

TITLE PAGE.

SCARLET MOONS: The Australian Women's Liberation Movement
and the Communist Party of Australia, 1965-1975.

by

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ABBREVIATIONS.

ALP: Australian Labor Party.

CP and CPA: Communist Party of Australia.

CPSU: Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

FIA: Federated Ironworkers' Association.

IWD: International Women's Day.

MWG: Militant Women's Group.

NCC: National Civic Council.

WLM: Women's Liberation Movement.

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SYNOPSIS.

This thesis analyses the intersection of the Communist Party of Australia and the women's liberation movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It examines a number of theoretical issues and contradictions which arose, and also looks at some of the practical experiences and outcomes for Communist women which resulted from this conjunction.

It is argued that the women's liberation movement was a major influence on the Party, assisting in changing some of its political, theoretical and social perspectives. In particular, Party women raised some of the contradictions and theoretical dilemmas which existed in the Party's inherited view of 'the woman question'.

The thesis maintains that at the time of the emerging women's liberation movement in Australia, the Communist Party was successfully attempting to analyse its political and ideological heritage. In particular its Stalinist heritage, its relationship to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and to the Communist International were deeply dissected. The thesis analyses the influence of the Soviet Union on the Australian Party, especially the theory and practice of 'work among women'. It also argues that the Communist Party was influenced by traditional labourist definitions and political views of the working class and the labour movement in Australia.

The thesis suggests that the impact of the women's liberation

movement can be seen in all areas of Party work and life, including its agendas, political programs, ideology and theory, cultural activities, and in the personal lives of some of its members.

It is argued that Communist women assisted in the development of feminist critiques, particularly on issues of the family, sexuality , gender and class, patriarchy, the gender division of labour, and the state. Such critiques have been central to the development of socialist feminist theoretical perspectives. The development of such critiques has assisted in the re-definition of many aspects of the socialist project and of the socialist vision.

The thesis examines the historical and political threads from the 1970s which assist in explaining the current concerns and problems confronting socialism and socialist feminism. One of the continuing issues has been how to develop a unified theory of socialist feminism.

The thesis rejects feminist critiques which deny the relevance of Marxism and class analysis to women's oppression, and argues that the theory of class struggle is essential to analyses of capitalism and provides a unifying theory which links all oppression.

INTRODUCTION:

But the CPA and the Women's Movement are dead, aren't they?

In the 1990s, analysing and writing about the Communist Party of Australia and the Women's Liberation Movement is accompanied by some social, political and historical tensions. The main challenge is a strongly held social and political view that Communism is dead, both as a domestic and international political process and force. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, deputy director of the United States State Department's policy planning staff, suggested that we had now reached a point which is "the end of history".¹ In 1990 P.P. McGuinness maintained that socialism arose in response to early capitalism, but assured us that as capitalism has now been "civilized and liberal democracy and the rule of law have, however imperfectly, asserted their sway, socialism as a creed has become increasingly irrelevant."²

Writing constructively and optimistically about Communism in the 1990s is a difficult task. We also are told that Communism is dead particularly because the U.S. State Department and Boris Yeltsin continue to be emphatic about its demise. In Australia a number of media sources are also clear that Communism and the Communist Party will not and cannot be

¹. Francis Fukuyama in Brian Aarons, "Farewell to 1917", Australian Left Review, (February 1990), p.19.

². P.P. McGuinness, "The Grand March Routed", Australian Left Review, (February, 1990), p.15.

revived. In 1987 the Good Weekend Supplement ran an article on the demise of the Communist Party;³ in 1990 Geraldine Doogue documented the fact that "The Party's Over";⁴ and more recently, the article "Goodbye Red Brick Road" in which Bernie Taft was interviewed, the demise of the Communist Party was once again explored.⁵

The political reality of the 1990s is that Communism is in decline and the Left, including socialist feminism, is fighting a rear-guard battle against the consolidated political and socio-economic rhetoric of 1980s New Right liberalism. This ideology is firmly based on the religion of the market place. Within this polemical arena, the Left has endeavoured to battle the lions of individuality and international monopoly capital, with very little evidence of winning even a skirmish. The 1980s and 1990s will not be historically remembered in Western capitalist countries for heroic working class victories, but rather for defeats and rear-guard actions.

When the Communist Party was established in Australia in the 1920s, it supported the socialist principles of state ownership of the means of production and distribution, and the Marxist theory of class struggle, whereby the working class

³. The Good Weekend Supplement, 24th July 1987.

⁴. Geraldine Doogue, "The Party's Over", an Australian Broadcasting Corporation edition of Hindsight, 29th July 1990.

⁵. Peter Ellingsen, "Goodbye Red Brick Road", The Age, 2nd May 1992, Extra 5.

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would transform capitalism into socialism. Additionally, the Communist Party endorsed a number of specific Communist principles including support for the Bolshevik and Leninist model of party organisation, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the development of strong political and ideological links with the Communist International and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Those who currently support the view that Communism is dead are convinced that Communism as a political ideology, and the Communist Party as the political organisation which advocated that ideology have ceased to exist and will not be resurrected again. For them the Communist experiment, represented by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, has failed.

In addition to these views on Communism, there are other views which maintain that Marxism itself can no longer provide an adequate theoretical perspective. Some argue that the new social movements which have arisen over the last two decades around issues dealing with the environment, peace, racism and feminism, for example, demand that a new theoretical perspective is an imperative.

"Marxism involves a centred and global view of the world: inevitably, the development of radical movements based on new concerns and new political subjects has led to dissatisfaction with the place

allotted to them within its frame".⁶

For some on the Left, Marxism has to be abandoned because it represents an economist theoretical analysis which reduces concepts of politics and ideology to a "notion of 'economic' or 'class' determination".⁷.

Writing constructively and optimistically about the women's movement in the 1990s is not so difficult a task. Although the term 'liberation' has been gradually but significantly dropped,⁸ the existence of a variety of legislation for example, anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity, and the existence of women's services in Australia, serve to remind us of some of the demands and political agendas of the women's movement in the 1970s. They are indicators of some of the political and social reforms which have been achieved and sustained for Australian women.

In the 1970s however, Communism was not dead. It may have been rather unwell; some may have even thought that it was seriously ill, but few would have believed a diagnosis which maintained that the illness was terminal. A number of militant and politically aggressive movements, where direct action was

⁶. Judith Allen and Paul Patton, eds., Beyond Marxism? Interventions After Marx, (Leichhardt, 1983), p.5.

⁷. Stuart Hall, The Hard Road to Renewal, (London, 1988), p.3.

⁸. Tom O'Lincoln, Into the Mainstream, (Sydney, 1985), pp.179-180.

important, began to breathe new life into a Communist Party hamstrung by 1930s Stalinism and shattered by the vehemence of 1950s anti-Communist propaganda which was pursued by Menzies and the Industrial Groupers. By 1969, one such militant movement was the emerging women's liberation movement.

This thesis examines some of the political and social implications of the intersection of the Communist Party and the women's liberation movement during the late 1960s to mid-1970s. This analysis endeavours to answer the following questions:

What was the impact of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party of Australia?

What was the political and ideological role of Communist women who were active in the movement and in the Party?

What political and theoretical influences did the Party have on the movement?

Are there historical and political threads from the 1970s convergence between Party and movement which may assist in analysing the current position of each in the 1990s, particularly the decline of Communism?

The questions are asked within an historical and political perspective and framework which maintains that the Communist Party of Australia was from the mid-1960s onwards, endeavouring to search for ways in which to develop a more Australian socialist theory and practice. The Party was undertaking a de-Stalinisation process, which involved severing many of the ideological and theoretical ties it had long held with the Soviet Union and international Communism.

It will be argued that by the time that the women's liberation movement was beginning to make waves within Australian political and social contexts, the Party had made a number of major changes to its political program, ideological perspective and to its view of Marxist theory. Such changes, it is argued, enabled the Party to more readily support many of the political issues and agendas being brought before the Party by women members active in the women's movement.

For some, the changes which the Party was making were very encouraging for Australian revolutionary politics. "Australia in the seventies then, offers considerably brighter prospects for revolutionary working class and mass mobilization than at any time since the thirties."⁹ Higgins continued by stating that the Communist Party was the only political organisation that was able to implement an overall socialist strategy for the labour movement, and was also in a strong position for

⁹. Winton Higgins, "Reconstructing Australian Communism", The Socialist Register, (1974), p.185.

developing the necessary class alliances essential to the socialist project.¹⁰

The impact of the women's movement came at a time when the relatively new 1960s Communist Party leadership, particularly under the influence of Laurie and Eric Aarons, was attempting to reverse a situation where Party membership was declining and the influence of the Party within Australian labour movement politics was much less than it had been in the previous thirty years. The Party leadership accepted that it had to endorse changes to its political organisation and program if it was to endeavour successfully to recreate the kind of membership numbers and political influence it had achieved in Australia in the 1930s and 1940s.

The new political movements of the 1960s which embraced an anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment polemic, were viewed by some in the Communist Party as a political stimulus. It is argued that the effect of the women's liberation movement on the Party was cathartic, influencing all aspects of Party life, including its theory and practice, its perception of revolutionary organisation and also the personal lives of Party members. The intersection of the Party and the movement also eventually led to another transformation of socialism itself - socialist feminism. Within the parameters of socialist feminist critiques on gender, class, the sexual division of labour and the family, existing Marxist theory was

¹⁰. Ibid.

constructively and positively informed and developed.

The thesis argues however, that an examination of the intersection of the women's liberation movement and the Communist Party demonstrates some theoretical tensions and contradictions for the socialist project. One of the continuing tensions, which is examined in the thesis, is the issue of how to develop a theoretical and practical relationship between feminism and socialism.

The thesis argues that the early influences of the women's liberation movement on the Party were positive. However, by the 1980s, the influences of the women's movement and other social movements, on socialism, had become problematic. It is argued that the Communist Party was unable to reject Stalinism and at the same time retain a Marxist praxis and that it could not accommodate an alliance with the new movements whilst retaining Marxist objectives and strategies. The result of these inability has meant that the theories of post-Marxism have dominated the socialist project, and the socialist agenda has moved to the right.

Could it be that Phaon of Lesbos was really a woman?

"For the last thousand years or more at least 70 per cent and sometimes as many as 90 per cent of

the population have been ordinary (common) people who had to work to make a living and who were ruled by a small minority who lived off the labour of the majority. Most history is concerned with this minority, who owned most of the wealth, exercised supreme power, and made all important decisions in the country. When the common people appear in history at all they are not central but only in the background, almost like characters off-stage."¹¹

Over the last decade a number of women who at one time were members of the Communist Party have written autobiographical accounts of their lives and experiences as Communists. Dorothy Hewett, Audrey Blake, Oriel Gray, Audrey Johnson are a few of those women who have provided detailed information, reminiscences and historical accounts which turn traditional Communist history upside down. If the common people have been like "characters off-stage", then women in Communist history have been characters with no script, perceived as peripheral to the action.

"For every piece of recorded history there are a thousand pieces that have helped shape those events which go unacknowledged. Those most often ignored by the historian's pen have been slave, peasant,

¹¹. J.F.C. Harrison, The Common People, (London, 1984), p.13.

worker and woman.".¹²

The only full-length history of the Communist Party is by Alastair Davidson. His book, The Communist Party of Australia, A Short History, was published in 1969.¹³ It was in December of that year that the first Australian women's liberation movement meeting was held in Sydney. Although the influence of feminist historical perspectives could not have affected Davidson's book, he recounts the history of the Party within the historical framework of the marriage between the Party and the labour movement. It is the Party's relationship to industrial work and trade unions in Australia which provides the social and political backdrop to his work.

The book was written "primarily for scholars of communist studies and Australian history and politics".¹⁴ One has to assume after reading the book that there were not too many women members of the Party, and that no really important Party political activities involved women. This is a study which emphasises the Party as 'political' where emphasis is upon the leaders (the male ones), the labour movement (male, blue collar), the Party's relationship to the Soviet Union, and accounts of Party members (the men).

¹². Joyce Stevens, "Without Fear or Favour", in Women at Work, ed. by A. Curthoys, S. Eade, and P. Spearritt, (Canberra, 1975), p.268.

¹³. Alastair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia, A Short History, (California, 1969).

¹⁴. Ibid., p.ix.

Davidson does acknowledge the "able Communist women leading the New Housewives Association",¹⁵ but does not deal with the 'woman question', 'work among women' nor with the role of women members throughout all levels of the Party.

This formula for writing accounts of Party history has been repeated in a number of other individual histories of the Party written by male comrades. For example, Ralph Gibson's My Years in the Communist Party, written in 1965,¹⁶; his book The People Stand Up, 1983¹⁷; John Sendy's Comrades Come Rally!, published in 1978¹⁸. and Robin Gollan's Revolutionaries and Reformists¹⁹, place emphasis on the male identified labour movement and industrial work as the most important and essential activities. Even if one accepted the definition of 'political work' as trade union or delegation to other countries activities, women are singularly omitted from these accounts. One can only assume that these histories are written by men, for men.

When women are mentioned it is via their marital status as 'the wife of...' or as heroic individuals. When Communist women are so well known that they cannot be written out of the

¹⁵. Ibid, p.106.

¹⁶. Ralph Gibson, My Years in the Communist Party, (Melbourne, 1965).

¹⁷. Ralph Gibson, The People Stand Up, (Ascot Vale, 1983).

¹⁸. John Sendy, Comrades Come Rally!, (Melbourne, 1978).

¹⁹. Robin Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists, (Sydney, 1975).

accounts, such as Katherine Susannah Pritchard, the account describes their activities within a collective context. For example, when Ralph Gibson wrote his account of the Egon Kisch episode he recalled that:

"welcoming and supporting Kisch were Australian writers such as Vance Palmer, Katherine Susannah Pritchard..."²⁰

Another account of Communism in Australia is The Communist Movement and Australia by W.J. Brown, published in 1986.²¹ The book discusses the Party's role in pursuing women's rights "a long neglected issue that had come to the fore with the extensive role played by women in the war effort".²² This history acknowledges the role of the 'social movements' of the 1960s and discusses the women's liberation movement. The discussion is however contained by a particular political definition of 'class'.

"Some CPA members in recent times have raised the concept that the contradictions between women and men, the environment and human development, and capital and labor are equal revolutionary trends. This attitude not only fails to recognise the

²⁰. Gibson, My Years, p.42.

²¹. W.J. Brown, The Communist Movement and Australia, (Haymarket, 1986).

²². Ibid., p.148.

primary role of the working class in the winning of socialism but omits any mention of the fact that the women's struggle for full equality is inseparable from revolutionary action by the working class and its allies to remove exploitation in all its forms.".²³

Whilst Brown acknowledges that inequalities did exist between men and women in the Party, reflected particularly in the low numbers of women on Party committees at all levels ²⁴., he continues to support the orthodox Communist view that such inequalities would cease to exist once a socialist economy is in place, as this would provide the necessary material conditions for equality.²⁵

Tom O'Lincoln's book Into the Mainstream provides an analysis of the Communist Party and 'the woman question'. The book, as the author acknowledges, deals with the Communist Party in an often polemical way.²⁶. However, O'Lincoln does discuss some of the historical issues pertaining to 'work among women' and the Party.

It remains essential that Communist women and women who were

²³. Ibid, p.258.

²⁴. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.258.

²⁵. Ibid.

²⁶. O'Lincoln, Into the Mainstream, p.7. (This publication provides a Trotskyist analysis of the decline of Australian Communism.).

at one time in the Party continue to tell of their memories, activities, political hopes and aspirations. Otherwise the part played by Party women, both within the Communist Party and within the many political and social organisations and groups in Australia, will not be told. Books such as Joyce Steven's Taking the Revolution Home ²⁷ begin to bring women out of being "hidden from history".²⁸

Terra Nullius was not simply a legislative process to enable whites to take over a land already occupied by aborigines. It provided a context in which histories of Australian settlement could be recorded and subsequently used to educate succeeding generations of white children. Those of us who were schooled in the 1950s in New South Wales, learnt more about the Kings of England than about the history and culture of Australia's original settlers.

Historical accounts and histories have relied as much on who has done the writing as the facts which are selected as a basis of the historical account. Both women and aborigines (and more recently those Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds) will need to continue a process which questions chauvinist histories and historiography.

"Feminist history is not simply women's history.

²⁷. Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, (Melbourne, 1987).

²⁸. Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden from History, (Ringwood, Vic., 1975 ed.).

Feminist historians are not simply women historians. Every historian is either female or male, and knows the world as a gendered being. To make sense of the past, the historical record, each historian must select, interpret, create patterns and invent meanings. These processes all involve the historian's subjectivity which is gendered. That subjectivity has also, however, been disciplined by historical training. Within western societies, the discipline of history has been until recently, thoroughly imbued with a masculine view of the world."²⁹

Calliope's Epic, Clio's Song or Just a Saga?

In the prefatory note to her book A Proletarian Life, Audrey Blake notes that:

"Its form - stories and documents (articles, a paper for a seminar, letters, speeches made on various occasions) - is connected to developments fostered by the women's movement. The women's movement does not accept that the conventional way of doing things has a special importance. If the conventional way doesn't work for these women, they

²⁹. Jill Julius Matthews, Good and Mad Women, (North Sydney, 1984), p.19.

use another one which does.".³⁰.

This thesis relies on a mixture of primary and secondary source material. The primary sources consist of Communist Party documents which have been placed in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, and also of interviews with a number of members and ex-members of the Communist Party of Australia. These interviews have assisted in the development of an oral women's history and provide an important basis for the historical record in this thesis. They have been incorporated into the historical examination as an essential tool, not just as a process of recalling and restoring what has been forgotten and hidden, but also to engender the public record - the minutes, documents and source materials which have been used, and which often neglect to record or indicate the views, decisions and arguments which have been developed by women.

Sheila Rowbotham comments on another aspect of the public record:

"Anyone who has been an active participant in politics knows people do not sit solemnly reading a book and then march off to make strategies and programmes. There is a less conscious process of political thinking in a movement, untidy for historians to be sure, but fascinating

³⁰. Audrey Blake, A Proletarian Life, (Malmsbury, Australia, n.d.), p.v.

nevertheless.".³¹

One intriguing process which such oral accounts provided has been to ask questions about the struggles, experiences and memories of comrades, women in particular, about how the Communist Party actually dealt with women's liberation issues, and what occurred behind the scenes in the Party to enable it to produce the public documents which it did.

"What no scholar has yet succeeded in tracing is the stages by which history transformed itself into legend and legend into epic...How was the story transmitted, and in what form? Ballads? Earlier improvisations of a primitive epic kind? We do not know. We can only fall back on the vague but useful phrase 'oral tradition'..."³²

Our histories of a number of cultures have relied on this 'oral tradition', particularly the songs and sagas of the Celts and the Vikings. Indeed, songs and ballads have been an important historical tradition within the Left and socialist cultures. "The Internationale" ended every Communist Party Congress.

