

Bread and Roses: Sheila Rowbotham

An Introduction, an Appreciation, and an Interview*

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There is a poem in Sheila Rowbotham's *Dreams and Dilemmas* (1983) that sums up succinctly a difficulty in doing left history:

I cannot quite get hold of history
I take it around with me,
bags and parcels
I never quite explore
One day I'll go right through.
One day I'll really know
exactly what
I lug about.
But somehow I never find the time
to settle down
and search.
I often want to fling the lot
out
into time
jump
on a moving bus
and steam into the future
...
Instead I stand
sniffing the dust
my parcels wrapped around me
bolstering the night.¹

This poem is a simple statement, with a simple title, "History," but it captures the complexities that intrude on all of us who write history as part of a project contributing toward social transformation. If the past matters because it somehow speaks to our present and offers suggestions about how we remake our future, then writing about it is always going to be an activity challenged by many demands, pushed and pulled

* *This introduction and appreciation of the political and the accessible in Sheila Rowbotham's writing of gender history was part of a panel at the 1993 American Historical Association Meetings in San Francisco. Also involved in the panel on "Women's Revolutions: The work of Sheila Rowbotham — A Twenty Assessment," were Barbara Winslow, Rosalyn Baxandall, Vinay Bahl, Temma Kaplan and Sheila Rowbotham. The interview was conducted in San Francisco, 9 January 1994.*

1 Sheila Rowbotham, "History," in *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings* (London 1983), 165.

in a conflictual swirl of competing priorities. Every historian knows this, and all historians, whatever their political beliefs and rhetorical stands, are caught in this kind of crossfire. But for many, satisfied with the world as it is, the comforts of complacency are sufficient placation.

The writings of Sheila Rowbotham are characterized neither by complacency nor comfort. Time and time again we are reminded of her precariousness, be it material or interpretive. Unlike the bulk of academically-employed North American historians, Rowbotham shares with many British socialist feminists an economic instability and insecurity that has forced upon her a range of employment, pushing her out into a world of itinerant lecturing. She has taught in technical and further educational colleges, comprehensive schools, and the Workers' Educational Association, lectured at universities in England, Holland, Canada, and the United States, appeared on women's movement podiums throughout the English-speaking world, and worked for the Popular Planning Unit of the Greater London Council and in the Women's Programme of the World Institute for Development Economics Research at the United Nations University. This work has been rich and varied, but it has always been scarred by fundamental insecurities, always subject to the cutbacks of the Tories. By the early 1980s those cuts were taking on the character of a 'slash-and-burn' campaign; Sheila was describing herself as "permanently broke." With the birth of her son Will in 1977 she felt new joys, but faced the additional pressures of parenthood. She wrote in a state of exhaustion, appreciating, "What philosophers we all would be if only we were less tired." Small wonder she was "prey to doubts."²

This is not to suggest that Rowbotham has vacillated. Her writing has been unequivocal in its relentless opposition to women's oppression, chronicling women's historical place, and women's contribution to resistance and revolutionary upheaval (especially in agitational writings in socialist, women's, and local publications such as *Black Dwarf*, *Red Rag*, or *Islington Gutter Press*). Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s Sheila Rowbotham deservedly became perhaps the best-known international public spokeswoman of British socialist feminism.³

Women's Consciousness, Man's World (1973) remains a poignantly readable account of women's oppression, vibrant in its capacity to make the personal politically concrete. A unique statement of her own experience of girlhood, and the marks it left, as well as a focussed treatment of capitalism's intrusions on sexualities and families, the book has been followed by two decades of intense discussion around themes that have grown and groaned under the weight of oppression's continuities and theory's refinements. As a book it touched many because it approached the understanding of gender in ways that were accessible and in ways that were always

2 *Ibid.*, ix, 78-80; Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s* (London 1989), xii.

3 The agitational writing collected in *Dreams and Dilemmas* is perhaps the most significant, but see Rowbotham's books from the early 1970s: *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London 1972); *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History From the 17th Century to the Present* (New York 1974); *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth 1973).

grounded in a politics appreciative of the fault-lines of contemporary capitalism, most decidedly those of class and imperialism. Rowbotham early identified the importance of language, and of speaking to and writing for particular peoples whose relationship to words and to specific inflections, dialects, and tone already existed and had to be acknowledged.⁴

Throughout the 1970s Rowbotham's writing focussed explicitly on the themes of sexuality and gender identity, but in ways, once again, that touched an audience of concerned men and women. Unlike the dominant writings in gender studies today, where theory too often parades proudly as obscurantism, and where the actualities of gender identity can get lost in the swirling refusals of 'the real', Rowbotham's writings of this period rested unpretentiously but extremely effectively on the foundation of an historical materialism that took the lived experience of actual men and women as the serious starting point of any understanding. With Jean McCrindle, she explored women's lives as constructed daughters, using specific life histories to challenge the entrenched view that gender relations could not change. Pain and suffering were of course there in the record of women's oppression, but so too were possibility and struggle. Turning to the past to make essentially the same point, Rowbotham explored the personal and sexual politics of Edward Carpenter and Stella Browne. In their themes, these writings were strikingly and surprisingly ahead of their time, a preview of the concerns of the 1990s packaged in the more accessible and more politically-pointed language of the 1960s and 1970s.⁵

Audiences read works with appreciations, needs, sensitivities, and knowledges as diverse as they are complicated. In Sheila Rowbotham's writings on women's oppression, gender identities, and historical recovery — be it of women's experience in general, in revolutionary situations, or in the feminist movement — I always felt joined with her vision, even at the point of disagreement. The sense of compatibility with which I read Rowbotham was also a consequence of shared spaces. No other historian of women was so clearly a product of the amorphous mood of new leftism that conditioned so much of the oppositional writing of the so-called new social history. We share an ambivalent, if divergent, relationship to the Trotskyist ultra-left, and although the lessons I have drawn from my experiences are at odds with those of Rowbotham's contribution to *Beyond the Fragments*, it is nonetheless the case that she is one of the few women's historians who has seriously engaged with what remains of the Bolshevik tradition.