One other point needs to be made about sources for this

³¹. Sheila Rowbotham, The Past is Before Us, (London, 1989), pp.xiii-xiv.

³². Dorothy L. Sayers, (trans.) The Song of Roland, (Harmondsworth, 1957), pp.9-10.

thesis. To date, there is no consolidated history of the women's liberation movement in Australia in the 1970s. It is hoped that such an account will be written in the near future, and that some of the material in this thesis may provide a useful contribution.

Coming to Terms?

When writing of Australian socialism Robin Gollan makes an important point:

"The Australian story is unique only in the particulars, the general process being similar to that which occurred in a number of other countries, most notably in Britain. The similarity is to be explained by the similarities in the pressures to which the parties responded. Of these the most insistent were the economic circumstances in which they found themselves and the lines of policy laid down by the CPSU.".³³

Eric Aarons notes, when discussing the problems of current Australian socialism, that such problems are also occurring in other countries which suggests that one must go beyond "the political terrain of individual countries".³⁴.

³³. Gollan, p.285.

³⁴. Eric Aarons, "Renewing the Socialist Vision", in David McKnight, ed. Moving Left, (Leichhardt, 1986), p.80.

Writing about Communism and the women's liberation movement in the 1960s also requires going beyond the terrain of the Australian political and social context. There are some similarities between the issues which arose between feminism and socialism in Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s which can provide useful political analyses and documentation for the Australian situation.

When discussing theoretical Marxist issues and socialist feminism, this thesis relies on sources which have been published in Great Britain, particularly Ellen Meiksins Wood's The Retreat from Class.³⁵ Wood provides an historical analysis of the legacy of Eurocommunism and Althusserian discourse on Marxist theory. Wood analyses the relationship of the 'new social movements' including the women's movement, to class politics and class struggle. Wood is critical of those socialists who reject the centrality of a Marxist class analysis.

This analysis is largely class struggle analysis.³⁶ It is the nucleus of Marxism.³⁷ Class struggle explains the dynamics of history. The abolition of classes is the ultimate object of the revolutionary process. The particular importance of the working class in capitalist society for Marxism is that

³⁵. Ellen Meiksins Wood, The Retreat from Class, (London, 1986).

³⁶. Ralph Miliband, Divided Societies, (Oxford, 1989), p.2.

³⁷. Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Marxism without Class Struggle?", Socialist Register, (1983), p.239.

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this is the only class whose own class interests require, and whose own conditions make possible, the abolition of class itself.³⁸ This analysis is essential therefore in providing a view of history, and to the continuing development of revolutionary objectives and strategies.

This view of class struggle is a central political and ideological tenet in this thesis. Additionally, it is maintained that historical materialism is important in analysing oppression.

It is also argued, however, that it is within these political and ideological contexts that the sources of tension and conflict about socialism and feminism have arisen over the last decade, in a number of Western capitalist countries.

One of the continuing tensions for socialist feminists has been to develop analyses and strategies which enable women to fight against oppression, as part of the overall fight for socialism. This has meant continuing to struggle against a dominating socialist strategy which subordinates feminist issues and continues to define class struggle and the socialist project in male, economist terms.

This thesis argues that without the unifying theory of class struggle, political issues, including feminist issues, and their solutions tend to be analysed and dealt with on a

³⁸. Wood, The Retreat, p.12.

single, category basis. The challenge has been and continues to be the development of "a unified dialectical materialist perspective on women's liberation.". ³⁹

Debates about feminism and socialism and what kind of relationship can be developed between them have continued throughout the 1980s. For example, in a paper given at the socialist feminist conference held in 1987, Anne Curthoys asked "what is the socialism in socialist feminism?". In this article, Curthoys explores the relationship between the words 'socialist' and 'feminist' and concludes that the work of the term 'socialist' is not so much to describe a socialist political philosophy as modifying the word 'feminist' so that a distinction is made between 'bourgeois liberal feminist' or 'radical separatist feminist'. The paper continues by asking some important questions about what is it that is meant by 'socialist'? Yet this questioning is undertaken within the political context of asking "how can we then mobilise the term 'socialist' to do some work for us?".⁴⁰

In a reply to this paper, Rosemary Pringle indicates that Curthoys' call for a return to the 'socialist' fold is not

³⁹. Lise Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women, (Rutgers Univeristy, 1983), p.28.

⁴⁰. Anne Curthoys, "What is the Socialism in Socialist Feminism?", Australian Feminist Studies, No. 6, (Autumn 1988), pp.17-23.

very convincing or compelling.⁴¹ Pringle argues that labels, including that of 'socialist-feminism' do not have much meaning in the 1980s,⁴² and that many feminists who were involved in socialist feminism in the 1970s do not support a return to "a set of orthodoxies that we have deliberately and, I think productively, left behind."⁴³

This thesis acknowledges the complexities of the issues involved in developing the politics of gender and class. It however, rejects the views put forward by feminists such as Pringle, whose arguments are placed within a political and ideological context which accepts socialism as passe and Marxism as redundant.

It is maintained that 'socialism' and 'socialist feminism' are not simply labels. They provide a theory and analysis which is essential in explaining capitalism and the politics of the working class in the 1990s. Within this analysis a Marxist critique can assist in understanding women's oppression and in formulating strategies which go well beyond liberal reforms.

The thesis supports the views put forward by Curthoys about the need for continuing to question and analyse the

⁴¹. Rosemary Pringle, "'Socialist-Feminism' in the Eighties: Reply to Curthoys", Australian Feminist Studies, No. 6, (Autumn 1988), p.25.

⁴². Ibid., p.29.

⁴³. Ibid.

relationship between feminism and socialism. Such a process would involve identifying the complexities which exist between the two, particularly in relation to critiques of patriarchy. It would also involve continuing to reassess orthodox socialist definitions and strategies in relation to women's oppression.

"I hold that the problem of women's oppression, like all social phenomena, can be addressed in terms of marxist theory. We do not need some new synthesis between marxism or socialism, and feminism. Rather it is marxist theory itself which must be developed, and socialist practice that must be transformed.".⁴⁴

The thesis also relies on a number of texts written by Sheila Rowbotham.⁴⁵ Rowbotham, writing about the history of the women's liberation movement in Great Britain, analyses problems and issues, contradictions and dilemmas which have arisen for socialist feminists. Reference to these sources is based on a view that there have been significant political and social similarities between the Communist Parties in Australia

⁴⁴. Lise Vogel, "Marxism and Feminism: Unhappy Marriage, Trial Separation or Something Else?" in Lydia Sargent, Women and Revolution, (Boston, 1981), pp.197-198.

⁴⁵. In particular the thesis refers to the following Rowbotham books: Women, Resistance and Revolution, (Harmondsworth, 1972); Woman's Consciousness, Man's World, (Harmondsworth, 1973); Beyond the Fragments written with Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, (London, 1979), and The Past is Before Us, (London, 1989).

and Great Britain.

Additionally, an American text, Lise Vogel's Marxism and the Oppression of Women is used as source material.⁴⁶ Vogel provides a critique of the relationship between Marxism and feminism. Vogel rejects arguments which support the view that there is an incompatibility between a patriarchal and a class analysis of society. There are a number of papers on this view in Women and Revolution edited by Lydia Sargent. In particular Carol Ehrlich who argues that it is impossible to build a feminist theory and practice that will be an equal partner in the marriage of feminism and marxism.⁴⁷ Christine Delphy also examines this issue in Close to Home, arguing that "feminism cannot use concepts developed to explain capitalist class relationships because they precisely occlude the oppression which is specific to women."⁴⁸

This thesis rejects the view that patriarchy is the main enemy. It maintains the argument that whilst most women suffer oppression, the ways in which this oppression is experienced varies depending on women's class location.⁴⁹ It supports Vogel's assertion that Marx and Engels still provide a valuable theoretical basis within which women's oppression can

⁴⁶. Lise Vogel Marxism and the Oppression of Women, (Rutgers University, 1983).

⁴⁷. Carol Ehrlich, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Can it be Saved?" in Sargent, pp.109-133.

⁴⁸. Christine Delphy, Close to Home, (London, 1984), p.11.

⁴⁹. Miliband, p.103.

be analysed.

Within the thesis reference is made to 'the Party' for the Communist Party of Australia, and to 'the movement' for the women's liberation movement. This is not to suggest that the terms have only a generic application. Both the Party and the movement consisted of a variety of opinions, ideas and theoretical perspectives. This pluralism is less applicable to the Party which, as a political party, produced documents based on majority decisions. However, the use of the term 'the Party' is not intended to ignore or deny the variety of views which existed in order for debates to produce theoretical and political decisions designated as those of 'the Communist Party'.

The women's liberation movement consists of a number of theoretical and political opinions. The pluralism of the movement often resulted in polarised opinions and actions, as for example, between the socialist feminists and the radical or separatist feminists.

For the sake of clarity however, references to 'the Party' refer mainly to the public record of Party decisions, and references to 'the movement' refer to the political organisation which acted as the umbrella for women's liberation.

There is another issue involved in referring to 'the Party'

which requires clarification. Such a reference does not distinguish the variety of views which existed between the rank and file membership and the leadership. Nor does it distinguish any differences which may have existed between the membership and the documents which are the final record.

In the end, however, one relies on the documents which are the outcome of debate and majority decision. Yet when recalling such debates, members often noted that differences occurred. Although reference is made in the thesis to many of the verbal and political struggles which took place during the making of such documents, in the end it is the documents that are relied upon to provide the 'Party view'.

In the 1970s the Party view on issues continued to be developed through the mechanisms of its national bodies, the National Committee and National Congress. The Congress, constituted by delegates elected on a State basis, debated and endorsed resolutions and draft documents which formed the Party's programme and policy.

The emphasis in the thesis is upon the records of the Communist Party at the National level, and at the Sydney District level. Further information has been incorporated from the Wollongong and Newcastle Districts and from the Melbourne District, but the overall bias is towards the National level records. Given the structural nature of the Party, particularly within the organisational principles of

democratic centralism, it is asserted that the National records of the Party do provide an overall view of the political and theoretical decisions and perspectives of 'the Party'.

Throughout the thesis the terms "socialism", "communism" and "marxism" are used interchangeably. However the Communist Party of Australia saw itself, from its establishment, as a distinctly communist party. "It intended to lead the working class to a socialist revolution".⁵⁰ Although its development as a Marxist-Leninist party was gradual,⁵¹ the Communist Party accepted certain fundamental theoretical and organisational principles which were associated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik model. The principle of democratic centralism was endorsed by the party in Australia in the late 1920s.⁵² "The Bolshevik model involved a highly centralised organisation whereby the decisions of the central congress, committee and executive were binding on all party members".⁵³.

The Party in Australia developed a close relationship with the

⁵⁰. Davidson, The Communist Party, p.3.

⁵¹. For a discussion of the history of the establishment of the Communist Party of Australia see Alastair Davidson's The Communist Party of Australia. A Short History, and W.J. Brown's The Communist Movement and Australia.

⁵². Davidson, The Communist Party, p.38.

⁵³. Stevens, Taking, p.17.

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Comintern, ⁵⁴. thereby endorsing principles of world revolution, international communism and the dictatorship of the proletariat . Communists believed that the world capitalist system was corrupt and that it would and could be defeated by a proletarian democracy.

The influence of the Comintern on the Party in Australia has been the subject of some disagreement. Bill Brown maintains that charges of Russian domination of the Australian Party are "demonstrably false".⁵⁵ . He takes Alastair Davidson to task for supporting the view that the policies of the Communist Party of Australia were dictated by the Soviet Union through the Comintern.⁵⁶

In the 1970s differences of opinion about the role of the Soviet Union and its influences on the Australian Party contributed to a major split in the Party in Australia. These differences raised issues about the nature of the traditional Communist Party as a vanguard party and about a model for socialism in Australia. It marked a time of re-thinking the Bolshevik tradition.

It is difficult to accept Brown's position. Davidson documents

⁵⁴. The Comintern (1919-1943) or Third Communist International was established March 2, 1919 and was dissolved in 1943.

⁵⁵. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.28.

⁵⁶. Ibid. pp.30-31.

the links which were developed between the Party and the Comintern⁵⁷ and many Party members in Australia attended CPSU schools in Moscow as part of their revolutionary education.⁵⁸ In developing these links, the political and ideological line developed by the Comintern influenced, if not dominated, many of the political and strategic decisions made by the Party in Australia prior to 1967.

Occasionally the influence of the Comintern meant that the Communist Party in Australia took a more radical position on some issues than other Australian political parties. As Joyce Stevens notes one of the influences of the Comintern on the Communist Party of Australia was to assist in producing a notion of international solidarity, including in the Asian region.⁵⁹ This internationalism contributed to the Party's opposition to the White Australia policy and to the development of a policy which supported aboriginal rights.⁶⁰ Communist Party views on these issues appeared in early Party documents. The 14th Congress of the Party strongly opposed 'White Australia'⁶¹ and the Party was an early champion of aboriginal land rights, being the first Australian political

⁵⁷. Davidson, The Communist Party, particularly pp.14-39.

⁵⁸. For one account of these schools see John Sendy, Comrades Come Rally!

⁵⁹. Stevens, Taking, p.18.

⁶⁰. Ibid.

⁶¹. Communists in Congress No. 7 (Series), "Resolutions of the 14th Congress of the Australian Communist Party, (Sydney, 1946).

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party to propose a program of Aboriginal Advancement.⁶².

The role of the Communist Party in dealing with issues of racism and aboriginal self-determination will not be discussed in detail. This is not because the issues are regarded as unimportant, but because they are beyond the scope of this thesis.

A history of the Communist Party's role in issues of racism is a task still to be undertaken. Anne Curthoys makes a comment on some of the issues which would require attention:

"Trying to keep just two concepts in play has proved extremely difficult; how easy it has been as feminist historians, critics and philosophers to fall into seeing sex as the primary distinction and race or class as a secondary distinction frequently submerged, elided, forgotten. And how easy it has been for Marxist or labour historians to do it the other way around, keeping a firm eye on class relationships and seeing sex or race as a secondary, dependent distinction."⁶³

Chapter and Verse.

⁶². Daisy Marchisotti, "History of the Land Rights Struggle in Queensland", Australian Left Review, No. 64, (May 1978), p.2.

⁶³. Anne Curthoys, "The Three Body Problem: Feminism and Chaos Theory", Hecate, Vol. 17, No. 1, p.15.

The first two chapters detail the ideological, theoretical and practical heritage which the Communist Party had incorporated into its programs, policies and activities since its establishment in 1920. The chapters examine the parameters which were inherited for 'work among women' and the legacies which had assisted in the development of a gender-blind theory and practice. It is argued however, that the Party was re-examining many aspects of its theory and practice at the time of the emergence of the women's liberation movement. This movement assisted Party women to question and analyse many aspects of the traditional Communist views on 'the woman question'.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the impact of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party. The movement effected all aspects of the Party, including its theoretical perspectives and definitions on class and revolution and its views of the roles and organisation of a Marxist party. The role of Communist women in the women's movement is also examined.

Chapters 5 to 8 investigate some specific issues which were raised by the women's liberation movement and which were subsequently addressed by women in the Party. These issues include gender and class, the gender based division of labour, the family and sexuality, the 'personal is political' and organisation and the revolutionary party.

It is argued that Communist women assisted in developing

critiques of these issues and in advancing the theoretical perspectives of socialist feminism.

Chapter 9 examines two specific political circumstances where women had to fight to gain political recognition and equality. These situations are examined in order to evaluate how much of a gap existed between the Party's theory and practice of women's liberation. The first situation was the struggle to gain proportional representation for women in the Communist Party, and the second examines the NSW Builders Labourers Federation at a time when its leadership was predominantly Communist and when women working in the union office went on strike.

The final chapter argues that there was a "Red Renaissance" in socialist women's writings and that the involvement of Communist women in the women's liberation movement enhanced the development of a number of socialist feminist journals.

The struggles of our demands for women must be bound up with the object of seizing power, of establishing the proletarian dictatorship...The women must be made conscious of the political connection between our demands and their own suffering, needs and wishes. They must realise what the proletarian dictatorship means for them, complete equality with man in law and practice, in the family, in the state, in society; and end to the power of the bourgeoisie.

Lenin to Klara Zetkin.

CHAPTER 1: HERITAGE AND LEGACY

History and historical agents.

The 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of Australia was held on March 27th-30th, 1970. It was to mark a watershed for the Party, and for Communist politics in Australia. Not only did the Congress indicate in its adopted documents and resolutions an attempt to formalise a separation from its past praxis, the Congress also literally marked a separation of Communist political viewpoints in Australia. This separation culminated in the establishment of the breakaway Socialist Party of Australia, which was formally constituted on 4th of December 1971.

This divorce was to initially overshadow another political debate placed on the Congress agenda. "At the Congress there were all kinds of dynamics. Issues about how to describe the Soviet Union; about the modern working class, and about involving students. Obvious ideological differences were going to blow out".¹. Amidst this political turmoil, a resolution had been put forward to suggest that the existing Party program for women be withdrawn and that discussion on the Party's program be based on a new document entitled Women and

¹. Interview with Mavis Robertson July 1990.

Social Liberation: a Communist Viewpoint. ².

The resolution ³. stated that the movers wished to:

"develop a detailed Communist program which would consider the actual position of women in society (economic, social, sexual and psychological questions); the sources of discrimination and oppression practised against women; their immediate, long term needs; the potential of revolutionary and radical movements against different forms of inequality; the responsibilities of revolutionaries to these movements and for a socialist program to ensure the liberation of women as an integral part of the wider movement for human liberation." ⁴.

This resolution was not actually debated at the Congress, due to the exigencies of other agenda items. Congress did however, agree that the document be the basis for a discussion on women's liberation in the Party. ⁵

². This document was the basis for the later document Women and Social Liberation, first adopted at the 24th Congress of the Communist Party in 1974. This was subsequently amended by the National CPA Women's Conference held in 1979 prior to its adoption at the 26th Party Congress, held in 1979.

³. Communist Party of Australia, "Resolutions and Proposals Submitted by Party Members and Organisations", Item 130, 22nd Congress of the CPA, 1970, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

⁴. Ibid.

⁵. Women and Social Liberation, (1970), Introduction.

The initial overshadowing of this Congress item, however, could not continue. The Communist Party was becoming involved in the inchoate Australian women's liberation movement, and the women's liberation movement was beginning its iconoclastic influence upon the Communist Party of Australia.

On 30th October, 1920, twenty-six men and women formed the Communist Party of Australia.⁶ The Russian Revolution and revolutionary activity in Europe gave the impetus for existing Australian socialist groups to form a political party.⁷ The early years of the CPA were however marked by internal disputes and splits in which "the trade-union based faction defeated the more theoretically oriented groups from the earlier socialist parties."⁸

Members of the Communist Party regarded themselves as offering the working class an alternative to the reformist policies of the Labor Party.⁹ Communist Party attitudes to the ALP continued to remain a major item of debate and political struggle within the Australian political arena.

The CPA made its first contact with international Communism at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920.¹⁰

⁶. Davidson, The CPA, p.3.

⁷. Stevens, Taking, p.16.

⁸. Ibid., pp.16-17.

⁹. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.23.

¹⁰. Davidson, The CPA, p.15.

Political, ideological and organisational programs and principles were established between the parties in the Soviet Union and Australia, although as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, there are differing opinions about the strength and role of the CPSU in relation to the formulation and operation of the Australian party.

Between the years 1965-1975, the Communist Party of Australia underwent a political metamorphosis. The political chrysalis which emerged and which was developed with leadership guidance, effected both the theory and practice of the Party. For some in the Party the metamorphosis was necessary and revolutionary; for others it was viewed as an opportunist attempt to direct the Party away from its original revolutionary goals and objectives. For the former, the influences of the student movement, the Vietnam moratorium movement, the 1968 events in Europe and Czechoslovakia, and the women's liberation movement would provide a much required diversity of socio-political practices and views for a Party whose influence in the broader Australian political arena was continuing to decline.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain this decline. John Sendy notes that the effects of the 1949 coal strike; the Party's intolerance towards intellectuals; Stalinism; and attitudes to the events of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 all contributed to a decline in Party

membership.¹¹ Added to these are the effects of 1950s cold war anti-Communism.

Additionally, the Party's political attitude during the Coal Strike pointed to other issues which assisted in the Party's decline. The Party was certain that the late 1940s would herald the revolution in Australia. This certainty blinded it to other social and economic changes which were occurring in post-war Australia, particularly the restructuring of capital, immigration and concomitant changes to work and the nature of the working class. The Party failed to analyse the flexibility of post-war capital, and instead clung on to increasingly anachronistic definitions of class. It was not until the mid-1960s that the Party began seriously to analyse these issues, by which time its political and ideological position in relation to the working class had become, for many workers, an out-dated position.

For other Party members, the new eclecticism based upon New Left politics was anathema.

"We believe one basic reason for the decline and confusion in the Party during the short period since the present leadership has taken office arises fundamentally from its vacillating, opportunist position and is the direct result of its substitution of a mixture of right opportunist

¹¹. Sendy, Comrades, p.4.

and so-called New Left or petty bourgeois radical trends in place of its formerly sound scientific socialist position.".¹².

Throughout this ten year period, the political movements and developments within the Australian and international New Left context would have various effects on the Communist Party. They would be like a series of waves moving the pattern of sands settled deep upon the ocean floor. One of the largest waves would be the women's liberation movement. It would irrevocably challenge and change both the theory and practice of the Communist Party in Australia.

New Left politics constituted a complex dialectic whose sources were to be found in a number of social and liberation movements which had been developing internationally since the early 1960s. These movements regarded themselves as radical, anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian. Whilst anti-US imperialism, the New Left also distanced itself from Soviet socialism.¹³. In Australia the roots of the New Left were contained in the events of 1956, with voices such as Helen Palmer calling for a more critical analysis of socialism and Australian society.

One element of this politic, the women's liberation movement,

¹². Brown, The Communist Movement, p.265.

¹³. Ann Curthoys and John Merritt, eds., Australia's First Cold War 1945-1953, Vol. 1: Society, Communism and Culture, (Sydney, 1984), p.206.

emerged with other liberation movements, and whilst accepting the theories of other New Left elements, developed its own theories and practice of struggle.¹⁴

In its own right the women's liberation movement had a cathartic influence on the Communist Party. This movement assisted Communist women to challenge the Party's inherited theory on 'the woman question', and its firmly held views on the nature of class struggle and socialist revolution.

The women's liberation movement also assisted Communist women to challenge the prevailing orthodox Party views on definitions of working class, and to influence the questioning of a fundamental socialist tenet, that social, economic and political equality for all women would be achieved, come the revolution.

The effects of the women's liberation movement extended to all aspects of Party life. Not only within the theoretical sphere as outlined above, but equally in its practice. Communist women confronted the ways in which Party organisational work reflected a gender based division of labour; the ways in which Party documents reflected sexism and political chauvinism, and demanded that Party priorities and agenda reflect more equally the activities and issues of its women members.

¹⁴. Joyce Stevens, A History of International Women's Day, (Marrickville, 1985), p.28.

Communist women also demanded that Party structures be organised so that they could become more accessible to and representative of women, and enable women to be more visible throughout Party organisation from local branches to the National Executive.

Within the eclectic framework of women's liberation, there was a renaissance of socialist feminist writings in the Communist Party. This included not only the reprinting of works of earlier writers such as Kollontai, but also the writings of contemporary Communist women who assisted in enriching debates on gender and class, and in challenging the Party's orthodox views on the sources and nature of women's oppression, including women's oppression within socialism.

If one was to take an idealistic, perhaps romantic view, of communism, the fact that Communist women had to fight and struggle within the Party for the recognition of the need for the Party as a whole to embrace and support women's liberation, may come as a surprise. The Communist Party of Australia had a long association with militant women's political and social issues, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ The Communist Party had a history of publicly supporting economic and social equality for women exemplified by its advocating equal pay.

¹⁵. For discussions of this period see Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, (Melbourne, 1987), and Audrey Johnson, Bread and Roses, (Sydney, 1990).

But in the 1970s, many Communist Party women were immediately attracted to the new women's liberation movement and agitated for the political and personal liberation of women both inside and outside the Party. In order to understand this political event, it is of value to examine and analyse the previous fifty years of Party history, particularly as it related to a history of women in the Party.

Within the context of this chapter, such an examination will be brief. The intention is to raise some events and issues which it is felt are imperative historically so that an explanation of the influences of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party in the 1970s can be made. Whilst the overall intention of the thesis is to examine in particular the years 1965-1975, it is not possible to judiciously undertake such an examination without raising the Party's heritage and legacies acquired from its previous fifty years of history.

This chapter will attempt to unravel some of this heritage and legacy, woven in a sometimes intricate hedge-like fashion within a domestic and international framework. The unravelling will attempt to tease out some thorny and colourful strands as a way of examining the effects of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party of Australia.

Before embarking upon this examination, it is important to note that a study of Communist Party history from the 1920s

to the 1970s raises points of historiography and of definitions of history itself. Not only does it raise those issues made by a number of feminist historians about the invisibility of women's history, but it also raises issues about definitions of historical progress.

E.H.Carr wrote in the 1960s:

"History in its essence is change, movement, or - if you do not cavil at the old-fashioned word - progress... History properly so-called can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself. The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. A society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past."¹⁶.

An examination of women's history, however, demonstrates that a definition of historical progress as expressed by Carr can be questioned. Such progress cannot be measured by maintaining that a time line continuum exists which in a linear fashion marks historical progress by steps forward. Rather a more acceptable definition acknowledges that the time line advances and retreats and that there is historical progression and regression.

¹⁶. E.H., Carr, What is History?, (London, 1961), p.132.

"'The past is before us' is a backwards way- round of expression. We tend to assume the past is securely behind us as we head towards the future. Yet on second thoughts it makes sense. The past has gone by and is already evident for scrutiny. It is after all the future which is behind us."¹⁷

Such progress and regress is evident if one examines the history of women in the Communist Party of Australia in the years 1920-1970. It is also evident in a study of communism in the Soviet Union for the corresponding time period, but particularly in the years 1917-1953.

Charles Fourier, within another age and context, had raised another point about definitions of progress:

"Social progress and change of period are brought about by virtue of the progress of women towards liberty, and social retrogression occurs as a result of a diminution in the liberty of women. Other events influence these political changes, but there is no cause which produces social progress or decline as rapidly as a change in the position of women...In summary the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social

¹⁷. Rowbotham, The Past, p.xi.

progress.".¹⁸.

Whatever happened to Clara, Rosa and Alexandra?

When the Communist Party of Australia was established in 1920, it inherited both Australian and international socio-political contexts, the international being specifically communist. The Party inherited the traditions of the Australian labour movement and the traditions of the Bolshevik revolution. The Party was also influenced by the history of militant women's struggles, particularly those fought for by the suffragettes.

These struggles were strengthened by those women who participated in anti-conscription campaigns during the First World War. Women in the Women's Peace Army and the Australian Peace Alliance took leading roles in the anti-war movement.¹⁹ Pat Gowland comments that women in the Women's Peace Army were "influenced by socialist ideology and their tactics were regarded as provocative".²⁰

Joyce Stevens has commented on how women who came into the communist movement in Australia were not only associated with

¹⁸. Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex, (London, 1979), p.7.

¹⁹. Joy Damousi, "Socialist Women and Gendered Space: The Anti-Conscription and Anti-War Campaigns of 1914-1918", Labour History, No. 60, (1991), p.1.

²⁰. Pat Gowland, "The Women's Peace Army" in Women, Class and History. Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978, Elizabeth Windshuttle, ed. (Melbourne, 1980), p.216.

the socialist and progressive movements which existed prior to the establishment of the Communist Party, but they were also associated with the suffragette movement. Joyce Stevens points out that Communist women had interacted with feminists, who might or might not have been socialist, but who had strong ideas about the social position of women. That interaction influenced the way that Communists saw the position of women in a positive way.²¹

Rosa Luxemburg²². made the following comment about historical inheritance, a comment applicable to the new Communist party in Australia:

"It is also true that every new movement, when it first elaborates its theory and policy, begins by finding support in the preceding movement, though it may be in direct contradiction with the latter. It begins by suiting itself to the forms found at hand and by speaking the language spoken hereto. In time, the new grain breaks through the old husk. The new movement finds its own forms and its own language."²³.

²¹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

²². Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919, Social Democratic Party of Germany, murdered on January 15, 1919 by the reactionary Freikorps.

²³. Rosa Luxemburg, Reform or Revolution, (New York, 1970 ed.), p.9.

This comment is applicable to the influences of the early Australian suffragette and socialist movements on the Communist Party and also to the authority of the Soviet Union on the Party in Australia. It was not until the 1950s and more especially during the 1960s, that the Australian party vigorously and diligently endeavoured to 'break through the old husk'.

The Communist Party also worked within the framework of the Australian labour movement, both within its traditions and political practice. This inheritance was of course tempered by the influence from the Soviet Union, an influence which was to create ongoing difficulties for the relationship between the Communist Party and the Labor Party.

Additionally, the Communist Party was a party functioning within Australian social, economic, political and legal infrastructures. The hegemony of these structures and institutions would provide the material conditions in which the Party would struggle to apply its theory and practice of dialectical materialism.

When the Communist Party was established in Australia, the Leninist leadership was still in control of the Party in the Soviet Union. The subsequent shift in power within the Soviet party was to be as influential upon the Australian party as Marx and Lenin had been in early years. Tyranny of distance notwithstanding, the Soviet influence was to be continuing

and indefatigable - at least until the 1960s.

This Soviet inheritance was as important on issues relating to women in the Communist Party of Australia, as it was upon other issues and their translation from the theoretical to the practical. It is interesting that one of the first Soviet publications to be distributed by the Party in Australia was Alexandra Kollontai's ²⁴ pamphlet, Communism and the Family.²⁵ It was first issued in Australia in the early 1920s, and was subsequently reprinted in 1970, ²⁶. when there was a red renaissance of feminist publications within the Communist Party.

Kollontai's pamphlet was serially published in Working Woman during 1930 and 1931, ²⁷. but many of the political and social issues raised in Kollontai's writings would not again be accessible, or debated, within the Communist Party until the 1970s. This progressive support for women's issues, evident in the early days of the Communist Party of Australia, would cease to develop once party powers in the Soviet Union

²⁴. Alexandra Kollontai, 1872-1952, member of the Bolshevik Central Committee and after 1917 head of the Ministry for Social Welfare. Kollontai introduced the first social legislation for working mothers. She defended sexual freedom and wrote a number of novels, including Red Love, about the potential of the new culture under socialism. In 1922 joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs becoming an ambassador in 1943 thus surviving Stalin's purges. Kollontai was the world's first woman diplomat.

²⁵. For a detailed account of Kollontai see Cathy Porter, Alexandria Kollontai: a Biography, (London, 1980).

²⁶. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

²⁷. Stevens, Taking, p.46.

embraced a turn to the right, with Stalin taking over party leadership of the CPSU in the mid-1920s.

Sheila Rowbotham makes the following comment on Kollontai:

"Kollontai was conscious always of a more complex dialectic. In her stories she describes economic and social circumstances and inner patterns of feelings. She was aware of an unevenness in the relation between new social forms and sexual passion - an unevenness which bore the weight of centuries of oppression. Here Kollontai is straining towards an alternative culture of communism, which would transform all human relationships.".²⁸

Many Communist Party women who became involved in the women's liberation movement would demand a recrudescence of this sexual politic in the 1970s.

Within the Soviet tradition, the Communist Party of Australia inherited 'Work among Women'. This work involved the political organisation for working class women around class issues.²⁹ The Party would devote energies to the development of a praxis around 'The Woman Question.' In 1886 Eleanor Marx and Edward

²⁸. Alexandra Kollontai, Love of Worker Bees, translated by Cathy Porter, afterword by Sheila Rowbotham, (London, 1977), p.225.

²⁹. Stevens, Taking, p.10.

Aveling wrote a pamphlet The Woman Question. The authors were insistent that the source of women's oppression under capitalism was economic.³⁰ A praxis for dealing with this question was developed under the guiding hands of Clara Zetkin³¹ and Lenin, but fundamentally redefined under Stalin.

A publication much used in post World War Two Communist Party of Australia schools, was entitled The Woman Question.³² It included selections from the writings of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V.I.Lenin, Joseph Stalin. In addition it contained an appendix which included an excerpt of Clara Zetkin's conversation with Lenin on the 'woman question'.³³, although it contained no selections from the writings of Kollontai or Luxemburg.

This publication demonstrates that a massive contradiction existed in international communism within the theory and practice of 'the woman question'. Whilst the selection included revolutionary views on women and socialist struggle, in practice it was used to entrench a patriarchal view of gender and class. In Great Britain the exact publication was used by the Communist Party of Great Britain. It was entitled

³⁰. Vogel, p.103.

³¹. Clara Zetkin, 1857-1933, Social Democratic Party of Germany, in 1920 appointed by the executive committee of the Communist International as the International Secretary of Communist Women. Zetkin's pamphlet Lenin on the Woman Question discusses women's organisation in Communist parties.

³². The Woman Question, (New York, 1950).

³³. Ibid., Appendix, pp.89-94.

Women and Communism and contained a forward written by Harry Pollitt, the then General Secretary of the Party in Great Britain.³⁴

Within the context of the previous discussion regarding historical progress, the ways in which the theory and practice of 'work among women' was developed and applied both within the Soviet and Australian Communist parties contexts, demonstrates that between the years 1917 and 1970 the politics of this issue progressed and regressed. In Australia, the militancy of the 1920s and 1930s women's groups would be replaced by the more conservative and orthodox theory and practice of the 1950s, a practice which reflected both the more conservative views on women in society which developed after the second world war,³⁵ and also the dominating views of Stalinism.

By 1925, after the meeting of the 3rd International, Communist parties internationally began to take a step to the right.³⁶ This was the beginning of the Stalinist deification, and this ascendancy heralded the defeat and decline of the left in the Soviet Union, and the dominance of Stalinist views within

³⁴. Women and Communism, (London, 1950).

³⁵. See "From the Military to Motherhood 1940-1960" in Stepping Out of History, Marian Aveling and Joy Damousi, eds., (Sydney, 1991), pp.136-156.

³⁶. There are many accounts of and discussions about Trotsky and the Left Opposition. One view is expressed in Frank Farrell's International Socialism and Australian Labour, and another, more polemical account is contained in Chanie Rosenberg's Women and Perestroika, (London, 1989).

international communist parties.

Uncle Joe

There is a plethora of material which has documented and analysed the role of Stalin and the influence of Stalinism on both domestic and international communism. However, an examination of the women's liberation movement and the Communist Party of Australia during the period 1965-1975, cannot be adequately undertaken unless the legacy of Stalinism is asserted and applied. As previously indicated, there were many influences of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party, and these will be dealt with in depth in later chapters. At this point it needs to be stated that one of the major achievements of Communist women during the 1970s was to accept the new feminist politics of the women's liberation movement and with great alacrity and sedulousness, attack a major bastion of Stalinism in the Party - the Stalinist definition of the Party's theory and practice pertaining to women.

The process of opposing and denigrating Stalinist views on women had begun in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, with vigorous debates put forward by the left. Prior to Stalin's succession, Zetkin had been able to point to the tremendous advances made in the Soviet Union in the early years of the revolution:

"In law there is naturally complete equality of rights for men and women. And everywhere there is evidence of a sincere wish to put this equality into practice. We are bringing the women into the social economy, into legislation and government. All educational institutions are open to them, so that they can increase their professional and social capacities...In short, we are seriously carrying out the demand in our program for the transference of the economic and educational functions of the separate household to society."³⁷.

There had, of course, been much debate within the Bolshevik Party about the 'woman question', particularly between Lenin, Zetkin and Kollontai, who had each endeavoured to analyse and enrich the theory of Marx and Engels on this question. After the October Revolution, the Party endeavoured to develop this discourse into practical achievements. Legal and political steps were taken to introduce a revolutionary change for women in the Soviet Union which was far in advance of any other country. New legislation established a basis for revolutionary political, social and economic life for Soviet women. Laws on marriage, divorce, abortion and equal pay turned the traditional Russian ideology of the family upside down.³⁸.

³⁷. The Woman Question, p.94

³⁸. See Sheila Rowbotham, "If You Like Tobogganing" in Women, Resistance and Revolution, (London, 1972) for a detailed discussion of this period.

Unfortunately for international communism, these advances and progresses were not to be fully developed into Soviet praxis.

"Unfortunately it is still true to say of many of our comrades, 'scratch a Communist and find a Philistine.' Of course, you must scratch the sensitive spot, their mentality as regards woman. Could there be a more damning proof of this than the callous acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in the petty, monotonous household work?..."³⁹.

Not only was the legislation to remain influential mostly in theory and not effect the majority of Soviet families, but, in addition, the ascent of Stalin marked the end and reversal of this progress.

This retrograde period under Stalin is commented upon by Kate Millett in a book written in the same year, 1970, that the Communist Party of Australia was to begin to understand that there was a new challenge to the old Stalinist definitions of women's place both inside and outside the Party:

"The initial radical freedoms in marriage, divorce, abortion, childcare, and the family were largely abridged and the reaction gained so that, by 1943, even coeducation was abolished in the Soviet Union.

³⁹. The Woman Question, pp.92-93.

The sexual revolution was over, the counterrevolution triumphant."⁴⁰.

It is interesting to trace the parallel developments of 'work among women' in the Party in the Soviet Union and the Party in Australia.⁴¹ Joyce Stevens has documented this parallel history in her book Taking the Revolution Home.⁴² In an unpublished paper on the same subject, Joyce Stevens comments on the influence of the Communist International which had called for the formation of a women's section of the Communist Party. The International resolved that there was to be no 'separatist' women's movement but there was "a necessity for the organisation of communist women to proceed along somewhat different lines than general party organisation - at least in the early stages".⁴³.