As in the case of her friend and collaborator, Lynne Segal, Rowbotham addresses the historical meaning and making of gender in ways that are unambiguously

4 See, especially, *Women's Consciousness, Man's World*, 32-35, on language, and the entirety of Part II on the issues of class/imperialism.

5 See Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London 1977); Rowbotham, *A New World for Women: Stella Browne — Socialist Feminist* (London 1977); Jean McCrindle and Rowbotham, ed., *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk About Their Lives* (Harmondsworth 1979).

woman-centred.⁶ Yet it is never possible to lose sight of the fundamental political project of a social transformation that, to be successful, is a joint venture of women and men, a shared effort of change and resistance. These transitions, however rough, always lead, for me, back to involvement and engagement with Rowbotham because her voice is authoritative precisely for its refusal of bitterness and exclusion. Rowbotham, cognizant of the historical record of suppression and oppression, manages to fashion an optimism of the will out of her pessimistic pages of intellect, seeing the large promise of new potentials within the strivings and shifting contexts of womanhood, manhood, and childhood. “The particular aspects of life I describe seem gloomy and pessimistic because I have tried to sketch the anatomy of oppression,” she wrote in 1973, continuing, “The point is to change these conditions ... behind this book there is a basic optimism. I think we are at the beginning of new social and personal possibilities, both for women and for men.”⁷

Over the past twenty years Sheila Rowbotham has been writing for a wide international audience, who want desperately a new society even as they themselves fail to live in ways that might prefigure our much-wanted socialist Jerusalem. She has done this in a quiet, unassuming way. The audience has been highly differentiated and diverse: academics and trade unionists, women’s movement participants and socialists, peoples of various backgrounds and countries. Her rewards have been materially few and politically difficult to ascertain. In many ways she has given so much and received so little. Her discriminating comments on patriarchy in 1979, where she swam against the stream of feminist orthodoxy, were an acute intervention of substantial importance. These views did not, unfortunately, get wide endorsement, and I sense that this failure to convince many of her feminist colleagues may be a loss for historical appreciations of gender relations.⁸ Placed alongside the contemporary syllabus of women’s studies texts, her stack of books might appear, to the trained eye of academic fashion, a bit tattered and worn by time. Yet against the winds of absolutism and ultimatism, sectionalism and separatism, theoretical obscurantism and high pretension, all of which blow with such bluster in the 1990s, Sheila Rowbotham stands as a breath of fresh air, always accessible, always directed in its political force.

6 See Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London 1987); Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London 1990).

7 *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*, xiv. See, as well, *Dutiful Daughters*, 3,9.

8 For the practical politics of the 1970s see *Dreams and Dilemmas*; for the Trotskyist left see Sheila Rowbotham, “The Women’s Movement and Organizing for Socialism,” in Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London 1979), 21-156; on patriarchy, Rowbotham, “The Trouble with ‘patriarchy’,” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 364-370.

In *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (1972), Sheila introduces one of her chapters with the lines of verse inspired by the young mill girls of the 1912 Lawrence Massachusetts textile strike:

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
 Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
 Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew
 Yes it is bread we fight for ... but we fight for roses too.⁹

Bread Sheila Rowbotham has fought for; bread she has had too little of. Let her not lack a few roses.

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Bryan Palmer: *You have written in alternating voices or moods about your family background, about your mother and about your father, and your inflection in this generally shifts, as I think is appropriate when discussing family life, from sometimes one of critique to sometimes one of respect and appreciation. It also carries with it a sense of your own experience as a child, occupying the kind of borderline where ambiguities of class and gender predominated, rather than a secure sense of place. And you have concluded in one brief sketch that although neither of your parents knew it, they did their unknowing best to produce a socialist-feminist historian. Maybe you could begin by commenting on this family background, and how you think it shaped or informed your later development.*

Sheila Rowbotham: Yes. I think that perhaps the borderline is the key because the first place we lived in was an area called Harehills, in Leeds. It had a borderline character really, it was an area which had been a lower middle-class area and it was turning into a working-class area, it was a mixture. There was a big road that divided the lower middle class from the working class. And the working-class houses were rapidly going down and the lower middle-class ones too. And also, black people were beginning to come to Leeds. I was born in 1943 and lived in Harehills until I was about seven. As a small child, I was aware of a muttered fear that the area was about to disintegrate into chaos. Leeds had had a fascist tradition and anti-Jewish feeling was pervasive. My family was a funny mixture. My father had very British-Raj imperialist ideas because he had been an engineer in India, a mining engineer, and had not been part of the upper class in India but had gained a kind of pride from seeing himself as superior to Indians. My mother, in contrast, never accepted this. She used to argue with him all the time about their disagreement over race. Although he had

9 Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London 1972), 100.

very racist ideas, my father was very opposed to people who were anti-Semitic, and anti-Semitism was very much around. They had two main families who they were friendly with, one was a dentist and my mother was friendly with his wife. And this dentist was actually a fascist. I mean he was signed up member of a fascist organization. But the other family was a Jewish family, the Kesslers, who had been very kind to my father when he had a stroke. So there were these completely contradictory things.

BP: *And you were how old when this was going on? Ten?*

SR: We left Harehills, the working-class area, when I was seven and we moved to a more definitely lower middle-class area, Roundhay, which was still in walking distance from Harehills but it was quite a move socially. I was seen as working-class when I moved to Roundhay. People were quite snobby to me and said I was common.

BP: *I remember in one of the pieces that you wrote, it was probably in Dreams and Dilemmas, there was a sense, however, that both of your parents in different ways were firm about supporting your right to be anything or do anything. Is this right?*

SR: Yes that's true, they did. My mother was a very personal rebel. It turned out she had never actually been married to my father because my father was married to another woman when he was sixteen. He lived in a village and he had married this woman when he was very young. They had broken up by the time he met my mother, but his first wife was a Catholic and wouldn't divorce him. So though they appeared to be incredibly respectable and staid to me, in fact, they had quite a history — as my mother said, "we've had our ups and down's." They weren't married but pretended to be married. And my father was quite a lot older than my mother. She had a very strong spirit and a deep sense that women should be able to have independence and a good time. She liked women who played with their sexuality like Eartha Kitt and Marilyn Monroe. My father just had this sort of Yorkshire thing — I suppose it came from a small farm — a sort of feeling that you stood on your own ground and nobody moved you. If you believed in something you stood by it, you didn't go by what was the fashionable opinion.

BP: *Did history come into this at all? Did they have a sense of appreciation of history or do you think you picked that up later and got that from somewhere else?*

SR: My father never talked about anything very much at all. Except occasionally, having come from the countryside, he did talk about how they'd lived, with a big table which all the farm labourers sat round at the farm. There were photographs of Grandpa, who had been a miner and then got the small farm. There was this picture of him at my Aunt's sitting in one of those traps drawn by a horse. But my mother was very interested in reflecting on her own past and she used to tell stories about my father's and her life together — well she didn't tell me that they weren't married. When I was at school I just felt this interest in history. I don't know why. I do

remember the first time when I suddenly had a sense of what the past meant. A teacher was teaching us about the Phoenicians and she said that they discovered purple. I was really young, it must have been before I was ten, and it was like this flash of amazing revelation that a thing as normal as a colour had been discovered. I suddenly always liked history from that point, if you could discover things like that. And then I had a very good history teacher when I went to my second school, a Methodist boarding school.

BP: *That leads into the question I was going to ask secondly about your education. I know you were educated at a Yorkshire Methodist school, and this seems to have been something of a pattern among radical historians. This India connection is rather interesting too, there's a lot of that around too among the radical historians — either having been in India or, like Thompson, having had this connection. You've commented on how a Methodist sense of duty weighed heavily on someone like Edward. And Christopher Hill actually recalls how, among Communist historians of the Popular Front period, there was this common jesting introduction of "I'm a Methodist, what's your heresy?" So this teacher was obviously centrally important; you might want to talk about her. But was there anything else in this particular kind of Methodist education that you can relate to later developments?*

SR: I think there was a sense of the purpose of life being more than simply making money, which is what I was surrounded by. My parents had had a fairly comfortable life in India, but then came back in the Depression. My father had to work as an electrician in the mines and my mother had been really poor, so she appreciated the comfort that money gave. Having money was rather new to my parents who understood what it meant not to have it. But I thought oh, you know, this is so crass, this materialism. And I thought there should be some other purpose in life. And I think I got that partly from Methodism, because they did encourage you to think that there was a meaning to life, it wasn't just about buying thicker carpets and things. So I rather turned my nose up at what I thought were these bourgeois comforts that my mother was keen on getting in the 1950s.

BP: *And then had to pay for this for the rest of your life by living in poverty, right?*

SR: Yes, quite. But I think I still really do have the sort of Leeds *nouveau riche* thing. I still do like some things, like buying clothes. But Methodism is quite earnest, a sort of call to the idea that life could have meaning. And then there were the early C.N.D. protests. There was a kind of atmosphere that, as a young person, you were there protesting. And I never joined those because I thought, if I join those things, I'd be joining them — again this is a very Methodist thing — for the wrong sort of motives. I would be going just because I wanted to be part of a group of people who took on a kind of fashion of politic. And there were Jewish people in Leeds, Labour Party professional types who had some kind of socialist politics. I was friendly with the daughter of one of these Jewish families. And actually I got more involved with the

parents, who were rather sophisticated people, and who had also been in India. The father owned a button factory in India and he knew about existentialists and things and didn't believe in religion. They used to listen to sophisticated things like Tom Lehrer and knew about transvestites (laughs). They knew about the *Sunday Times* and going to the theatre.

BP: *This is to backtrack just a bit, because you had mentioned that there was this fascist movement in Leeds, or that there was at least fascist overtones in the local culture. And there is also, of course, this socialist tradition that you became interested in.*

SR: Yes, an integrated socialism of Irish and Jews.

BP: *Right. So this must have been a fairly interesting political mix, fairly conflictual?*

SR: It was a town with lots of mixes in it. Because the Jewish people moved across Britain and some stopped at Leeds and some went on to Manchester and then some went to America and I guess to Canada, they brought a whole sense of a different European culture to Leeds. So that it was in the Jewish community that I found people who were discussing and debating politics and ideas. I mean nobody else that I had ever met from my family, the colliery managers and people who used to come around, talked like this. When my father held forth on politics, as a rather paternalistic Tory, he would pronounce on things like the royal family or human nature. So, I really liked the parents of my Jewish friends and they liked me because I was more interested in the things they wanted to talk about than some of their children.