In 1919 in the Soviet Union, the Working and Peasant Women's Department of the Communist Party was formed. It was known as the 'Genotdel'.⁴⁴ This organisation was not simply an

⁴⁰. Kate Millett, Sexual Politics, (New York, 1970), p.176.

⁴¹. For more detailed accounts of women in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, see Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, Women in Soviet Society, (California, 1978) and Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, eds., Women in Russia, (Stanford, 1977).

⁴². Joyce Stevens Taking the Revolution Home, (Melbourne, 1987).

⁴³. Joyce Stevens, "Work among Women" in the Communist Party - 1920-1940, Unpublished paper, (n.d.), p.1.

⁴⁴. Michaela Kronemann, "Ideology and Liberation: Women in the Soviet Union", Melbourne Journal of Politics, Vol. 8, (1975/6), p.45.

educating body for women. It organised women politically and helped to raise the political consciousness of women after the Revolution.⁴⁵. It helped organise women into practical activities, especially during the War, but as well, discussion groups were established to talk about many issues involving Marxist theory.

In Australia the Communist Party established a Central Women's Department in the 1920s with the task "of organising special work among women and carrying the message of the Communist Party to women workers and to the working men's wives connected with the factory...".⁴⁶.

This Australian activity was however, tempered by the domestic influence of the Militant Women's Group established because 'The women of the CP have felt the imperative need that exists for a separate women's group', according to the Workers Weekly 3.9.26.⁴⁷. The MWG defended equal pay, encouraged women to participate in International Women's Day, (it organised the first IWD public meeting in Australia in 1928 in Sydney) and involved itself in a number of workers' disputes, particularly in the mining and timber industries.⁴⁸

⁴⁵. Rowbotham, Women, Resistance, pp.159-160.

⁴⁶. Stevens, "Work among Women", p.4.

⁴⁷. Audrey Johnson, Bread & Roses, (Sutherland, 1990), p.171.

⁴⁸. Stevens, Taking, pp.26-32.

In 1927 the Militant Women's Group in Sydney published a pamphlet entitled Woman's Road to Freedom.⁴⁹ It was subtitled 'From Domestic Slavery to Communism'. The pamphlet urged working class women to become involved in the class struggle as Clara Zetkin had done. Zetkin is quoted at the front of the booklet: "Women of the working class must line up with their male comrades of the working class and work for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a classless society."⁵⁰ Kollontai's Communism and the Family was included in a list of suggested further reading attached to the front of the publication.

However, in 1929, after the MWG had been involved in relief and picket work in the above disputes, the Communist Party decided:

"The relief work the militant women had done would be carried on by a different organisation - Workers International Relief - and the MWG could work through it in rallying women to meet the needs of mainly women and children. This change in attitude, meant to integrate women's work more closely with that of the Party, was one of the first fruits of the CP leadership change at the end of 1929."⁵¹

⁴⁹. Militant Women's Group, Woman's Road to Freedom, (Sydney, 1927).

⁵⁰. Ibid., Front page.

⁵¹. Johnson, pp. 25-26.

In addition Joyce Stevens refers to the mechanical liquidation of the women's departments which occurred in the Communist Party of Australia in the 1930s.⁵²

In 1929 in the Soviet Union, the Genotdel was abolished.⁵³ In the 1930s official policy rehabilitated the family and gradually new moral codes and authorities were imposed.

"The liberation of women was submerged, the notion of female activity pressed down. 'Woman' was resurrected instead - as the heroine of motherhood, under the benign whiskers of Uncle Joe."⁵⁴

Whilst it is a curious coincidence that the incidences involving the MWG and the Genotdel occurred in the same year, there is no coincidence involved in the influential relationship between the Comintern and the Communist Party of Australia. O'Lincoln summarises this influence when he points out that the regression occurring in the Soviet Union under Stalin was reflected in the Communist Party of Australia, which also began to place emphasis on the family as a bastion of socialism, and where 'work among women' began to be defined within traditional conceptions of the female role.⁵⁵

⁵². Stevens, "Work among Women", p.11.

⁵³. Kronemann, p.45.

⁵⁴. Rowbotham, Women, Resistance, p.163.

⁵⁵. Tom O'Lincoln, "Women and the Communist Party of Australia, 1946-1968", Hecate, Vol. 6, No. 1, (1980), p.53.

On occasion, the influence of the Soviet Union on the Communist Party of Australia would produce a Party in the Australian context which was theoretically advanced for Australian society. At other times, the Soviet influence would slip, glovelike, onto the domestic socio-political structures and framework. By the 1930s, 'the woman question' would fit firmly into the latter category.⁵⁶

In Australia women had been legislated into positions of inequality with decisions such as the Harvester decision of 1907.⁵⁷ Within that illusive but pervasive myth of 'mateship', women were rendered practically invisible within the theory and practice of the labour movement.

If there is anything in common between the reality of Stalinism and the mythology of mateship, it is an attempt to impose an invisibility on women and their contribution to communism and the labour movement respectively, and their success in denying women real equality within their respective societies. The Communist Party of Australia, influenced by both political contexts, was to inherit a legacy which erupted in the 1970s.

From the 1930s onwards, Communist definitions of 'work among women' would establish not only women's roles and functions

⁵⁶. Stevens, Taking, Introduction.

⁵⁷. Kaye Hargreaves, Women at Work, (Ringwood, Vic., 1982), p.16.

in the Party, but would also establish a narrow, sexist definition of working class.⁵⁸ By the late 1940s, and especially in the 1950s, the Party would proudly champion a working class whose basis was blue collar and male - the miners, the wharfies, the seamen and the metalworkers.

Finally, as a last tribute to "Uncle Joe", it must be added that the influence of Stalinism on the Communist Party was all pervasive. The effects were felt in theory and practice, methods of work, party organisation and structure, the Party's views on foreign affairs and the Party's relationships with other political organisations on the domestic front. The latter point saw the Communist Party see-saw between dogmatic sectarianism and Dimitrov's united front policy.

After the Second World War, particularly from 1956 onwards, the Party would attempt, on a continuing basis, to assert a communism based more on Australian conditions.⁵⁹ Initially this attempt prioritised economic and political conditions as the basis upon which to develop an Australian Communism. Priorities were set within an economist male definition of working class and revolutionary struggle. Under the influence of the women's liberation movement, Communist women would be able to persuade the Party to define an Australian Communism from a socialist feminist perspective.

⁵⁸. Stevens, Taking, p.11.

⁵⁹. Australia's Way Forward, Program of the Communist Party of Australia, (Sydney, 1964).

Political Schizophrenia

Having raised the above points, it is however, necessary to add some historical qualifiers, or to perhaps become involved in a game of historical snakes and ladders. The history of a political organisation such as the Communist Party of Australia should not be simply a two dimensional black and white analysis of facts. It is more accurate to create a history which includes three dimensional shades of grey. These shades of grey include all the contradictions, ambiguities and blind spots that often mark not only political organisations themselves, but also their theory and practice. Sheila Rowbotham notes that:

"...it requires some effort to validate ephemeral evidence, since the more distanced theorising of concepts is authorised within the prevailing structure of knowledge."⁶⁰.

As well a three dimensional assessment reveals that quite often chasms exist between the theory and the practice, or between the leadership and the membership of a party.

Although the above paragraphs have discussed some of the negative influences of the Soviet Union on the Communist Party in Australia, and also the ways in which the labour movement effected the Party, one would have to acknowledge that the

⁶⁰. Rowbotham, The Past, p.xiv.

Communist Party also inherited some positive influences from the early revolutionary and socialist politics in the Soviet Union and from other socialist groups in Australia.

Joyce Stevens comments on the Soviet influence:

"Despite serious reverses, particularly in the area of family and sexual politics under Stalin during the 1930s, the implementation of [earlier] reforms has helped radical and socialist feminist movements of a more recent era to reassess their goals."⁶¹.

Whilst the Communist Party was to accept an economist, male view of socialist politics in Australia, at the same time the Party supported many of the demands brought to it by women who had been involved in a variety of left political organisations.

"Despite the contradictions in its own practice and the inability to develop a clearer theoretical perspective, the CPA did provide an image of women and their social activity that challenged prevailing social mores, and undoubtedly scared many women and men."⁶².

Under the influence of the early feminists, there were a

⁶¹. Stevens, Taking, p.13.

⁶². Ibid., p.103.

number of firsts for Communist women such as Cecilia Shelly who is believed to be the first paid woman trade union secretary ⁶³. and Nelle Rickie who in 1925 was the first woman to stand as a Communist candidate in an Australian election.⁶⁴

Women were encouraged to take up public positions in the Party especially as organisers. Many of the women interviewed had at some time in their political activity, undertaken Party organiser work. Sally Bowen is an example. Sally records that Eric Aarons encouraged her to become an organiser in the Party in the 1950s. At the time when Eric Aarons was district organiser, Sally had to look after her parents and Eric would come and stay in the house while Sally went to meetings. When Eric went to China, he asked Sally if she would be interested in being the district organiser.⁶⁵.

But at the same time, there was a dual political and social practice in the Party. It is summarised by Joyce Stevens:

"It's interesting to see dual attitudes in the Party. On the one hand women were encouraged to be normal working class women, proper marriage and all that stuff, while many leaders of the Party conducted alliances and relationships with women

⁶³. Johnson, p.175.

⁶⁴. Ibid., p.16.

⁶⁵. Interview with Sally Bowen, November 1987.

who were married to other men or with single women. Also some women who were married and who were in key type positions were told not to have children. It was schizophrenic sort of stuff."⁶⁶.

The existence of the double standard meant that there was one kind of social morality for men and another for women in the Party; it meant that in public the Party strongly upheld the traditional ideology and mores pertaining to men and women, whilst in private some Party men were involved in sexual indulgences. In addition, there was a dual ideology in the Party regarding the role and function of women, where publicly women were encouraged to be active and equal comrades with the men, whilst in private the Party view was that women be involved with the family and children.⁶⁷ Paula Rix adds that:

"The feeling that I had was that the outlook on women reflected the Soviet. That is women who were active politically were heroic. There was a feeling that the Party in Australia was unique in comparison to other social and political organisations in regard to women. Women could be political animals. However the reality was different. The double standards existed."⁶⁸

⁶⁶. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁶⁷. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁶⁸. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

If it can be said that these events can be represented on a historical snakes and ladders board, then perhaps the ladders represent the positive events and the snakes, the negative. At the same time that one can examine progressions up the ladder, one can also examine descending serpentine slides.

Winifred Mitchell records that she and her husband decided that they wanted to have a child. Winifred also publicly active in the Party, sought Party approval for this decision and it was granted. When she became pregnant, and before she had relayed this news to the appropriate Party official, Winifred was informed that the Party had changed its mind and that because there was important work for her to do, that she could not have a child. She was able to report that the Party's changed decision had come too late.⁶⁹

This political and social schizophrenia existed in the Party in the pre and post war years . Kath Olive in a Tribune article in 1980 wrote about the criticism, particularly from male comrades, of Jean Devanny. Kath states that Jean's speeches and writings were forthright and that Jean was a consistent champion of woman's right to express her sexual desires."For this she was the subject of a sustained campaign of criticism and often vilification by the male comrades.".⁷⁰

⁶⁹. Interview with Winifred Mitchell, October 1990.

⁷⁰. Kath Olive, Tribune, April 30, 1980, p.14 in Stevens, Taking, p.102.

Much of this experience was carried over these years by Communist women and acknowledged, explored and politically redefined within the contexts of women's liberation in the 1970s.

The post war version of this schizophrenia is summed up by Dorothy Hewett:

"The Party is trying to clean up its image for the new struggles ahead, making itself super-respectable to fit in with its idealised view of the Australian working class...No one was going to accuse them of free love, extra-marital affairs, wild and reckless behaviour or wearing the wrong clothes or the wrong hairstyles. The dictatorship of the proletariat referred only to a certain kind of worker, one who punched the Bundy without fail, brought home his pay packet to his wife and kids and mowed the lawn in a white singlet on Sunday morning."⁷¹

War, Curtains or Cold Iron?

The Second World War not only turned Australian society upside down, but it also had a similar effect upon the Communist Party of Australia. Society generally witnessed women entering

⁷¹. Dorothy Hewett, Wild Card an Autobiography 1923-1958, (Ringwood, Victoria, 1990), p.122.

the workforce on a larger scale than previously and into non-traditional work areas. This women's history has been well documented.⁷² Women in the Communist Party also took up non-traditional Party jobs, especially in leading positions in the Party. "Women were promoted into more leadership positions and accepted greater organisational responsibilities than they had ever experienced before."⁷³.

Communist women were involved in this Party work at a time when the Party achieved its numerically highest membership in its entire history. Membership increased from 5,000 in 1941 to 16,000 in 1942.⁷⁴ At the end of the Second World War membership was approximately 23,000.⁷⁵ The militancy of the Depression years, together with the general wave of anti-fascist feeling, activated firstly by the Spanish Civil War and then by the ascendancy of German and Italian fascism, made the Communist Party attractive to a number of Australians. This was particularly the situation in 1941 when the Party had publicly decided to revoke its opposition to the war.⁷⁶ These political events provided the material circumstances which assisted in strengthening the Communist cause, both in

⁷². See, for example, "From the military to motherhood - 1940-1960" in Aveling and Damousi, eds., Stepping Out, pp.136-156.

⁷³. Lyn Finch, "Could 'Winnie the War Winner' Organise Women?", Hecate, Vol. 10 No. 1., (1984), p25.

⁷⁴. Stevens, Taking, p.81.

⁷⁵. Sendy, Comrades, p.62.

⁷⁶. Stevens, Taking, p.81.

Australia and internationally.

Previously in the Party, the clerical and administrative work had been undertaken by women, and whilst women may have had some experience in organising work, very few women had been involved in leadership positions.⁷⁷ The war meant that women undertook new and challenging roles and functions in the Party's organisation. The new tasks involved women in travelling around and covering great distances, in order to talk to and discuss issues with members scattered throughout the states. Finch points to other issues for women:

"Male communists were usually members of the relevant union, and could speak to their colleagues on the job site in the lunch hours. Women activists, attempting to carry the work of the Party to the people, revived an old method of job site meetings outside factory gates."⁷⁸.

Finch further documents that women were active in some leadership positions in the Party, although they were not represented at the highest level of Party organisation, the Secretariat. Women were however, visible at State Committee levels and as a minor representation, on the Central Committee.⁷⁹

⁷⁷. Finch, p.11.

⁷⁸. Ibid. , p.15.

⁷⁹. Ibid., p.14.

The situation was commented upon by J.B. Miles in his 1943 report Work Among Women,⁸⁰. where he commented on women carrying responsibility as branch secretaries, zone leaders, and district committee members.⁸¹. "The party was a matriarchy while the men were away at the war."⁸².

Despite these activities undertaken by women in the Party and despite the challenges successfully met by these women during the war years, women were regarded as second class comrades in terms of their capabilities. J.B.Miles referred to this in the above document, a patronising and from the hindsight of the 1990s, a rather offensive document in some passages. Miles was making a report on 'Work among Women' to a meeting at Marx House held on November 20th, 1943. The report picks up the pre-war definitions of the acceptable role of women comrades as expressed within the framework of 'Work among Women'. This despite the fact that the war had fundamentally shifted the material conditions for such a framework. Miles told the meeting:

"..since the main aim of the workers' struggle is to smash the rule of the capitalist class and set up workers' rule, it all resolves itself into a question of winning the masses of women to the

⁸⁰. Work Among Women, a report delivered by J.B. Miles, November 20th, 1943, A Communist Party Publication, (Sydney, 1943).

⁸¹. Ibid., p.8.

⁸². Hewett, p.112.

proletarian movement for socialism.

The extreme importance of this should be obvious to Communists because history itself has determined that the masses of women are inert and uninformed, even more than men. That being so, it is equally obvious that the proletarian tasks will be more easily realised, the more active, the more conscious and willing is the participation of women in the struggle."⁸³.

Miles then exhorted the women to undertake 'Work among Women' more ardently. Male comrades were also asked to support this work, particularly as it was noted that women cannot always satisfy their Party meeting obligations because of domestic activities.⁸⁴. The General Secretary also felt it necessary to remind the women's committees of their proper roles and function:

"It became quite clear, comrades, during this year, that under the impact of the big drive to build the Party, our women's committees, while not neglecting work among women, tended to devote too much of their time to the organisational questions that are the main concern of the organisational committee. One must say that so far the organisational committees know better than the women's committees

⁸³. Miles, Work Among Women, p.2.

⁸⁴. Ibid., p.6.

how to study and deal with Party organisational problems, and, if that is so, we do not need another committee doubling up on that work.".⁸⁵.

This patronising view of women's work in the Party found ultimate expression at the end of the war when the men returned home. Women who had leading and active roles in the Party during the war were once more returned to their roles in the clerical areas and back to the locality branches. Joyce Stevens records that it became obvious that when the boys came back, they were the more qualified and that they would take over.⁸⁶. Mavis Robertson comments:

"The generation before me was one where all kinds of women did extraordinary things during the war, but it was just like the women in the factories, when the boys came home the women no longer did the jobs. But the experience never left them. These women were enormously capable of making decisions. Women ran the Party and it was the biggest period of Party history.".⁸⁷

Some of these women who had undertaken such amazing work inside and outside the Party during the war would welcome their work around the New Housewives Association, established

⁸⁵. Ibid., p.4.

⁸⁶. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁸⁷. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

in 1948; would with great alacrity set up the United Association of Women branches in the 1950s, and in the 1970s would be puzzled, peeved and politically reject the need for the new women's liberation movement, particularly within the Communist Party. The view of these women was that there was no need for liberation as women had proved throughout the history of the Party, that the Communist Party had always supported equality amongst the sexes. Many of these women would abide by the Party's tenet that the position of women would improve economically and socially within Australian society generally, with the advent of socialism. Many of these women would leave the Communist Party and join the Socialist Party.

On the other hand, some women would remember their wartime experience and the ways in which the Party endeavoured to relegate this experience to invisibility once the war was over, and would as Mavis records, "dive straight into the women's movement" twenty years later.⁸⁸.

The return of women to their pre-war occupations and roles raised some complexities and also created a legacy of ambiguity. Mary Wright comments in 'Bread and Roses' that:

"During the war, in the Party too, women came forward or were dragged forward as section secretaries, as branch secretaries, as leaders or in charge of various campaigns. When the men came

⁸⁸. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

back - goodbye girls. Mind you it was partly the girls' fault because they said 'you can have your job back now'. I did my best to keep it going, but I failed.".⁸⁹.

The attitude of women returning to domestic invisibility is a complex one. Many women would agree that the men had the right to their old jobs when they returned home from the war and that this was also a reward. Mavis Robertson raises this complex attitude by noting that there must have been a strong desire by some women who had worked so hard during the war, to go back to the life that they thought was their ultimate desire. These women wanted to have a house, family, rose garden and children.⁹⁰. But Mavis also notes that there were many women who had learnt that by working they were their own persons and they wanted to go on working.⁹¹.