BP: *This woman that was influential in your education, do you want to say a few things about her and how she moved you towards an appreciation of history? It probably wasn't a very overtly political reading of the past was it? Or was it?*

SR: Her name was Olga Wilkinson. She was a very political liberal. She read the *Guardian*. And she had been taught by economic historians like John Clapham who were very hostile to radicals like the Hammonds or R. H. Tawney. She put a lot of effort into stopping us from getting enthusiastic or passionate. I remember reading Tawney in rebellion. She was a Methodist but a very sophisticated kind of Methodist. She was quite snooty about the Primitive Methodists. She came from an agricultural, East Yorkshire family and she was a physically very ugly woman, who made herself incredibly attractive by wearing nice clothes and simply by her atmosphere. She always spent a lot of money on clothes and she would always have *Vogue* and things like that around. She was quite sarcastic and made us laugh at ourselves and at politicians like Palmerston. She had two real areas of interest, one was agriculture and enclosure in east Yorkshire — and she had written little pamphlets — and she was also interested in Methodist church architecture. So we got really interesting teaching because of her interest in social history. She taught us about diet and the Poor Laws, for instance, and she used to do things like take us to the Record Office.

BP: *And you were how old at this time?*

SR: She must have taken me over when I was about 12 or 13. She didn't teach us when we were very young. We got this exposure to documents and besides going to the Record Office we also went archaeological digging in medieval villages. She used to take me around looking at architecture and introduced me to history on the ground. All this laid emphasis on the concreteness of history. She was extremely fed up with me when I later got interested in existentialism.

BP: *Diversions?*

SR: Yes, she didn't like that stuff at all.

BP: *Was there an encouragement to write?*

SR: Well, she used to try and stop me writing what she called "purple passages." I had to do so much about the eighteenth century. I mean when Edward Thompson teases about J. H. Plumb it gives me great satisfaction because I had to read about Plumb on Walpole *forever*. I was more interested when she taught us about the history of Methodism or the life of young ladies at Bath. We were stranded in the middle of nowhere in East Yorkshire. We had nothing to do but read. We were going crazy. Reading was your only way of surviving. I read a lot. Leckey, she made me read Lecky to kind of calm me down (laughs). She thought Leckey would be good for me. He was this Whig, Protestant Irish historian with a fair bit of anti-woman bias as I recall.

BP: *We might jump to the next stage then when you studied at St. Hilda's College in Oxford — of which I know nothing. It was at this stage, or before I guess, that you had some contact with Edward and Dorothy Thompson outside the setting of the university. Did that come after or before?*

SR: I met them when I was 19. I didn't do very well in my first year at Oxford. I couldn't make head nor tail of Gibbon, Lord Macaulay or Bede, though I liked de Tocqueville.

BP: *That was a set curriculum?*

SR: Totally set. And we had to learn them almost by rote, but we weren't taught about any context. At school I'd learned to place historians in an intellectual tradition, for example Whig history. But we were never taught that when I did Gibbon and Macaulay. They didn't explain why we were reading these people, as examples of a particular approach to history, you just had to read the text and remember it and answer questions about where events came. It was very boring and I couldn't really understand it at all. So I was doing very badly and I was also acting, which is what I was really interested in. I was busy building my acting career by being "BoBo," a whore in *The Hostage*. It was not an important role, it must be said, I had to come on

in a towel and say, “fucking hell!” (laughs). I was rather pleased with myself, however, and loved acting, but my tutors didn’t think much of this because I was doing really bad work. I was told basically that I would be chucked out, I was banned from acting and told that I had to get down to work.

BP: *Did going to University create any waves in your family? Was it just assumed that this was a sort of natural progression?*

SR: Oh no. My father used to come and try and stop me from doing my reading and get me to come and watch television. It was thought to be very unnatural to sit in your room reading. But I used to sit reading in my room. My mother always read, she used to read romantic novels and things. I used to read anything, because I was fed up with where I was. I was always wanting to be somewhere else.

BP: *Is Oxford where you first had this connection with Richard Cobb?*

SR: Oh, that came about because there were two tutors, Mena Prestwich and Beryl Smalley. And Mena was a militant right-wing liberal, quite a funny woman in some ways. She always used to have a cigarette out of the corner of her mouth, quite sarcastic. Beryl Smalley had been in the Communist Party and was a Catholic Marxist. They were completely different in their outlooks; Beryl Smalley was interested in organic views of society whereas Mena Prestwich was interested in atomistic individualism. I was doing really badly and Beryl Smalley rescued me along with Bridget Hill, who was the bursar at the college. Miss Smalley decided that the thing to do was to send me to Richard Cobb because I hadn’t got along well with a very right-wing-diplomatic historian Charles Stuart that I had been sent to. He always used to say “Ms. Lowbotham,” because he couldn’t do his Rs. He would say, “if Austlia does this what would Plussia do.” And I hadn’t got a clue, because I had never studied diplomatic history and I couldn’t understand this at all. So Richard Cobb was wonderful, it was a great relief to go to Richard Cobb. He was completely outrageous in the way he behaved. One day he jumped over the settee. I mean he must have been in his 40s, which seemed very old to me then, and he jumped over the settee saying “the Spanish people will rise again” (laughs). And I was really alarmed because I was thinking that he was going to collapse or something. He was such an exciting person to have as a teacher. He was totally mad, but it was sort of fun, I liked him. And there was a sense that history could be done differently than the way so many others at Oxford were pushing. I got a sense of the French Revolution.

BP: *He must have seemed really odd politically and idiosyncratic I would expect. Did his attachment to lower-class history and documents and discovery come across?*

SR: Yes! And symbol, and ritual, and power — power in personal relations. But before I got sent to him I did go to Trevor Aston for four tutorials in medieval history. He was around *Past and Present* and was really inspiring. He told me to read Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels* because I had a sort of mystical interest in peasant

rebels and he said there's a better book than Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* by this friend of mine who's also a Jazz critic. I thought that was good, an historian being interested in Jazz. I'd been taught in this horrible first year to regurgitate these books in a very obedient way. Reading medieval history, I hadn't understood, I just repeated things. So he just threw one of my essays down and said, "we read too many books!" Then he said, "have you been to the Japanese film that's on? In order to understand medieval society you ought to see the Japanese films." So I thought, oh wow, this is great. Then I'd decided what I'd do. I'd always found that if you mentioned Marxists, that all these people who taught me got very cross. So I thought, well I'll give him a bit of a go. Because I didn't know he was a Marxist. So I read Kosminsky and produced all this Kosminsky kind of stuff. He didn't bat an eyelid. He just pointed out some problems in it. So he was my one ray of light in the first year. Then I was taught by Miss Smalley. We got onto things that she really knew like medieval humanism. Then I got really interested in medieval philosophy. Then Richard Cobb sent me to Dorothy and Edward.

BP: *Yes. Because Edward and he were going to collaborate on this project with Gwyn Williams I think, on riots or crowd actions, and it never happened.*

SR: Yes. There were always lots of people going on about crowd actions. Rudé came too, to Balliol, once.

BP: *But I can't imagine Cobb as a member of any team! He was such a militant individualist from what I know of reading him. This may be off track a bit, but I always found Cobb to be a wonderful writer as well.*

SR: Yes he is. He has a beautiful use of English.

BP: *Did he stress that at all? Did he try to stress the artistry of doing history, or was this just something he did?*

SR: No. He never talked about his language. It was his reading that was phenomenal. I used to spend ages trying to read articles that he didn't know about. He used to give me a list of books and then I used to go and try and find books that he didn't know. I never found an article he hadn't read (laughs). I don't know whether he pretended, but I never found something that he said "oh I haven't seen that". Richard Cobb always called me Tiger Tim because at a party that Christopher Hill gave, a young man came to talk to one of my friends; he just assumed that because we were women talking to one another, we weren't doing anything important and he just butted in. I got all kind of Yorkshire and gruff, which I did sometimes at Oxford because people seemed so smug, and I was discovered telling this young man off by Christopher Hill. From then on I was called Tiger Tim. Evidently there had been this comic character, a cat called Tiger Tim, who Richard, Christopher and Edward all read (laughs). It had a grin, this cat, and apparently looked like me when I was young.

BP: *In terms of your own politics and your involvement in the left and the cause of women's liberation, were there turning points that defined you in relation to these movements? This is a difficult question, I know.*

SR: From my mother I'd had a feeling that women should be able to stick up for themselves and find their own way somehow in the world. And she always stressed earning your own living and knowing how car doors worked so you could get out and having money for the taxi home if you decided you wanted to. She had her own ways of surviving as a woman. But I thought, oh I don't agree with all that. I thought you need equality and straightforward stuff and reason. I discovered Emma Goldman when I was about nineteen. I found this book called *Rebel in Paradise* by Richard Drinnon in the Leeds library. I just saw "rebel" and thought paradise sounds good. And I decided I liked this anarchist stuff more than socialism. Bob Rowthorn, now a Professor of Economics at Cambridge, whom I'd just met, and Gareth Stedman Jones, who were friendly, had all this new left sort of socialism and I thought, no, I'm an anarchist because I like this Emma Goldman. But then I really started to read Marx because of Bob's interest and enthusiasm. I just really liked Marx. Bob also believed that women should be emancipated and read Simone deBeauvoir and threw my mascara out of the window! I was furious (laughs); I was so cross. He thought emancipated women shouldn't have mascara. It was the sexual rebellion in Emma Goldman that I liked. I was very conscious of inequality and class and also of race, but I didn't see it as something that was political. I saw it as part of personal relations. I didn't see it as part of the overall structure of society, which is how Marxism taught you to see the world. But Bob started to open up a way of explaining things in terms of an overview, which made sense of what I'd observed between people. He was also very good at making you feel that you should use your own brain; he had a big influence on me.

BP: *Was there much at this point in the air in the early 60s about women's liberation?*

SR: No. We had C.N.D. marches, which I started to go on because of Bob. And we had Committee of 100 and Direct Action and we had a march to the regional seat of government. But we didn't identify ourselves distinctly as women. The only way in which women were identified as women was that there was a bit of "women for peace" kind of thing. But our generation didn't want to be identified with that. We wanted to be, with our jeans, marching along with the guys. Judith Oakley, who'd read Simone deBeauvoir, did raise some issues, like the fact that we were not, as women, allowed to be members of the University Union. And a woman who was found in bed with someone was kicked out when Judith and I were in our first year. Someone in third year did a petition, which we signed. We could see the injustice, but we didn't have a sense of being connected to other women. It was not until the late 1960s that I remember a shift in awareness — that sort of exchange of eyes in which people would communicate. There was an implicit recognition that we weren't going to behave in a competitive way appearing by 1969. I still find it so strange why

this happened when it did. Why it was that consciousness developed quite at that moment. Having lived through it doesn't help to really understand. In fact, many people got involved who I'd been friends with at college — even some friends I'd known at school in earlier days.

BP: *You hadn't had any history of talking about it?*

SR: We didn't talk about it as a politics, no. There was no overt political expression, though a cultural and personal feeling was appearing in women's writing of the time. And there was a collection called *Talking to Women* by Nell Dunn, simply women talking about sex. I was completely fascinated by that. I remember saying to Bob in 1967 that I was so interested in it and he couldn't see why I was so captivated. It was extraordinary seeing in public something that you had only thought on your own, or talked to your own personal friend about. But everyone said it had nothing to do with politics.