Many of the women who gained such valuable experience in the Party during the war had developed a political praxis based on dealing with many challenging situations, and in the next few years ahead would be a solid and resilient force for the Party when the spectre of the cold war started to howl around its windows. These women, whose political and social perspectives had been broadened and hardened by their wartime experience, were to assist the Party at a time marked by

⁸⁹. Johnson, p. 132.

⁹⁰. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

⁹¹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

increasing ant-communism. And despite the ambiguous view of the Party about the political and social role of its women cadres, these women would provide a metal and strength at a time when the Party most needed it.

Many of these wartime experiences were to provide situations of material value for women involved in the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. These experiences not only demonstrated what women knew about their own capabilities, and how women themselves often underrate those experiences, but they also firmly and concretely exemplified the chauvinistic ways in which men defined those experiences. This would be as equally true for many Party women. Within this context, the war years marked a watershed for Communist women.

1945 ended the Second World War and heralded the beginnings of a capitalist reconstruction, based on economies with expanded manufacturing and developing service industries.

"Women were expected to be dependent on their husbands' wages. Their economic role was to buy the household appliances that were being marketed to 'the modern housewife'.".⁹²

The structure of the working class would be suitably reorganised in order to meet the demands of this economic restructuring. The end of the war was the beginning of boom

⁹². Aveling and Damousi, p.152.

decades, and in its own way marked a watershed for capitalist economies. It was a period of 'new deals' and 'reconstruction'.

Apres la Guerre.

The post war years were conspicuous for a Communist Party which was to hold onto its pre-war definitions of working class and 'work among women'. The definition of working class became increasingly anachronistic, given the massive restructuring of capital which was taking place. 'Work among women', constructed within the Stalinist framework, was exemplified with the establishment of the New Housewives Association, and then in 1950 the Union of Australian Women. These organisations had the responsibility for work among women, as a post-war activity, particularly at the local level and particularly for international peace as Pritchard outlined:

"You women of Newcastle have accomplished a great deal by co-operative effort to improve local conditions, I know. But I can imagine how much more you could have accomplished had you been assisted by many more women who perhaps have not thought it necessary to take an active part in public affairs. As Mohammedan women threw off their veil on International Women's Day in Moscow many years ago, so let us throw off from our minds the veils of

ignorance and apathy which for so long have prevented us seeing clearly that women must think and work strenuously, if ever the world of peace and security which we dream about is to become a reality.".⁹³.

In 1944, the Communist Party produced a pamphlet entitled A New Deal for Women.⁹⁴. The pamphlet addresses a number of issues relating to the economic and social position of women in wartime Australia. It raises the history of the war itself and the working relation of the government and the trade unions. There is a discussion of the Women's Employment Board⁹⁵. and the equal pay issue; ⁹⁶. a description of oppressive factory conditions ⁹⁷. and a 'different picture' of a factory where a man serves the tea, and a section headed 'It's tough being a mother'.⁹⁸. The pamphlet is an attempt to take up as many issues as possible of interest and concern to women, but most importantly it describes what the Communist Party's program in relation to women would be after the war.⁹⁹. The solutions raised in the program address the issue of the need

⁹³. Katharine Susannah Pritchard, Straight Left, (Glebe, 1982), pp.241-242.

⁹⁴. A New Deal for Women, Communist Programme Series No. 4, (Sydney, 1944).

⁹⁵. Ibid., p.7.

⁹⁶. Ibid., pp.8-10.

⁹⁷. Ibid., pp.11-13.

⁹⁸. Ibid., p.22.

⁹⁹. Ibid., pp.31-32.

for equal pay and for the provision of social services relating to children.¹⁰⁰.

The pamphlet raises and supports issues which still have not been fully addressed in the 1990s and in this respect is an interesting document. Although by current standards, the language is often patronising, nevertheless as a public statement of Party policy and intent it is a radical document. Given the issues raised previously in this chapter concerning the schizophrenia which existed in the Party, and given the attitude of the Party to the wartime work carried out by women in the Party, the foreword to the pamphlet can be read with a splash of irony:

"The women of Australia, as in other democratic countries, have played an outstanding part in the great people's war against Fascism. They have joined the services in their thousands, provided a huge labour force for the war, transport, food and other industries, and in many other ways have contributed to the success of the Australian war effort.

What a blow these things mean to that reactionary view, that the place of women is in the home, and that socially, economically and legally their place in society is inferior as compared with men!".¹⁰¹.

¹⁰⁰. Ibid., p.32.

¹⁰¹. Ibid., p.3.

The years after 1945 were extremely difficult ones for the Communist Party. This was of course as true for the Party in Australia, as it was for Communist Parties in most capitalist countries. In Australia, the Party had always maintained its political certainty and belief that it was the only Party to lead the working class across the Rubicon. "The Party saw itself as showing the way to an alternative and better society".¹⁰².

In many respects, this political certainty and arrogance was inherited from the Stalinist hubris pertaining to the correct road to socialism. Stalinist parties were not only unitarian, bureaucratic and politically inflexible, they were encased within a dogmatic certitude about having the correct line - on everything. "A whole cadre grew up in our Party in the Stalin period and accepted the idea that communists are 'people of a special mould'".¹⁰³.

Developing this idea that communists were special, Eric Aarons in a Communist Review in 1955 completed an article on 'The Marxist Theory of Knowledge' with the following paragraph:

"The Communist must be an expert surfer. Knowing the laws of the surf, of life, he will ride the waves, avoiding the dumpers, and adjusting himself

¹⁰². Gollan, p.285.

¹⁰³. D. Olive, "What is a mass party?", Communist Review, No. 286, (November 1965), p.326.

to all the changes and new circumstances, being as close to and as at home among the masses as the expert surfer is in the sea."¹⁰⁴.

Women in the Party would with equal vigour and iconoclasm, reject this certitude when they became involved in the women's movement twenty years later.

Iron Curtains

Churchill defined post-war political, social and economic barriers for Europe, East and West, with his cast iron view, as expressed in his well known post-war statement. The effects of this definition travelled the seas to the Australian shores, where in addition, a similar socio-political post-war framework was also floating across the Pacific from the United States.

The following decade was to be the most challenging and damaging period for both domestic and international communism. In Australia, the successful spread of suburbia with its attendant white goods, would create chinks in the Communist view that capitalism had failed to produce the goods for the Australian working class. This period was the beginning of the down turn in the popularity and support for the Party.

¹⁰⁴. Eric Aarons, "The Marxist Theory of Knowledge", Communist Review, (October 1955), p. 304.

Some members, in reminiscing, have blamed the Party's role in the Coal Strike in 1949 for the Party's demise.¹⁰⁵. Yet this is but one spoke in the wheel of Communist misfortune. The cold war years were to not only begin to freeze out the Party from politics in Australia, they were to also create a series of blizzards which many Party members themselves would not be able to battle.

The end of the 1940s and the 1950s were years of relentless and ubiquitous anti-communism. These were years which witnessed the Korean War, the threat of the atomic bomb, the consolidation of the Catholic right-wing through Catholic Action, the Groupers and the Democratic Labor Party, reaching their peak of McCarthyist hysteria with Menzies's Communist Party Dissolution Bill.

This different kind of war established a new battle ground for communists, who in many instances established their own iron curtain as a political and social protection. Mavis Robertson recalls that there had to be devices placed in offices such as the Eureka Youth League office, so that when the police raided, the workers could slam down doors so that the police could not enter, and there was time to remove items which would otherwise be confiscated.¹⁰⁶. Even though Menzies failed to have the Red Bill validated, it was a period when

¹⁰⁵. For example, Jack Blake interviewed by Geraldine Doogue in "The Party's Over", ABC Hindsight.

¹⁰⁶. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

a citizen knew that to be an acknowledged member of the Communist Party would be a barrier to employment promotion or even to employment itself. This battle added another spoke to the wheel.

In addition to the psycho-social and political war being waged by Menzies so that he could placate both British and United States friendships and ensure his own electoral success, Australian capital was undergoing a massive restructuring as a post-war project. This restructuring was to outstrip the old style Communist view about the nature of capitalism and definitions of class.

"Contradictions within the working class, in short, were destroying the apparent unity of the mid-1940s and helped make possible the shift to a new period of capitalist dominance. Out of the smash came, not just the personal ascendancy of Menzies in federal politics, but a reconstructed capitalism: an industrial welfare capitalism, pacifying the work force with rising material standards, providing profits out of growth, managing economic incoherencies and social tensions by expanded state intervention, and cementing the classes with an ideology of anti-communism and development."¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁷. R.W. Connell, and T.H. Irving, Class Structure in Australian History, (Melbourne, 1980), p.292.

The visible poverty and poor standards of living evident to the pre-war working class, whilst not disappearing altogether from Australian society, after the war, were becoming less visible with the post-war economic reconstruction.

The development of right wing politics, which became a feature of post-war society in Australia, was important not only in terms of the redefined ideology of the family and the development of capitalist hegemony, it was important also in terms of influence in the trade union movement. CPA leadership was successfully challenged in some trade unions, notably in the Federated Clerks' Union and the Ironworkers Union.¹⁰⁸. Some female dominated unions saw their leadership taken over by the Groupers. The influence of the politics and the tactics of the right in these unions is still evident in the 1990s.

The ideology of the family was strengthened by the 1950s sex role stereotypes for men and women and encompassed the romantic myth of marriage. It locked women into positions of exploitation and powerlessness, particularly in the suburbs. This was to be a major area of debate in the women's movement and in the Communist Party, in the 1970s, where women struggled to unravel the definitions which had long served to hold them prisoner.

Macro and micro activities.

¹⁰⁸. See Susanna Short, Laurie Short. A Political Life, (Sydney, 1992) for a recent interpretation of the implications of the split in the ALP on the FIA.

Throughout the buffeting of these battles the Communist Party clung more firmly to its male, economist definition of working class, anchored rigidly in the blue collar, male dominated industries - in the mines, on the seas, on the water front and on building sites. It still maintained that "A Socialist Australia is the glorious goal of the working class."¹⁰⁹.

Joyce Stevens comments:

"When the Party made decisions during the 1950s and 1960s about needing to increase its strength in the working class, the main turn was to the factories. There may have occasionally been an odd reference to an office, but really it was to the factories. So, you had office workers like me, who spent a lot of time letterboxing factories...The notion of class was very blue collar, male oriented."¹¹⁰.

Ironically though, whilst these battles were being fought on the broader political and social front, the Party membership were ardently carrying out Party activities in their local branches. It was at this level that women members had been most active traditionally. Jean Bailey was the Party organiser in the Newcastle district in the 1950s and Jean recalls that the Party gained a great deal of support in the area from its

¹⁰⁹. Laurie Aarons, Party of the Working Class, (Sydney, 1959), p.8.

¹¹⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October, 1990.

work on prices and on flood relief.¹¹¹. In the Maroubra branch, where Paddy and Gwen George were active, there was a major campaign regarding beach pollution,¹¹². an issue which was to reach a particular importance in the 1990s.

There was also some Party work in the cultural area both on a local and State level. This work, begun by women such as Jean Devanny in the 1930s, was not always seen as important to the class struggle in Australia.¹¹³. As one who grew up in the so-called 'Red Belt' area of Sydney, whose heart was the West Como Branch of the Party, I remember as a very young girl accompanying my Party neighbours to Progress Association fetes, which were held on an annual basis, and which supported a multiplicity of cultural events as a way of promoting Australiana. As with many other such fetes, fairs and stalls organised by the Party, many women members prepared events, served behind counters and collected revenue from such stalls.

In addition, there was the work undertaken by Party members in the 1950s for the peace movement, which had become increasingly important after Hiroshima, and was an issue which attracted a number of people to join the Party in the 1940s. "It was consciously anti-American and it believed it had a duty to promote understanding of the Soviet Union as a force

¹¹¹. Interview with Jean Bailey, October 1987.

¹¹². Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

¹¹³. Johnson, p.46.

for peace.".¹¹⁴.

Whilst these activities at local and other levels in the Party provided some degree of optimism for members, at a time of political darkness and uncertainty, they were supported by an unshakeable belief that internationally, communism was on the move. Mavis recalls that "At that period it appeared to socialists that we were winning. There was China, Vietnam and Cuba. We were on the march...we might not have been winning here, but we were on a world scale.".¹¹⁵.

The Krushchev Legacy.

Then came the Krushchev expose of Stalin. This was to be the most difficult legacy for the Communism. These revelations, coming within the period of the Cold War, and the events in Hungary, rent a massive indentation into the once solid armoury of communism, internationally and domestically.

"In February 1956 Nikita Krushchev denounces Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. We find the printed speech pushed under the back door one summer evening when we come back from driving down the South Coast. We argue over it for weeks. Is it really genuine, or a

¹¹⁴. Heather Radi, ed., Jessie Street Documents and Essays, (Broadway, N.S.W., 1990), p.232.

¹¹⁵. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

skilful forgery by some anti-Soviet writer?

If it is genuine, the ramifications are unbelievable...".¹¹⁶

Thirty years later, in the 1980s, Communist Parties especially in Australia and Western Europe were still trying to create and resurrect a praxis which, correctly, rejected Stalinism.

The denunciation of Stalin was a catalyst for the Communist Party in Australia to begin to develop a communism based on Australian conditions. There had been some moves towards this at the 1955 Party Congress, as a result of the Party's closer ties with China. Eric Aarons had spent three and a half years in China in the 1950s ¹¹⁷. and he commented on this experience in an article he wrote in 1970, "from such Chinese sources came a deepening of knowledge and an expansion in the range of thought which was entirely necessary and beneficial.".¹¹⁸.

In the same article Aarons comments on the effects of the disclosure regarding Stalin:

"The exposure of many of the crimes of stalinism

¹¹⁶. Hewett, p.233.

¹¹⁷. Eric Aarons, "As I Was the Sixties", Australian Left Review, (Oct.-Nov., 1970), p.61.

¹¹⁸. Ibid. p.62.

was undoubtedly a very bold step. It both opened up great possibilities for advance and appeared as evidence of good intentions on the part of the CPSU leaders, given time and sympathetic understanding, to make a break with all that had been wrong and restore the ideals and norms we believed in, at the same time arming us against the pitfalls.".¹¹⁹.

Tensions in the Communist Party in Australia developed from this period about the appropriate road to socialism, culminating firstly in the 1963 split over China and Maoism, and secondly, in a document entitled the Statement of Aims¹²⁰. debated at the 22nd Congress of the Party in 1970. This latter Congress will be further examined in another chapter, but at this point it is important to note that the Party in Australia recognised that an Australian path to socialism would have to be developed. This process became even more imperative with the actions and removal of Krushchev.

Again, the events of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 have been numerous documented. It is not intended to refer to this episode in communist history in any great detail, except to say that it created historical and political legacies for international communism. Audrey Blake summarises some of the consequences of this period:

¹¹⁹. Ibid., p.60.

¹²⁰. Statement of Aims, Methods & Organisation, The CPA's objectives as adopted by the 22nd Congress, March 1970, in CPA Documents of the Seventies, (n.d.).

"There was much that was terribly wrong, but Stalinism had not been revealed. The Trotskyists, because of their special history, had insights here but, also because of their special history, we didn't learn from them. Some of the small 'L' liberal democrats had insights but we didn't learn from them either because of the nature of our belief in the Soviet Union: critique was betrayal...Our acceptance of the theory that feminism was a bourgeois thesis was a central weakness too...".¹²¹.

It was to be a major struggle to achieve a de-stalinised Communist Party in Australia. Len Fox makes the following comment about this period:

"After the revelations about Stalin in 1956, a number of socialists pointed to the need for a new beginning, for a New Left. Agreement was lacking as to what form it should take. The old left had tried to force the socialist movement into rigid forms and this had mummified it. For the new left there must be no fixed forms; it must develop naturally and take whatever forms were needed and democratically decided on.".¹²².

¹²¹. Blake, A Proletarian Life, p. 94.

¹²². Len Fox, Broad Left, Narrow Left, (Chippendale, 1982), p.227.

Many members left and some were expelled in the attempt to change the face of socialism in Australia. The West Como branch suffered a big loss. "When a fairly prominent intellectual in the West Como branch was expelled the branch of about 16 collapsed, only two members remaining in the Party...".¹²³ The group which founded Outlook, and which was part of this New Left was vigorously attacked in the Communist Review in 1963:

"The bourgeois counter-revolutionary offensive against communism has also produced the ideological grouping, self-styled the "New Left". Composed in part of those who formerly held a marxist position, the New Left is characterised by a bourgeois radicalism operating under the cloak of the A.L.P.".¹²⁴

Dogmatism and Women Cadres.

The Party dogmatically clung to its view of democratic centralism and to its definition of the working class which had often shown an antipathy to intellectuals. But it was not only intellectuals who left the Party after 1956. Party numbers began to increasingly decline and this was a question which had to be very seriously addressed during the 1960s.

¹²³. Alan Barcan, The Socialist Left in Australia 1949-1959, (Sydney, 1960), p.15.

¹²⁴. W.E. Gollan, "Intellectuals and Communism", Communist Review, (June 1963), p.195.

"A membership of approximately 23,000 at the end of the war declined to between 8,000 and 9,000 in 1955, largely as a result of cold-war anti-Communism but helped along by CPA mistakes.".¹²⁵.

During this period the Party also clung to its definitions of work among women. Party documents of the 1950s and 1960s continued the tradition of placing women as second class comrades within Party priorities. There is a formula to such documents: firstly key international issues, followed by major Australian political and industrial issues, the Party's attitude to the ALP, rural issues, then a section on women and youth.

For example, the main resolution adopted by the Party's 14th Congress held in 1945 included views on fascism; domestic unions; migration and jobs; the need to fight Labor's enemies; followed by statements on 'farmers and middle class for progress', 'women for progress' and 'win the youth'.¹²⁶.

And in 1961 at its 19th Congress, the Party adopted Australia's Path to Socialism. This document contained policy on international monopoly capital; the ways in which monopoly capital effects Australia; 'people disappointed' which was a discussion on the ALP; 'socialism is the answer', and a

¹²⁵. Sendy, Comrades, p.62.

¹²⁶. "Resolutions of the 14th Congress of the Australian Communist Party", (Sydney, 1946).

'people's program' which referred to equal pay and equal opportunity for women to enter all trades and professions.¹²⁷. A separate document was adopted which dealt with rural issues.¹²⁸.

At the 18th Congress of the Communist Party held in 1958, Sharkey, the General Secretary reported that:

"women suffer doubly from the drive of the monopolists. Women workers are paid lower wages than men, a threat to all wages. Housewives face a more and more difficult task as prices rise while wages drop further and further behind living costs."¹²⁹.