BP: *Was there a moment when things kind of crystallized for you and you began to see your own politics as a leftist as integrally related to the movement for women's liberation? Or was this an incremental thing that caught up with you at some point and you realized that this is what you and other people were doing?*

SR: There were these two trivial incidents. The one incident was when I worked on a newspaper called *Black Dwarf*. It was a student thing and David Widgery and Nigel Fountain had gone to a meeting and suggested that perhaps we should have pinups to increase circulation. There was a woman from Canada who was from a Trotskyist group, from I think the SWP — the American Fourth Internationalists, not the British SWP-ISO — and she had an immediate kind of puritanical old left response. I was very opposed to sexual puritanism. But at the same time, I did find it really insulting and so I was really angry but couldn't express it in terms of the existing framework of politics. So I was struggling with that. And then we did do an issue about women, because discussions about equal pay started to come up among trade unionists. I was allowed to do this with Fred Halliday. And Fred was seen as an expert on Reich because he'd read Reich. So he wrote the main editorial and I was allowed to get some articles and things. I worked so hard and I got so many things that I ended up collecting most of the stuff for this *Black Dwarf* issue which came out at the beginning of 1969.

BP: *It's very interesting because it would never happen on the left now, that there would be a discussion over whether to have pinups. But of course there is that fundamental fragmentation of how one relates to sexuality, which probably still is there, it emerges around debates on pornography; whether one has a sort of puritanical censorship, or whether one tries to grapple more difficulty with the expression, without putting it in modes that are denigrating.*

SR: Well, subsequently I would be in grappling rather than censorship. But at the time it was so difficult to express ourselves and we were so vulnerable that anger overtook the grappling. As time went by the problems about suppression became clearer. Suppression of sexual fantasy has been part of a feminist tradition of social purity, which has conservative implications because it's denying areas of human imagination and desire. When you start to try and stifle those, you can be stifling things that are really important in women's creative sexual energy. So I've shifted on that now.

BP: *You have written about women and the organized left in *Beyond the Fragments*, you were part of a left organization, the International Socialists, now the SWP [ISO], for roughly eighteen months. *Beyond the Fragments* was written in 1979 when there were a plethora of groups still around. Maoists and Trotskyists were there, the Communist Party was a presence. There has been a decline since then, but the SWP has continued and is probably the only left group around that is growing — that at least has some influence. I have a somewhat jaundiced view of that, since I know about the ISO's recruitment process— if you're willing to sell a paper, you're in. It's something of a turnstile. People go in and go out in a very short time. Nevertheless, I thought maybe I'd ask you to reflect on, just briefly, the strengths and weaknesses of the organized left Leninist tradition and whether things look any different in 1994 than they looked in 1979?*

SR: They do look different, don't they? Well, one way of answering that is with an anecdote. Harry Wicks, an old Trotskyist, a founder of the movement in Britain, was interviewed by Loggie Barrow. And he'd been reading *Beyond the Fragments* in his eighties. And Harry said "yes it's very strong on the criticism but it's very weak on the alternatives" (laughs). And I think that was a really good statement actually. We'd imagined that by making our criticism it would encourage other people to pool their experience. We thought that would happen, but instead, everyone asked us to go and speak, as though we had the answer really, which we didn't. But we'd imagined that perhaps some new combination could happen, some new organized possibility.

BP: *And you don't think it did?*

SR: No it didn't. But funny enough, just before the *Beyond the Fragments* conference, I did an I ching and the I ching said that you have to more or less think smaller, something along those lines. But it was quite funny because we'd assumed it would all sort of come together and somehow or other, by good will, all these people would get together, and of course it didn't happen at all. And we were expecting that we would have perhaps conflict coming from the Trots. In fact we got attacked from some sections of the sexual politics people. Opposition came from people like Don Milligan, a gay activist who was then around the Revolutionary Communist Party, and also from some feminists in the Communist Party. They did not attack us for not being Communists, but for not being feminist enough. I think the difference was we

imagined socialism being changed by feminism and by other grassroots social movements. Whereas for women in the Communist Party there were these two distinct zones of feminism and Party politics. Some of the connections were to occur subsequently through the radical politics of the Greater London Council (GLC) and then in the miner's strike of course. They continued in the trade union movement, for example, the link to gays and lesbians carried on in the printer's strike at Wapping after the miner's strike. A lot of these groups actually did begin to make contact with each other but in a much more organic way than we'd imagined. It wasn't something that you sat at a conference and worked it out and put them together; they wouldn't be put together like that. But fragile networks persisted after each struggle subsided. I'm very conscious of the failure of the middle-class intelligensia to follow through the grassroots process. When workers were being defeated in Britain from 1987, most middle-class socialists didn't continue to support them. Instead, even the discussion of class appears to have vanished. When P & O the Seafarers had a big dance at the end of their strike, there were hardly any middle-class leftists who went. But people who weren't allowed to unionize at the defence centre GCHQ walked all the way from Dover to Cheltenham. The miners' wives also continued to travel the country but in the end many of them didn't have the resources to keep on, though a few still go to the Socialist Movement Conference. So this grassroots network of workers has had little backing from either the intellectual left or the mainstream of the Labour Party. I went to see a leftish woman Labour MP — she was from a mining constituency — and I said, “why don't you give voice to the fact that there are these women,” because the miner's wives were making links with other working-class women and both the wives of strikers and workers in the public sector. I wanted her to be a voice to this because it had no public voice anywhere. And she said “oh, but they wouldn't join the Labour Party.” The Labour Party obviously never read Gramsci (laughs).