The view that women, as wives, could achieve something for the Party was a theme repeated in subsequent reports. The Party's agrarian program was discussed at the 19th Congress held in 1961. This program emphasised that:

"Farmers' wives should be encouraged to become more active both in general farmers organisation and

¹²⁷. "Australia's Path to Socialism" in The People Against Monopoly, adopted by the CPA at its 19th National Congress, June 1961, (Sydney, n.d.).

¹²⁸. "Workers and Farmers Together for a Better Life" in The People Against Monopoly, adopted by the CPA 19th National Congress, June 1961, (Sydney, n.d.).

¹²⁹. L.L. Sharkey, Report to the 18th National Congress of the CPA, held April 1958, (Sydney, May 1958), p.55.

women's organisations...Women and youth in the countryside and their organisations would benefit considerably from closer relationships and regular interchange of experience with organisation of working class women and youth in the cities."¹³⁰.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the Coal Strike in Australia in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir had written her book The Second Sex.¹³¹ The impact of this book on Communist women in Australia would not be felt for another twenty years, and in the meantime, the Party would pursue its 'work among women' within the orthodox framework.

In 1964, Freda Brown in an article in the Communist Review,¹³² wrote about issues which had been raised at the Party Congress held that year. The main report given to that Congress had answered the general political question of 'What is the way forward for Australia?'¹³³ Freda indicated in her article that as women are half of the adult population and a third of the work force, that it must be seen that women play an important role in building the people's movement.¹³⁴ The article however, in the main raised issues relating to the

¹³⁰. "Workers and Farmers Together", p. 36.

¹³¹. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, (London, 1988 ed.).

¹³². Freda Brown, "Women in the Struggle for Peace and Progress", Communist Review, (August 1964).

¹³³. Ibid., p.259.

¹³⁴. Ibid.

development of women cadres and the position of women in the Party.

Some figures are given about the representation of women at various levels in the Party. Whilst it was not possible to obtain an overall percentage of women Party members, in N.S.W. there were approximately one-third women members.¹³⁵ On the Sydney District Committee of the Party there were 16 per cent women and on the outgoing Central Committee, 7 per cent.¹³⁶ The article continues:

"Our investigation reveals that in the history of the Party only 11 women have been members of our Central Committee. There are no women to our knowledge on the editorial staff of our press, and very seldom are women the tutors at full-time Party schools. It is true that women have many problems and their development poses many difficulties for the Party. In the J.E.L. and E.Y.L. there are no problems; but as women grow older, marry and take on family responsibilities there are very real difficulties to overcome."¹³⁷.

One of the difficulties outlined in the article was that of providing adequate facilities where women cadres could be

¹³⁵. Ibid., p.261.

¹³⁶. Ibid.

¹³⁷. Ibid.

involved in Party education. The article does indicate that the Party had begun to slowly develop new forms of education for women, such as week schools with facilities for child care, but that "their education requires patience and persistence, a willingness to put up with children being present."¹³⁸. at the local daytime classes which were held for two hours a week.

Throughout this period, the Communist Party maintained its celebrations of International Women's Day, a celebration which would achieve different significance with the advent of the women's liberation movement. In many respects, the Party was ahead of its time in continuing this communist tradition, even though some of the ways in which it celebrated IWD were chauvinistic. "No one else much celebrated IWD. In the Party it was celebrated with things like giving greeting cards to all the women who worked in the Party, or a bunch of flowers. Yuk!. But then in 1975 IWD became a really big event."¹³⁹. In 1958, Freda Brown wrote:

"In two years we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of I.W.D. in 1910. It would be good to set that as a goal for the solution of some [problems and] as a step in the direction of drawing women into the struggle for

¹³⁸. Ibid.

¹³⁹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

Peace and Socialism.".¹⁴⁰.

Such articles on International Women's Day appeared annually in the Communist Review.

Whilst this positive Party activity in respect of women took place every year, it was juxtaposed against another negative definition. In his report of 1943, J.B. Miles had stated the following:

"We Communists do not have the view that there is any specific woman question. We do not support any idea leading to a specific woman's movement, because a woman's movement could only be a bourgeois movement. The present system under which we live is the system of the capitalist class and their rule perpetuates the special position of women that has been historically developed, perpetuates that because it is a part of the subjugation by the exploiters of all the exploited classes.".¹⁴¹.

The view that a woman's movement would be, per se, bourgeois had its origins in some of the writings and speeches of the 1920s and 1930s, when the Communist Party had developed an

¹⁴⁰. Freda Brown, "Fifty Years in the March to Equality", Communist Review, (March 1958), p. 118.

¹⁴¹. Miles, Work Among Women, p. 2.

antipathy to feminists. Joyce Stevens refers to the history of this issue in her book Taking the Revolution Home. Christian Jollie-Smith is quoted from an article in The Communist written in 1922. "Women who cannot forget their personal resentment will only bring disruption, strife, bitterness and misunderstanding by carrying their sex war into the class war."¹⁴².

The view that the class war sufficiently defined all issues pertaining to all communists, irrespective of the sex of those comrades was a sacrosanct view. The hammer and sickle stood for justice and equality for all. The problem for women was that traditionally since the 1930s, international Communism had assigned a gender based division of labour to the symbols. Men, of course hit firmly and fervently with the hammer and therefore carried a more serious and important role. Women, with the sickle were relegated to the domestic, second rate task of providing for and supporting the men.

This was another of the major issues taken up by Party women within the framework of the women's liberation movement. Party women would point to the sex blind contradictions which existed in the Communist Party when the Party would draw all issues under the umbrella of class struggle, and Party women would raise the ideological necessity of strengthening the spokes of the umbrella with gender based definitions of class.

¹⁴². Christian Jollie-Smith, The Communist, 1922, in Stevens, Taking, p.24.

In the 1970s, Party women would also redefine 'equality'. In an article entitled 'Outside the Mould', Kath Thomas wrote about Val Fraser, a Party member who had died in 1965:

"The Communist Party's policy has always been for equality of women. But Val's "Equality" wasn't the sort which all comrades approve of. She didn't fit the imaginary picture of the earnest communist women - obedient to the leadership, working to win over the average working class housewife and passing on to women workers policies that had been worked out for male workers.".¹⁴³

The Way Forward

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Communist Party of Australia endeavoured to analyse the political and cultural baggage it had inherited and created over the last 40 years. This baggage had travelled from the Soviet Union, with the especially notable label of Stalinism, but in addition some pieces of baggage had been collected on the domestic front. In particular there was a need to acknowledge the economism which lay as the basis of so much of this inheritance. This element of the Party's praxis had infiltrated its methods of work and organisation, and had assisted in providing a narrow, ambiguous and contradictory definition of class struggle.

¹⁴³. Kath Thomas, "Outside the Mould", Join Hands, (Winter/Spring, 1983), p.11.

In the quest for discovering a new way forward, the Party had to also acknowledge that it had previously misread some of the signposts on the pathway to socialism.

"Stalinism robbed the Party of the will for vigorous analysis and assessment...The paucity of intellectual endeavour, the insignificant numbers of intellectuals who served on the leading committees, and the studied intolerance and suspicion displayed towards intellectuals by both leadership and membership, seriously curtailed the critical faculties of the Party."¹⁴⁴

In some respects the Party lost its way because of the influence of Stalin and the necessity of fighting a rear guard action during the cold war years. The intensity of this struggle and the time-consuming process of defending itself during this period, meant that the Party underestimated the divergent paths which had been put into place so flexibly and subtly by capitalism.

"What must be taken into account is that in the quarter century between 1946 and 1972, Australia had changed from a predominantly working class to an overwhelmingly middle class society. The nation was glowing in an ambient (and transient) optimism where late capitalist creeds of economic growth and

¹⁴⁴. Sendy, Comrades, p.4.

consumer abundance, of high and constantly rising material expectations, concealed the deepening shadows of inflation, unemployment, and scarcity of resources." ¹⁴⁵.

In its search for a way forward the Communist Party would struggle to tackle some of the multifarious and intricate ideological issues confronting 1960s communism. A number of Communist parties in Western Europe endeavoured to develop new roads to peaceful socialism, roads which would be criss-crossed by the influences of a variety of elements under the banner of the New Left.

In Australia, a change of leadership from Sharkey to Aarons, in the 1960s, ¹⁴⁶. would herald an acceptance of this need for such a peaceful road and of the need for a diversity of New Left influences as a way of resuscitating and renewing a Party which still practised 1950s communism.

The road to renewal required not just historical soul-searching, but a redefined, de-stalinised praxis. As in the past, the Communist Party of Australia was influenced by the theory and practice of international communism, and maintained links with the parties in Great Britain and Western Europe

¹⁴⁵. Allan Ashbolt, "The great literary witch-hunt of 1952", in Australia's First Cold War, Vol 1., p.181.

¹⁴⁶. Sendy, Comrades, p.223.

throughout the post-war years.¹⁴⁷. These links were maintained even after the Party in Australia had ceased to communicate with the Soviet Union, and the CPSU ceased to have a co-ordinating role in maintaining such links.

In 1982, the Australian Left Review published an article by the Italian Communist leader Gian Carlo Pajetta, entitled 'Reflections on the 20th Congress'. The article discussed the effects of the Krushchev speech on international communism, and raised some of the tasks confronting international parties in the 1960s:

"..for Italian communists (and I believe, not only for them) one thing was clear. In order that such a trauma should have a salutary effect and help work out a different perspective, it was not just a matter of correcting some errors or of making condemnations in vague terms such as "cult of personality...It was necessary to look back with courage, to comprehend the historical origins and the reasons for what Togliatti called precisely the degeneration of the system.".¹⁴⁸.

By the time of the 22nd Party Congress in Australia in 1970, the Party had examined many of its inheritances and

¹⁴⁷. See Sendy, Comrades.

¹⁴⁸. D. Davies, (ed.) "Reflections on the 20th Congress", Australian Left Review, (September 1982), p.24.

acknowledged historical liabilities. By this time also, the women's liberation movement was impelling and inspiring many Party women to raise ambiguities and contradictions in the Party's past which would compel the Party to "look back with courage" and "comprehend the historical origins" of 'the woman question' redefined within the context of gender and class.

Disagreements and controversy are part of socialist life, part of its life force, and there is a need to accept the difficult tensions on the Left. But there is also a need to stand together against those who act to destroy the other. There are those who like best bitter animosity, faction, shouting down, more time for themselves than for others. These are destructive forces. Perhaps it is time on the Left to oppose the sort of thinking that divides things into parts instead of distinguishing aspects. This has importance for the contemporary socialist movement, a movement with a common aim.

Audrey Blake, A Proletarian Life.

CHAPTER 2: CROSSROADS AND CRACKED PATHWAYS.

"If we examine our long march from 1949 up to the last few years, we remember the coal strike, Menzies anti- Red Bill,... Petrov, passports, the NCC and groupers, the anti-nuclear war movement, the Crimes Act,... in essence these were a tactical defence against the cold war offensive... in the period the tactics were unavoidable. But along with it went a temporary loss of revolutionary ideology and perspective which was unavoidable. In the process our revolutionary ideology, added to the context of the dogma of the world communist movement, was eroded." ¹⁴⁹.

This was the political perspective put forward by Alec Robertson at the Party Congress held in 1970. It summarised a difficult period of Party history. From 1964 to 1971 the Communist Party of Australia undertook a political re-appraisal, searching for a new perspective and revolutionary ideology. This period of Party history is marked by a determination, particularly by the leadership, to forge a vigorous Australian Party with a socialism based within an Australian context.

"At this period it appeared to most observers and

¹⁴⁹. Alec Robertson, address to the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, 1971, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

probably a considerable proportion of Party members, that the struggle was in essence one of choosing whom to follow, whom to regard as the fountain head of Marxist-Leninist wisdom and the main architect of world socialist strategy and main force for ending imperialism - the Soviet Union or China...what we were really doing was facing up to the need to think out our position for ourselves." ¹⁵⁰

This search would be theoretically difficult and in the end, politically and personally painful, being scarred by a major split in Australian Communism.

It was however imperative for the survival of the Party that such a search be undertaken. The old skin of dogmatic assuredness and acceding to Moscow had to be shed. The Communist Party in the 1960s was politically and socially fragile. Additionally, the Party's response to the emerging women's liberation movement would have been less enthusiastic and welcoming if this new perspective had not been developed. The impact of the women's liberation movement on the Party was enhanced by 1960s eclectic politics which had earlier begun to challenge the Party's revolutionary theory and strategy.

"...social and political developments proceeded apace throughout the world, including in Australia

¹⁵⁰. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", p.65.

a new wave of political dissent and activism was beginning, effecting particularly students and intellectuals.".¹⁵¹

This chapter is written in order to develop the view that the changes which the Party made to its theory and practice in the six years 1964-1970, enabled the Party to more easily grasp the issues which the women's liberation movement raised. The criss-crossing of the socialist path by the New Left prepared the way for the Communist Party's acceptance of the women's movement. By the mid-1970s most members of the Communist Party understood that an Australian path to socialism must address the issues being advanced by the women's liberation movement.

"The orthodox (Communist) view of the women's movement maintained itself for many years and was challenged by the modern women's movement. As it happened that challenge came at the same time as other changes were happening in the Party and by and large the Communist Party responded quite well to it.".¹⁵²

Crossroads

The Communist Party in the mid-1960s was a Party at the crossroads. The choice consisted of remaining a 1950s

¹⁵¹. Ibid., p.68.

¹⁵². Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

Communist Party resolutely tied to the Soviet Union, or developing an Australian path to socialism.

"It was becoming increasingly clear that we were 'on our own' in grappling with the actual problems we were encountering, and that no succour was to be expected from bold new deeds or theoretical generalisations from the Soviet Union, or the 'International Movement'." ¹⁵³.

It was a choice to either passively bask in the past in the manner of *laudator temporis acti* (*se puero*), and of course the gender would be masculine, or to efficaciously meet challenge. At the 20th Congress held in 1964, the Party made a series of decisions to develop a new way forward, one which was planted firmly within the Australian political and social context.

"The Communist Party of Australia declares that the overall problem for Australia lies in the capitalist system that envelops our country. This problem must be solved by finding Australia's path to socialism." ¹⁵⁴.

There are a number of reasons for the decision to develop a new political and theoretical perspective. There were factors external to the Party which could not be ignored if it wanted

¹⁵³. Ibid.

¹⁵⁴. Australia's Way Forward, p.5.

to continue to survive as a political and social organisation in post-war Australia.

One such factor was the nature of the socio-economic changes occurring in 1950s and 1960s Australia resulting from the post-war boom period. These changes had implications for the nature of the working class, and for the structure of industry and work.¹⁵⁵ The two major political parties also recognised the need for transition after the War - the Labor Party to come to terms with the effects of migration and the increase in education on its traditional base, and the Liberal Party, with Menzies trumpeting his Britishness, accepting the need to shift politically and economically into the American orbit.¹⁵⁶

The Communist Party within this socio-economic context, began to understand the necessity of rigorously repudiating its 1950s image as a Party controlled by foreign interests. This view, perpetrated particularly by the Groupers, suggested that the Communist Party was a party of agents for Russia with little relevance to Australians.

According to Menzies in 1949 "the creed of Communism was anti-British, anti-Australian and pro-Russian:

'Communism is not organised for social

¹⁵⁵. See Chapter 5 in Connell and Irving, Class Structure.

¹⁵⁶. Ibid., p.292.

purposes, but for high treason. The only difference between the aggression and march of Hitler in 1938-39 and that of Stalin today is in terms of colour.

Does anybody believe that, if we were forced into war, there would be no Fifth Column in Australia?'

Menzies' war against Communism had now begun in earnest." ¹⁵⁷

This was a view which had caused the Party to assert its political praxis with dogged implacability during the 1950s. At the 1967 Congress the Party accepted the view that:

"We have made many gains since 1964 when we moved outward purposefully to break through the wall of isolation which spread around us, and that we ourselves possibly accepted too easily." ¹⁵⁸.

The Party also commenced an analysis of the implications of the post-war scientific and technological revolution which was occurring in a number of capitalist countries, and which was subtlety but irrevocably changing the nature and structure of

¹⁵⁷. Australia's First Cold War, p.112.

¹⁵⁸. Central Committee Report (first draft) to the 21st National Congress, CPA, 1967, p.6, CPA Records, Box 1, Mitchell Library.

work and working class politics. These changes necessitated a re-thinking about the traditional Party view on who formed the basis of the working class and where such groups as white collar workers, academics and intellectuals were placed within that definition.

"Communists...have to understand the character of social classes and of social groupings to recognise the decisive changes that are going on, and to overcome old prejudices and narrowness. The most decisive problems here are the role of youth - primarily young workers and students - the changing relationship of intellectuals to capitalist society and therefore to the working class and the revolutionary movement." ¹⁵⁹.

In Australia this post-war reconstruction put pressure on the Left to develop a more sophisticated analysis of class politics.

A second external factor was the influences on the Party in Australia which came from both Eastern and Western European post-war Communist Parties. These parties were attempting to grapple with a number of complex issues about post-war Communism and a model for socialism. The reverberations of Tito's actions in 1948, of China in 1961 and of Italy and

¹⁵⁹. Laurie Aarons, Report to the 22nd National Congress, CPA, 1970, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

France in the mid to late 1960s were felt in the Australian Party and those comrades who visited Communist countries and parties in Europe, returned with new ideas about an Australian way forward.

"Today many socialists recognise that political change and theory must draw from the history, traditions and aspirations of each particular country. It was not until a later era however, that Yugoslavia, China and Cuba were to suggest the possibility of a diversity in revolutionary paths and it took even longer for most Communist parties to acknowledge this possibility as being less than heresy." ¹⁶⁰.

The effects of the New Left and of movement politics were other factors influential on the Party. Within the context of the New Left, and the Moratorium and student movements, the Communist Party started to understand the importance of democracy, of less bureaucracy, and of searching for a praxis which acknowledged that there were other revolutionary forces within society who either had no contact with or rejected what the Party saw as the traditional revolutionary force, the Party itself.

John Docker describes the New Left as the generation which demonstrated against the Vietnam war and against hierarchy,

¹⁶⁰. Stevens, Taking, p.21.

lack of participation and stifling curricula in education. It was also the generation which rejected the view that "postwar capitalist society was so prosperous and the mass of people so happy in their consumerism, that ideological critique was no longer necessary.".¹⁶¹.

There were also internal Party factors which influenced the new way forward. One of these was the change of leadership from Lance Sharkey to Laurie Aarons in 1965, although Laurie had undertaken the General Secretary's role in an unofficial capacity in the early 1960s due to Sharkey's ill health.¹⁶². John Sendy comments on the repercussions of this change:

"He [Laurie Aarons] pleaded for a less secretive and defensive stance...generally for a more open character for the Party. Significantly he asked for wide and free discussions in the Party on his views, establishing from that time a more democratic atmosphere on the leading committees and in the Party as a whole."¹⁶³.

Additionally, there was the realisation in the Party that its membership was in decline and its influence within general Australian social and political activities was becoming redundant. The membership issue had become significant by the

¹⁶¹. Australia's First Cold War, p.206.

¹⁶². Sendy, Comrades, p.223.