BP: *Well, you had two processes going on. You had the new right, eventually Thatcherite assault on the working class. The result was a series of defeats that were not only defeats of overt class action and resistance, but also a constant erosion of people's material well-being, even to the point of the erosion of jobs and welfare provisions. Also, and not unrelated to the right-wing assault, there was an internal erosion of the left, of the organized left. Leftist groups began to wither. Some of them, like the Maoist groups, which in North America were at least a presence in the seventies, were starting to basically just implode all over the place. But you still found space to work politically.*

SR: The influence of left social movement politics in trade unions has actually been quite important from the mid-1980s. I know in Canada it was much more marked. Despite the political defeats and although unions still have a profound conservatism, there have been really interesting ways in which race and gender issues have had an impact. I went to a North-West regional meeting at International Women's Day two years ago and it really could have been a socialist feminist meeting of the seventies,

except that they were more conscious of Europe and of immigration and race. Quite a lot of them had been educated through adult education courses where there's actually been socialist-feminists teaching. So there is a whole layer of women and some trade union men who have really taken on the ideas of the women's movement. Ideas which have been marginalized in the mainstream culture are bubbling away within the trade unions. Also, many people who were involved in left groups and social movements have become officials in unions. My own friends are really quite divided: there are those working in trade unions or local government and those in universities and they tend not to have any contact with one another anymore. The SWP has survived and grown, despite its fast turnover of membership. They don't have such an antagonistic or hostile attitude to other people on the left as things have become more bleak. Although they've got a fixed mindset, they are less likely to denounce other socialists. They often seem actually glad to see anybody else around.

BP: *There's not much to denounce anymore in terms of left groups. How about the Greater London Council (GLC)? I think this experience isn't all that well known in North America. Maybe you could just say a few words about it, what you were trying to do, what the strengths and weaknesses and possibilities were. Of course it too succumbed to Thatcherism overtly.*

SR: Hilary Wainwright was in the original group of five people who created the industry and employment section. This area of intervention in the local economy, along with the women's committee and the ethnic minority, were radical innovations in local government based on the GLC's power to spend a penny in every pound of the rates on the welfare of Londoners and should inform Londoners of what was being done. Policy for developing industry and community services in London with democratic participation involved using certain powers that existed and expanding them. Thatcher hated that and was infuriated by the popularity of Ken Livingston as a media figure. He had a gift for presenting the aims of the Council through the media. Some people hated him, but many people really did and do like him. Even if they didn't agree with his politics, quite conservative types decided they liked him. There was this propaganda campaign against the GLC in things like the *Evening Standard*, the main London paper, but a lot of local papers would carry quite good reports because it was trying to do economic and social projects in local areas that were received quite well in those areas. An overwhelming majority of Londoners said that they wanted an elected authority and opposed the abolition of the GLC. It was 70 something percent in favour despite all the propaganda. It was broadly popular as well as incredibly radical. Those of us who were used to grassroots community politics went in the GLC wanting to combine participatory democracy with representative democracy. We learned a lot in the process. At first Hilary Wainwright started "People's Assemblies;" these were quite hopeless because we got all sorts of weird, lonely people who arrived. "We are the people," they proclaimed. Even when the women's committee called local meetings, a certain type of feminist politico, really, would come to these meetings and say, "we are the women." We found out

that here was a real problem about identity politics and who claims to speak for that particular identity — which I think is a familiar problem in North America. The interconnecting of representative and direct democracy is not an easy fit, it's a more organic process.

One of the most successful things, I think, was Hilary's work with people in the docklands area around Woolwich. The government was bringing in the non-elected London Docklands Development Corporation which had a kind of absolute free enterprise power so that all the normal powers of the Council were pushed aside. They were going to build this airport and Hilary developed the "People's Plan," an alternative plan based on the skills and needs of the people in the community, which was inspired by the idea of Lucas alternative plan. When presenting your alternative, you were in a stronger position than if you simply opposed the developers and financiers. Even though they didn't have the power to implement this People's Plan, the memory of it has continued. Working-class women activists were important in the People's Plan. Their knowledge was based on thirty or forty years of living in the area and knowing everybody around and working with people. After the GLC was abolished all these yuppies moved in. The government encouraged them to go there in the 80s. Speculators gerry-built these flashy places. Both working-class people and the yuppies were completely abandoned when the financial bubble burst. The government didn't make any infrastructure. Even worse, it seems the whole thing was built on top of some kind of toxic waste. People were getting all these illnesses and the yuppies now can't sell their houses, so a kind of strange alliance has developed between them and the older working-class inhabitants. Something of participatory democracy of the early 80s has continued.

BP: *At this time you were involved in other kinds of struggles related to childcare. The birth of your son in 1977 obviously concretized this whole area. Did you want to speak at all about the lessons and needs associated with children and how they get translated into doing politics and, if you have any idea on this, on doing history? Clearly it registered politically in terms of the struggles you were involved in with the local state from the mid to late-1970s and beyond.*

SR: Certainly it made me interested in childcare. My son Will went to a community nursery and I was involved in the childcare campaign in London. It was also the case that the women's movement at that time was becoming quite difficult to be in if you were a socialist feminist. So, the childcare campaign was a good way to be involved in practical issues and get things done.

BP: *Why do you think the women's movement was hard to be involved in then if you were a socialist feminist?*

SR: Revolutionary feminism, a particular kind of separatist feminism, somewhat different from radical feminism, was on the rise and was militantly hostile to socialist politics. It wasn't like radical feminism where people might have disagreed with

socialist feminists but they did believe in keeping some form of communication going.

Basically you were presented as evil if you had anything to do with men. It was pretty horrible politics. It was eventually very effectively opposed by young lesbian women who basically said it was not only bullying, but a dead end. But it marginalized those of us who had started the women's movement. It became impossible to go to meetings without feeling pretty horrible, and there was a lot of hostility to boy children which was just unbearable, I couldn't bear that. The men can look after themselves, but to attack eighteen month old boy babies as being oppressors was just so stupid. As a result, a lot of us got involved in things like the childcare campaign, community politics, and things like the Essex Road Women's Centre.