¹⁶³. Ibid., p.162.

late 1960s.

"The membership of the Communist Party has been declining over the last 20 years. The reasons for this have been...mainly dogmatic thinking, tied to past situations, not taking up the new social issues of the people arising out of living in a monopoly controlled society, and seeing only one form of a socialist society - that of the Soviet Union.".¹⁶⁴.

The debates and discussions which occurred at the 20th, 21st and 22nd Party Congresses demonstrate a Party attempting to analyse and develop a more dynamic, independent, imaginative and national socialism. Although it took time, the effects of the devils of the 1950s were finally being exposed and expunged.

"Few Western communist parties resisted the winds of change that blew from 1956 on, for so long or so tenaciously as the CPA. Entrenched behind its besieged trade union bulwarks, the party seemed intent upon crouching still more obdurately in the cul-de-sac of implacability and isolation to which it had helped to consign itself. As a result, it was denuded of its intellectual battalions and the

¹⁶⁴. Stella Nord, Communists and Radical Women's Organisation, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

great part of its popular support outside the trade unions.".¹⁶⁵.

The influence of these external and internal factors for change on the Party influenced the leadership to cultivate and generate a more viable and visible political option for Australians. This option had as a basic principle the rejection of the old sectarianism marked by "an uncompromising attitude toward the ALP, intellectuals and non-communists."¹⁶⁶.

In a similar way to comrades in Western European communist parties, the Australian counterpart had to embark upon an attempt to answer difficult, complex questions about the theory and practice of post-1956 communism, in particular the development of a socialist model. The Soviet model within 1960s eclectic politics, was an obsolescent hindrance to the advancement of socialism, particularly in capitalist countries.

"It was a gradual and often painful process of disillusionment. Perhaps the most serious aspect was the slowness of the Communist Party itself to replace non-viable strategic assumptions with a new viable socialist strategy. In the meantime, and in

¹⁶⁵. Rex Mortimer, "Communists and the Australian Left", New Left Review, No. 46, (Nov.-Dec. 1967), p.47.

¹⁶⁶. Davidson, The CPA, p.114.

the face of the absence of workable alternatives, many socialists lost heart, confidence and their enthusiasm.".¹⁶⁷.

During the 1960s, a number of Communist parties in Western capitalist countries attempted to answer questions about revolutionary ideology and practice, including the way to socialism within capitalism; how to achieve a socialist revolutionary state democratically and how to develop counter-hegemonic praxis within 1960s capitalism.

For these parties there was a recognition that it was essential to adamantly reject the old and orthodox dogmatism, bureaucratic control, and vanguardism and to develop new methods of practice which could be attractive enough to increase party membership and assure electoral success. 1956 had sounded the chamade of the Soviet model and the cessation of the apotheosis of the Soviet Union.

"One by one the Communist parties of Western Europe began to distance themselves from the Soviet Union and to criticise its flaws. Unplanned and unperceived, a process was set in motion which steadily eroded Soviet hegemony in the Communist world.".¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶⁷. "Editors' Comments", Australian Left Review, (February-March, 1970), p.3.

¹⁶⁸. Carl Marzani, The Promise of Eurocommunism, (Connecticut, 1980), p.xx.

Of the Australian Party Mavis Robertson comments that:

"The Party from the mid-1960s onwards was trying to rethink its position on most issues. This rethinking was influenced by a lot of things - the development of the student's movement, the changing nature of work, and the impact of education. We were puzzled by the buoyancy of capitalism and the ability of the United States to do all of the things that it did."¹⁶⁹.

Joyce Stevens recalls that there were attempts during the late 1960s and early 1970s to rejuvenate the Party, particularly its leadership, and to give the Party a new direction.

"I would say that the people who were at that time in leading positions, Laurie, Eric and others, were moving slowly in a certain direction to make the Party more relevant to the politics in Australia."¹⁷⁰.

The Australian Party began to criticise some of the actions and policies of the Soviet Union, a position which would have been anathema in the Party a few years previously.

¹⁶⁹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

¹⁷⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

In the mid 1960s the Party criticised the treatment of Jews and dissident writers in the Soviet Union. Although this criticism was mild, it marked a Party which was unravelling itself from Soviet international communism, and was embarking on a more domestic interpretation and socialist practice.

"I remember in the mid 1960s, a pamphlet was produced about Jews in the Soviet Union. Now, if you read it today you would read it as a massive defence of the Soviet Union, but then it was an extraordinary thing for the Party to do, because there were paragraphs in it which acknowledged that anti-semitism exists in the Soviet Union.

When Daniel and Synyatsky were gaoled for publishing material that wasn't liked, we protested about it and we argued for the rights of authors to publish critical material.".¹⁷¹.

As a testament to the era of change in the Party, 1966 saw the demise of the Communist Review and its replacement by the Australian Left Review.¹⁷² The new publication indicated the advent of a more critical, open and adventurous promotion of Marxist theory. It provided a forum through which there could be discussion about a variety of New Left views. It contained articles from overseas Communist parties, socialists and

¹⁷¹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

¹⁷². Sendy, Comrades, p.163.

intellectuals. "There was now no issue put beyond the pale of discussion as too 'difficult' or 'inconvenient' either before or after a number of non-communists joined the editorial board.".¹⁷³.

Perestroika Prefigured

The winds of change were blowing in from a number of different directions, both domestic and international. But at the same time storm clouds were building up on the horizon which were to slowly drift across and eventually break open with devastating torrents. In 1970 the Editors of the Australian Left Review commented that there was a crisis afflicting the Party and that it was essentially a crisis of strategy.

"The source of this crisis ...is about the prospects and means of a socialist transformation in our country. There are two main elements making up this crisis. Briefly it is the gradual disintegration of the old strategy and the difficulties of elaborating a new strategy for a socialist transformation in Australia.".¹⁷⁴.

It is interesting to examine these winds of change because such an examination provides the socio-political context in

¹⁷³. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", p.65.

¹⁷⁴. "Editors' Comments", Australian Left Review, (Feb.-March, 1970), p.1.

which the women's liberation movement had its origins and in which the relationship between the Party and the movement developed in Australia.

The various documents which were produced and adopted by the Party from 1964 to 1970 give an indication of the innovative changes and the metamorphosis which took place in the theory and ideology of the Party in Australia during this period.

The 20th Party Congress held in 1964 heralded a new attitude and outlook. As previously noted, this Congress adopted a program entitled Australia's Way Forward which emphasised the need to develop an Australian path to socialism. Chapter Five of that document, headed "Way Forward to a Socialist Australia" accentuated the view that:

"It is a basic principle of Marxism-Leninism that in each country the path to Socialism must be mapped and trodden by the working class, its party and its allies."¹⁷⁵.

Whilst this was a return to the international communist policy of 'Socialism in one country', the difference with this 1964 view was the emphasis on an independent, national line rather than the pre-war Stalinist policy of developing the Soviet model domestically.

¹⁷⁵. Australia's Way Forward, p.60.

Major changes to the Communist Party's theory of revolutionary politics were however made at the subsequent Congress held in 1967. This Congress adopted documents which took the 1964 political framework even further with the adoption of rule changes which radically altered the structure and political organisation of the Party ¹⁷⁶, and the establishment of a commission to draw up a Charter of Democratic Rights.

The issue of democracy was one of the major issues of debate and discussion in the Party, prior to, during and after this Congress. In 1970 Eric Aarons commented that democracy was perhaps the key question which was raised at the Congress.

"This was raised from everything we touched...The pre-Congress discussion was completely free, and this upset the CPSU particularly, because things previously unsaid in communist publications could be said about them as well as us."¹⁷⁷.

Aarons continued by noting that the proposal for a charter of democratic rights raised "all sorts of controversy" from the 21st to the 22nd Congresses.¹⁷⁸.

The 21st Congress discussed and endorsed two significant

¹⁷⁶. See Brown, The Communist Movement, p.239 and Sendy, Comrades, p.164.

¹⁷⁷. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", p.71.

¹⁷⁸. Ibid.

documents. The first of these was entitled Communists and the Battle of Ideas. This document stated clearly that the Party had to break away from the old Stalinist methods and adopt new, more open and more critical methods.

"The building of a mass Communist Party requires that communists break decisively with dogmatic attitudes and develop policy, theory, organisation and activity that accords with the requirements of contemporary Australian life in all its aspects.".¹⁷⁹.

The second document, Towards a Coalition of the Left,¹⁸⁰ was also controversial. This document marked a radical departure from and redefinition of the 1920s and 1930s international communist method of the united front. This method had been adopted by the Australian Party and had been applied to a variety of areas of its work including 'work among women', peace work and work in the trade unions.

Bill Brown notes that:

"The CPA's united front policy was based on Dimitrov's specific proposal that:

¹⁷⁹. Communists and the Battle of Ideas, Draft for discussion at the 21st National Congress, CPA, (1967), p.13.

¹⁸⁰. Towards a Coalition of the Left, (draft), for discussion at the 21st National Congress, CPA 1967.

'The establishment of unity of action by all sections of the working class irrespective of the party or organisation to which they belong, is necessary even before the majority of the working class is united in the struggle to overthrow capitalism and the victory of the proletarian revolution.' ".¹⁸¹

The 1967 document signified an attempt to de-stalinise coalition work. The old practice had been based upon a view of the Communist Party as the vanguard party and had been marked by bitter sectarianism, especially towards the ALP, which, with a number of other left forces had been continually castigated for a theory and practice which communists quite vociferously labelled 'reformist'.

Towards a Coalition of the Left was a radical departure from this perspective. Although still defending revolutionary means and ends and remaining critical of reformist methods, the document indicated that the Communist Party was acknowledging the necessity for it to work constructively towards a socialist society with other left forces in Australia. The old arrogant and dogmatic attitudes were being rejected.

"...co-operation in action for social change would continue as the centre of a coalition of different

¹⁸¹. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.123.

social and political groupings which would share the leadership of the new society. These may well include, besides trade unions and other people's organisations, other political parties which may be formed to represent interests of classes and social groups other than the working class.".¹⁸².

Such a statement was accepted by some in the Party as a necessary rejection of past practices which could no longer be sustained in a post-1956 socialist praxis. It was supported because of the urgency of the need for Party reviviscence. However, to others in the Party it was an opportunist sell-out and contained a revisionism which itself had to be rejected. Bill Brown commented that in adopting this position the Party "had abandoned the united front in the struggle for socialism for a mixture of right and left opportunism.".¹⁸³.

The polarisation in the Party had begun. It was further flamed by the draft documents and discussion on these items which occurred prior to the 22nd Congress held in 1970. This Congress was marked by bitter and personal debate over a variety of issues, especially over definitions of revolutionary theory and practice, methods of work, and the Party's relationship to international communism.

¹⁸². Towards a Coalition of the Left, p.11.

¹⁸³. W.J. Brown, "A Party of Communist Science Reborn", Australian Marxist Review, (Oct. 1980), p.20.

Bill Brown, representing one view, outlines some of the disagreements in his book The Communist Movement and Australia. Brown emphasises that Lenin rejected attitudes which endeavoured to impose "the Soviet experience on other Parties".¹⁸⁴ He does note that such errors did occur,¹⁸⁵ but it is unclear by whom and when. These errors included applying "Soviet history in mechanical un-Marxist terms".¹⁸⁶ As noted in the Introduction to this thesis Brown takes Davidson to task when Davidson asserts that the Party in Australia was dominated by the Comintern. Brown states that this view of the 1930s and 1940s Party leadership accepting Soviet domination "was revived in the ideological differences which arose in the sixties."¹⁸⁷

Eric Aarons, representing the other side of the argument said of the opposition in 1970:

"What will they do now? Nobody knows precisely...Generally speaking they will not cooperate in carrying out the decisions of Congress...Are they concentrating their forces for the next Congress in 1972 in the hope that the 'new line' - with some help from them - will discredit itself?...Will they set up a new Party? Perhaps,

¹⁸⁴. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.32.

¹⁸⁵. Ibid.

¹⁸⁶. Ibid.

¹⁸⁷. Ibid., p.166.

but it is hard to see that they could have any real expectations of succeeding in the future when they have so signally failed on this occasion."¹⁸⁸

The Communist Party in the Soviet Union was not impressed by the changes that the Party in Australia was making. The January 27th, 1971 edition of Tribune carried an article headed "New Times attacks CPA policies". This article had appeared in the January 1st, 1971 edition of New Times¹⁸⁹. and was being reprinted in Tribune. The article attacked the CPA delegation for the position it had taken at the International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties which met in Moscow in 1969. The CPA leadership had taken a dissentient position. The article stated that:

"The leaders of the CPA, specifically Laurie Aarons, Eric Aarons and Bernie Taft, began to come out with unfriendly and even hostile statements about the socialist countries and their policies."¹⁹⁰

The article continued:

"All the more regrettable is it to observe the turn

¹⁸⁸. Eric Aarons, "The Congress and After", Australian Left Review, (June-July, 1970), pp.46-47.

¹⁸⁹. New Times is a journal published in the Soviet Union.

¹⁹⁰. "New Times Attacks CPA Policies", Tribune, (January 27th, 1971), p.8.

developments have taken in the CPA in the recent period. In 1967 the 21st Congress of the Party, on the recommendation of its new leadership, annulled the program Australia's Way Forward adopted at the previous Congress (in 1964). At the same time, the principle of democratic centralism - the fundamental principle in the building of any truly revolutionary party - was to all intents and purposes deleted from the rules."¹⁹¹

The 22nd Congress adopted its Statement of Aims, Methods and Organisation, which outlined the Party's objectives, as well as Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement. These documents indicated that the policy changes adopted in 1967 had been further consolidated; that the issue of democracy had been broadened to include not only Party organisation but also issues of workers control and the necessity for democratic structures within the traditional base of the Party, the trade unions.

Whilst the achievement of a revolutionary society was still the main driving force behind the Party's theory and practice, the emphasis was less on the orthodox, economist relations of production, and was weighted more towards a human face of revolution and social relations of production. In its vision of a future society the Statement of Aims indicated that the Party was intent upon the "promotion of humanist values as the

¹⁹¹ . Ibid.

basic social ethic".¹⁹² Emphasis was on building a society where self-activity, self-management and autonomy in areas of production and enterprise would form the basis of the system.¹⁹³.

In his address to the 22nd Congress Eric Aarons stated that:

"...a qualitatively new form of development of the productive forces has gained momentum - the scientific and technological revolution whose basis is the development of the human factor of the productive forces and not just the material part as was mainly the case before."¹⁹⁴

There was a concatenation of factors which influenced the changes which the Party made to its program and practice in 1970. Some of these involved the further development of those which were influential on the general changes made by the Party in the 1964-1970 period, outlined earlier. Other factors included specific political and social influences of the late 1960s.

During the 1960s the Party had gradually acknowledged that there had been fundamental and radical changes in the

¹⁹². Statement of Aims, p.7.

¹⁹³. Ibid.

¹⁹⁴. Eric Aarons, Address to the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of Australia held March 27th-30th, 1970, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

organisation and structure of the working class, particularly as a result of changes to work brought about by the scientific and technological revolution. The Party could no longer continue to place emphasis on the blue collar, male as the basis of the working class. In 1967 the Party accepted the view that:

"Non-industrial wage and salary workers, taken as a whole, are the fastest growing part of the work force.

The "white collar" grouping is not homogeneous in social composition, but ranges from the mass of low-paid clerical workers and shop assistants up to the relatively few administrators of capitalist enterprises and governments. Besides clerical and commercial workers, there is a wide range of specialists, planners and technicians working in big enterprises and governments.".¹⁹⁵.

In addition there was a recognition that to reject intellectuals and their influence on the Party because they were defined as a middle class influence was also no longer appropriate. The 1960s marked the beginning of the expansion of the education industry, particularly with the emphasis on the tertiary sector. Such an expansion enabled some daughters and sons of the working class to cross over a threshold which

¹⁹⁵. Towards a Coalition, p.3.

in the pre-war period had been scorned and spurned as inappropriate and unnecessary on the one hand, and realistically acknowledged as economically unattainable on the other.

Docker notes the explosion in tertiary education in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. Communist parents were eager for their children to attend and do well at technical colleges and universities.¹⁹⁶ He maintains that one consequence of this was the danger of "turning their own children into members of not their own class segment but of the professional middle class itself."¹⁹⁷ This gave these children a different view of class experience and consciousness. It was "to have drastic effects on the character of the Communist Party itself."¹⁹⁸ Docker continues by arguing that many children of communist parents became radicals, but within New Left polemics, and not necessarily in the way that their parents may have wished, particularly in maintaining political support for the working class.¹⁹⁹

The discussion on the nature and definition of the working class continued in the Party even after the 1971 split. In 1972 Brian Aarons addressed this issue further in an article

¹⁹⁶. John Docker, "Culture, Society and the Communist Party", in Australia's First Cold War, Vol.1, p.205.

¹⁹⁷. Ibid.

¹⁹⁸. Ibid.

¹⁹⁹. Ibid., p.206.

in the Australian Left Review. He emphasised that whilst the traditional Marxist definition of the revolutionary force had relied heavily on the working class, and that whilst this was still the case, there had to be acknowledgment of the "vast changes in the class structure of capitalist society". The view that the revolutionary situation could be simply based on the proposition of the industrial workers versus capitalists was no longer germane.

"We now live under what has been described as neo-capitalism, which has a multitude of features that distinguish it from the capitalism of Marx' or Lenin's day.".²⁰⁰.

The expansion of the tertiary education sector would influence not only the working class and the organisation of work itself, it would have profound effects on Marxism and on Communist Parties in Western capitalist countries. Not only would this expansion give rise to the radical student movement of the late 1960s with its effects on Marxist parties, but in later decades it would gradually take over the role of providing opportunities for marxist studies, once regarded by Communists as the singular domain of their Party. Within this education sector would lie one strain of the seeds of communist demise.

²⁰⁰. Brian Aarons, "The Australian Left: Theory, Strategy, Practice.", Australian Left Review, No. 35, (May 1972), p.4.

"Marxism was given a new lease of life with the expansion of the universities in the 1960s and the impact of the student movement. Marxism became an object of academic study and debate but one which remained relatively aloof from the labour movement.".²⁰¹

Another fundamental factor for change in the Party were the influences which came from Parties overseas including the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In 1969 the Australian Communist Review published a book entitled Civilisation at the Crossroads.²⁰² It was subtitled 'Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution'. This book had been published in Czechoslovakia in 1967 and provided the theoretical basis for the Action Program of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.²⁰³

The text outlined that a re-thinking of Marxism was an imperative. The new Marxism was conspicuous for its emphasis on socialism with a human face, and a Marxism that acknowledged the social relations of production.²⁰⁴ The research team which investigated, analysed and produced the book was an interdisciplinary team with members whose

²⁰¹. Ben Fine, et. al., Class Politics, an Answer to its Critics, (London, n.d.), p.9.

²⁰². Radovan Richta, ed., Civilisation at the Cross-Roads, (Sydney, 1967).