When I went to the GLC, as well as doing the newspaper *Jobs for Change*, I took this experience with me to develop the policy on the domestic labour thing and childcare as part of the industrial strategy. We weren't just talking about work and wages. The equal opportunity approach from America seemed totally inadequate because it focussed on pushing individuals up existing employment structures, not questioning how work is organized in relation to the rest of life. Then I also got really interested in issues of space and mobility and design of cities through having a kid and through people discussing it at the GLC. I don't think I noticed a very immediate influence on my politics after having a child, although I think some of the things Dorothy and Edward had said about the importance of everyday-type organizations, like the Women's Co-op Guild, made me consider their significance. When I did *Women Resistance and Revolution* I had gone for the revolutionary sort of figures, the militant women. I think having Will made me realize the importance of those organizations that had been built around domestic daily life.

BP: *In the past, they always seem to have occupied a subterranean status below the people carrying the banners in the streets.*

SR: Yes. I also felt a more personal need to explore political slogans. I was in a group called "The Fathers' Group," when my son was a baby. We all felt uncomfortable about a politics that constantly cast men in a simple way, as being simply bad. This was so clearly an inadequate way of thinking about relations between men and women, including our own relationship to our fathers. That was how I wrote about my father in a book called *Fathers* that Ursula Owen edited for Virago. It was a search for some sort of complexity at a time when women's movement politics in Britain was becoming increasingly sloganized. Originally we had tried to create a more complex politics in opposition to the oversimplification of the revolutionary left, but we too succumbed to a closing which ceased to be fluid and open. The effort of holding onto complexity is very important. I think that is one of my main discomforts now with SWP, actually, that they haven't learned that. They still want politics to be very straight-forward and clear. It's like being caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea if you don't want to just waffle on about multiple identities and subjectivity like

Marxism Today did. The space for a socialist politics which recognizes personal feelings and yet still tackles external power and injustice has narrowed.

BP: *This next questions flows from that and it's kind of a long one. It seems to me that your writing has always been a project of engagement with the left, with the absolute necessity of struggling to overcome women's oppression, with historical exclusion and the need not only to confront the silences in the past but the way that mainstream historiography essentially reproduces those silences and then makes them more deafening. And you have, of course, explored traditions of dissidence and alternative sexualities in your book around Carpenter and other areas, and with making of gender through familial relations — on what terms and through what themes and in what tone you have written, it has always been a product of particular times, particular contexts. I mean, you're making the past speak to the present and the present obviously in some sense informs how you understand the past. I guess all this blabbering on is about where your attention and engagement is now. I mean, feminism has perhaps never been more richly varied, but it's also deeply divided and I have a sense from some of your writings that this division weighs on you. And class, which you have of course always been very interested in, is under assault not only in terms of direct attacks on the working class that have been going on since the mid-1970s, but these have inevitably registered in academic and left circles where there is, I think it is safe to say in 1994, far less attention and far less weight placed on class as the agent of social transformation. In some sense you were always negotiating that with gender, but I sense that you probably don't like the drift of some contemporary academic writing where class is getting shuffled off into corners. There is all this curious stuff going on in England that class wasn't really what people's identity was about, it was about the people, the kind of Patrick Joyce stuff. So, I guess I'm wondering what you think about the current moment intellectually, politically, practically?*

SR: The personal significance of being in the little group discussing fathers was that it helped me overcome a feeling of being able only to protest against a male power that was seen in a bloc, that forced you to be constantly restricted to retaliation. The importance of trying to come to terms with thinking about your own father as a man, as a person, was to be able to face that kind of fear about authority. I think that it is still quite difficult for most women, in England anyway, to speak with authority in the culture. Only if you are an upper-class woman can you speak with authority about general subjects and then the posh accent distinguishes the speaker from most women. Similarly among socialists, the resistance is still there to accepting that insights and understandings that come from the women's movement have a generalized relevance. Take how class is defined for instance. Socialist feminists have spent a lot of time talking about how class could be seen. That is not to say that class doesn't exist, but that class is about struggles not only around production. People become conscious too of their class in ways which are not necessarily according to the Marxist script. Marxism, moreover, has imposed ideas about what was a 'proper' worker, which

often contributed to women being marginalized. So who gets defined as being workers is part of a continuing redefinition of what class means. I think that because we are living in this period of change in capitalism, the forms which people's class resistance takes are appearing in different ways. There are, for example, movements among particularly poor women in Latin America and India which don't fit into models of proletarian action of the western Marxist kind. Yet these are mass movements and the strange thing is that as social movements they are not connected to the idea of class rebellion in the way that you might expect. Another strange thing to me is that some people now just sit and develop theory, despite the fact that it has nothing to do with what poor women are doing internationally. This is completely strange to me and I don't understand this at all because both my politics and my training as a historian is if you are going to have ideas they have to be based on an understanding of what actually seems to be happening.

BP: *And they have to be translatable to what's happening. They have to be understandable to people on some level. This is, I guess, what ties a lot of your recent work together, these kinds of concerns.*

SR: Yes. It is apparent that some of these movements which are now regarded as new, are not-so-new because actually historians know that there have been movements that resemble these movements in the past. 'New' social movements tend to only be relatively new.

BP: *A lot of the eighteenth-century literature on women and the crowd relates to the contemporary movements.*

SR: Yes, and there was community action of women in the crowd during the mass strikes of the early twentieth century. You could well understand some of the recent forms of global social protest in terms of what has gone before. But it would mean reinterpreting labour history. Actually, in the United States there is really a lot of new interesting books linking gender and class. You don't get those books appearing in Britain at all.

BP: *Why do you think that is?*

SR: Well, it's interesting isn't it? It's a kind of labour history which is very aware of gender. There must have been people who were influenced by politics at a certain time in their lives who went off and did theses and are now actually publishing their books. It's really quite a lot of them. There seems to be now more books appearing in the States on gender and social welfare too. There's much more exciting work being done in Canada and the United States on these areas than in Britain at the moment.