²⁰³. Ibid., Preface.

²⁰⁴. Ibid., Introduction, pp.xii-xx.

backgrounds ranged from the sciences, arts, engineering, architecture and environmental studies areas.²⁰⁵

The book was extremely influential on the theoretical developments occurring in the Australian Party in the late 1960s and its significance in thought and its reappraisal of Marxism were reproduced in Party documents adopted at both the 1967 and 1970 Congresses.

The book recognised the implications of the scientific and technological revolution taking place on a world wide basis and proposed that such a revolution could positively and creatively develop socialist societies to achieve socialism which was more humanitarian and democratic.

"The elementary function of the entire socialist stage of development would appear...to be that of making way for and evolving economic, social, psychic and human conditions under which the most progressive productive forces can be created and the civilisation base of human life revolutionised.".²⁰⁶

Within the Communist Party of Australia the scientific and technological revolution was being broadly discussed and with some controversy. The Australian Left Review carried articles

²⁰⁵. Ibid., p.xii.

²⁰⁶. Ibid., p.xvi.

on these issues.²⁰⁷. One Review article noted that "the working class is growing not diminishing as technological change gathers momentum."²⁰⁸.

Richta's book provided a theoretical framework in which socialism and science could positively work together in order to achieve a society based on equity and humanity. Both the Czechoslovakian and Australian Parties were seeking a new model for socialism which was appropriate for the 1960s and which enabled each Party to develop the model in accordance with the socio-political context of each country.

In this respect, the text, as indeed did the Action Program, provided the possibility of a scenario where a democratic, creative, viable, effervescent socialism was achievable. What Khrushchev had begun could now be completed.

"The work was conceived in an atmosphere of critical, radical searching and intensive discussion on the way forward for a society that has reached industrial maturity while passing through a phase of far-reaching socialist transformation."²⁰⁹.

²⁰⁷. See for example, Bernie Taft, "The Working Class and Revolution", Australian Left Review, (June-July, 1970), pp.15-20.

²⁰⁸. "Comment", Australian Left Review, (December, 1968), p.3.

²⁰⁹. Richta, Civilisation, p.xix.

The language and theoretical ideas in the text was reflected in Party documents. In its Statement of Aims reference was made to the scientific and technological revolution,²¹⁰ and to the fact that the main changes occurring in capitalism have been in machines which have become more complex and sophisticated whilst the workers "the human factor in the productive forces" have retained the same relationship as before that is, appendages to the machines.²¹¹

The Australian Left Review carried a number of articles on the situation and events occurring in Czechoslovakia during the late 1960s. In a 1968 issue Eric Aarons made the following comment:

"As the name Action Program conveys, this is not primarily or even mainly a theoretical document...What is required is to do, to break with the old, to introduce the practice of democracy, to bridge the gap between words and deeds, aspirations and results...One awaits the opening of the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on September 9 with great interest."²¹²

It was not however, only civilisation which was at the

²¹⁰. Statement of Aims, p.3.

²¹¹. Ibid.

²¹². Eric Aarons, "Czechoslovak Action Program", Australian Left Review, (Aug.-Sept. 1968), p.17.

crossroads. Communism, both internationally and in Australia was itself at the crossroads. The international decision was played out on the streets of Prague with disastrously irrevocable results for international communism.

In Australia whilst the battle would not provide so public a spectacle, the results for Australian communism would also be devastating. Polarisation of views on Czechoslovakia, the new way forward, definitions of revolution and working class continued and finally broke forth in political and personal invective. The decision about which direction to take was made, but the result was that members separated and pursued a different path. The domestic pathway to socialism was irretrievably cracked.

Laurie Aarons comments on some of these events:

"There was a big argument about the scientific and technological revolution. The dogmatists said that there is only one revolution and that there was no such thing as the scientific and technological revolution. They asked 'What are you talking about?' and indicated that those who supported the scientific and technological revolution were exaggerating the situation."²¹³.

There were also influences from other overseas Communist

²¹³. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

Parties on the Australian Party, especially the Italian and French, who had been searching for their own roads to socialism within post-war economic, social and political conditions. The ideas being developed by these parties had been seriously considered by Laurie Aarons and when he became General Secretary he began to put some of these ideas into action. Aarons visited Italy and France at the end of 1964 and as a result:

"Laurie delivered a significant report to the Central Committee in February 1965, entitled Party Building and the Path to a Mass Party. He indicated his admiration for the Communist Parties of Italy and France and conceded the possibility of a plurality of parties in a socialist society, implying the need for a coalition of the left.".²¹⁴.

The August-September 1967 issue of the Australian Left Review carried an article about the elections which had recently taken place in France and the fact that the French Communist Party had gained a substantial number of votes. The article indicated that the most significant aspect of this election was the success of the union of the parties of the left in working together and achieving such electoral success.²¹⁵.

²¹⁴. Sendy, Comrades, p.162.

²¹⁵. Henri Martin, "France - Towards a Left Coalition", Australian Left Review, (Aug.-Sept. 1967), p.63.

Perhaps the most wide ranging and important influences for the radical changes being made by the Communist Party of Australia at its 22nd Congress came from the New Left forces of the 1960s. This has been discussed in the previous chapter. The New Left had its roots in the 1950s and in Australia those Party members who had been expelled or left the Party after 1956 had developed a new political perspective, which supported criticism of the Soviet Union and demanded that Communist Parties become more open and democratic, less rigidly bureaucratic and dogmatic.²¹⁶ By the late 1960s this 1950s New Left perspective had gained legitimacy within the Australian Party.

In the Statement of Aims, Methods and Organisation the Party indicated that it was striving "to develop forms of democratic life which will stimulate ideas and forms of activity appropriate in today's changing conditions."²¹⁷ The Party also indicated its willingness to work with "all other forces" for revolutionary social change.²¹⁸

The New Left perspective was further influenced by developments in some Western European communist parties and by the political situation occurring in Czechoslovakia. The New Left influence from Britain had been carried to Australia

²¹⁶. For one discussion of these points see Jack Blake's tribute to Helen Palmer in Australian Left Review, No. 69, (June, 1979), pp.40-41.

²¹⁷. Statement of Aims, p.16.

²¹⁸. Ibid.

by articles which appeared in the British journal New Left Review. Mavis Robertson recalls that such articles were influential on Party members during the 1960s.²¹⁹.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, this New Left political perspective was itself informed by the movement politics which were developing during the 1960s, from the Civil Rights movement in the United States to the moratorium and student movements which were emerging in a number of countries. All of these elements conjoined to motivate and impel change in the Communist Party in Australia.

"Escalation of the Vietnam war by US imperialism in 1965 made a worldwide impact on the revolutionary movement...and at times in those early days the communists were almost alone in their campaigning, which deserves a recognition it seldom gets. But as other forces, especially the students, increasingly entered the struggle, the limitations of what the party was able to do in its existing ideological and organisational state became increasingly apparent.".²²⁰.

Whether the view that the Communist Party was the vanguard force in the moratorium struggle is correct or not will depend on who is writing the history of the movement. What is

²¹⁹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

²²⁰. Aarons, "As I saw the Sixties", p.68.

significant is that this movement and other New Left forces challenged Party praxis and seized the revolutionary agenda via direct action. Such militant and revolutionary practice had always been fiercely defended by the Party as its own, which may explain the need for the Party to reclaim its perceived historical role in the moratorium movement.

The Communist Party was viewed by some elements in the student and moratorium movements as a stagnant, moribund feature of 1950s political theory and action. The Party had not successfully and with long term continuity attracted youth to its membership. The Statement of Aims noted that:

"The CPA has failed to attract any great number of young people because of its past inconsistencies, and lost credibility, and because of the power of anti-Communist ideology.".²²¹

This was to change with the Party's new attitudes and democratic changes which for a short period enabled the Party to be an attractive political proposition for the younger sections of the Australian population. In December 1970 the Party endorsed a proposal for a Conference of Young Communists. It was proposed that discussions include topics on the anti-war movement, student organisation, the young

²²¹. Statement of Aims, p.11.

workers movement and young Communists and the Communist Party.²²²

Hegemonic Hitches

Some members of the Party saw the developing relationship between the Party and movement politics as opportunist.²²³ Other members viewed the development as an essential element of the revitalising of the Party and a necessary step towards Marxist renewal. To some Party members the eclectic influences of 1960s political and social activities were to form the basis of a visionary resurrection for both Party and Marxism. The Party noted in 1972 the significant development of radical movements, expressed mainly in new mass movements such as the anti-war, draft resistance, anti-racist, radical students, women's liberation and ecology movements.²²⁴ The statement continued that:

"All these are developments of earlier, smaller scale, spontaneous movements, but they have reached a qualitatively new level. All have the quality of militant activism, as distinct from the reliance mainly on propaganda which characterised movements

²²². Minutes of the National Executive, CPA, December 3rd-4th, 1970, CPA Records, Box 17, Mitchell Library.

²²³. See Brown, "The Problem Years" in The Communist Movement, pp.261-287.

²²⁴. The Left Challenge for the '70s, adopted at the 23rd National Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, 1972 in CPA Documents of the Seventies, p.27.

on similar issues in the '50s and early '60s.".²²⁵

The forces and influences of the early 1960s culminated in a number of events which occurred in 1968. These events brought the existing tensions in the Party to a head and put the Party leadership's attempts to make change, to the test.

"...in May 1968 the great upheaval in France showed that revolutionary potential in modern capitalist society could not be written off as some were suggesting, while also exposing still more fundamentally the unsolved problems of theory, strategy and organisation of the communist parties. Such new social and political currents in the capitalist and socialist world posed additional knotty problems of theory and orientation."²²⁶.

The 'knotty problems' involved finding answers to a number of complex and difficult questions regarding socialist and revolutionary theory and practice. The 1967 document Towards a Coalition of the Left had stated:

"The new conditions of political struggle already developing are favourable for discussion and debate on far-reaching solutions to the issues stirring public conscience and activity. This will

²²⁵. Ibid.

²²⁶. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", pp.68-9.

necessarily lead to consideration of socialist transformation as the only alternative to a continually narrowing monopoly domination. Thus such fundamental questions will arise as: what is socialism; how is it achieved; what form of state is necessary; how to prevent civil war developing by the defenders of wealth and privilege unleashing violence."²²⁷

These questions and issues would be continually placed on the political agendas of a number of Communist Parties from the late 1960s and for the next two decades. There was a recognition that solutions to such questions as the role of the state, the peaceful road to socialism, the relationship between parties and movements and the role of communist parties themselves had to be found. Various solutions would be sought by communist parties, but the historical significance of the search for answers lies in the fact that it was marked by a desperate desire to completely repudiate and assail the old, orthodox practices and replace them with a political analeptic which had to be new, vigorous, creative. Within this process would lie further seeds of the gradual disintegration of communist parties and the demise of Marxism. The search for a new socialist theory would become tantamount whilst the parties gradually lost touch with their base.

Ben Fine comments on the implications of this search for

²²⁷. Towards a Coalition, p.11.

socialism in the 1990s:

"We do not exaggerate the role that can be played by intellectuals and debate but the role of the newer left can only be to disarm the working class in the struggles in which it will inevitably be involved. Indeed, this is in a sense the whole thrust of its politics and its strategy - that politics is increasingly divorced from class in the new movements...".²²⁸

In the late 1960s the Australian Left Review contained articles about the political situation in Europe and France, and also interviews with French Communists and intellectuals.²²⁹ Such articles served to stimulate inner Party discussion about the development of new Party strategies and methods of work. These debates continued in the Party during the 1970s and at the 24th Congress held in 1974 it was agreed that:

"There are no definite models to go by in advanced capitalist countries but we can point to examples of rapid and even explosive upsurges of mass struggle. These include the events in France in May 1968, the 'hot autumn' in Italy in 1969, the great

²²⁸. Fine, et.al., p.63.

²²⁹. See articles in the Australian Left Review, (August-September, 1968) and (December, 1969).

moratorium in the United States, and the struggles in Australia over Vietnam and the penal powers struggle in 1969.".²³⁰

This discussion continued to note that there was still the question of how such situations can be transformed into revolutionary movements, but suggested that the success of such a transformation depends at least on the success of "communists in overcoming the hegemony of capitalist ideas and of reformism in particular."²³¹.

The influences on the Party in Australia came not only from the actions of the students and workers in France and Italy. Of equal importance was the impact of Marxist and socialist intellectuals including Marcuse, Althusser, Poulantzas, Lukacs and Gramsci. "By 1965 Paris, renowned for its vulnerability to theoretical fashion, was swept by the new trend in marxism initiated by Louis Althusser."²³²."

A new Marxist language was developing which insisted on a re-interpretation of traditional Marxist theory, attempted to redefine class politics and the 'proletariat', and endeavoured to provide a theoretical framework in which communist and socialist parties could achieve a praxis. Wood comments on:

²³⁰. Summary of Results of the 24th National Congress, CPA, 1974, p.3, CPA Records, Box 4, Mitchell Library.

²³¹. Ibid.

²³². Peter Beilharz, "Poulantzas and Marxist Theory", Australian Left Review, No. 73, (March 1980), p.28.

"The theoretical tendency to autonomize ideology and politics is, at its most extreme, associated with a drift toward the establishment of language or 'discourse' as the dominant principle of social life, and the convergence of certain 'post-Marxist' trends with post-structuralism, the ultimate dissociation of ideology and consciousness from any social and historical base.".²³³

The Party in Australia would accept and reject elements of the new discourse. The new interpretations of Marxism would make inroads into movement politics including the women's movement, and this in turn would have a further impact on the Communist Party. Beilharz notes that "it is still something of a heresy to suggest that Althusserian Marxism has had a negative effect on the Australian left.".²³⁴

The new discourse also challenged the orthodox organisation and structures of communist parties whilst the writings of the structuralist marxists challenged the theory of socialist revolution and the old methods of achieving a socialist state.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the socio-political melting pot represented by New Left politics was Eurocommunism. Wood gives a detailed critique of Eurocommunism

²³³. Wood, The Retreat, p.5.

²³⁴. Beilharz, "Poulantzas and Marxist Theory", p.29.

in her book.²³⁵ John Cammett notes that the term 'Eurocommunism' was first used on June 3rd, 1976 by Enrico Berlinguer, general secretary of the Italian Communist Party.²³⁶ Claudin comments that:

"Towards the end of 1970 a new work hit the front pages of the international press and rapidly passed into political currency: Eurocommunism."²³⁷

Marzani, however details its development, particularly in Italy after the Second World War, when the Italian Communist Party was under the leadership of Togliatti.²³⁸

In explaining Eurocommunism, Carrillo declared:

"that the Communist parties of developed capitalist countries, or those at an advanced level of development, must confront...specific problems which will lead us toward paths and forms of socialism that will not be the same as those of other countries."²³⁹.

²³⁵. Wood, The Retreat, in particular Chapter 2.

²³⁶. John Cammett, Introduction to Carl Marzani, The Promise of Eurocommunism, (Connecticut, 1980), p.ix.

²³⁷. Fernando Claudin, Eurocommunism and Socialism, (London, 1978).

²³⁸. Marzani, The Promise, Chapter 5.

²³⁹. Ibid., p.ix.

Wood comments on the link between the new discourse and the developing Eurocommunism:

"The single most influential school of Western Marxism in recent years has been a theoretical current that derives its principle inspiration from Louis Althusser...Hence the 'obsessive methodologism' that Althusser shared with other Western Marxists as questions of theoretical form displaced issues of political substance."²⁴⁰

Wood continues by indicating that the link between Althusserian marxism and Eurocommunism lies in the "theoretical products of post-Althusserian Marxism" and the demands of Eurocommunist strategy.²⁴¹.

By the mid-1970s Eurocommunism was developing a set of strategies for the achievement of a socialist state and the transformation of capitalism into socialism. It was attempting to provide a revolutionary praxis which could solve the problems involved in creating a socialist society in advanced capitalist countries and it appeared to be able to provide the political panacea to the issue of a socialist model.

This model suggested that it was possible to achieve socialism

²⁴⁰. Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Marxism without Class Struggle?", Socialist Register, (1983), pp.244-245.

²⁴¹. Ibid., p.245.

and still maintain if not enrich democratic political liberties and human rights, and to develop a socialist theory which could meet the new political and social realities of European society.

The Communist Party in Australia gradually incorporated elements of the Eurocommunist model into its revolutionary theory. Sally Bowen recalls that the influence of Eurocommunism was very strong in the Party. "Eurocommunism was supposed to be the best thing since sliced bread."²⁴².

The Eurocommunist model attempted to provide a framework in which a relationship between party and movement politics could be developed and also in which national communism could be viably and positively achieved. In this sense the Eurocommunist model owed an historical acknowledgment to both Tito and China.

"Eurocommunism rejects Soviet hegemony. But so do Titoism, Maoism and Castroism, none of which is considered Eurocommunist. What distinguishes Eurocommunism from these other variants of Marxism is its stress on democracy, both on the road to power and in the building of a socialist society."²⁴³

²⁴². Interview with Sally Bowen, September 1987.

²⁴³. Marzani, p.23.

Eurocommunism endeavoured to provide some solutions to the issues being raised by the New Left, in particular by advocating that the communist parties work closely with others on the left to achieve electoral success, a success which was to precede the socialist transformation and by emphasising that socialist party organisation be open and democratic.

In these respects some Eurocommunist tenets enmeshed well with the changing theoretical framework of the Communist Party of Australia. In Italy the 'historic compromise' was developed with its emphasis on working alliances, even with the traditional foe of the Italian Communist Party, the Christian Democrat Party. Such alliances were viewed as electorally and historically essential, and the method of co-operating with non-communist parties, as well as a variety of social groups and movements was adopted by the Communist Party of Australia with its Coalition of the Left document.

"Despite the many pressures making for division of the working people, agreement is possible between the conscious representatives of the classes and groups wanting social advance and change."²⁴⁴

The Italian Party emphasised the necessity for such a compromise in a period of growing economic crisis and at a time when a transformation of working class politics was occurring. The Party in Australia could appreciate the

²⁴⁴. Towards a Coalition, p.10.

necessity of working alliances with the left at a time when the Party itself was undergoing a membership crisis, and when the advance of socialism had almost come to a halt. Bernie Taft noted that socialist consciousness had dimmed. He maintained that socialism was not the issue amongst workers that it was two or three decades ago.²⁴⁵

At its 22nd Congress held in 1970, the Party had advanced its idea of a left coalition for revolutionary social change..

"This recognises that there are now and are likely to be in the future a number of trends agreeing on a general perspective of socialist transformation of existing society, but differing in important respects in ideology, program and organisation.".²⁴⁶

In 1965 Laurie Aarons had drawn the attention of the Central Committee to the situation in France where the Communists were working for united action with the Socialist Party. But Aarons had also stated:

"It is quite impossible to transplant mechanically the experiences of other Parties. It is essential to strive to grasp the essence and apply this to our country. There is no question of us adopting an

²⁴⁵. Taft, "The Working Class and Revolution", p.15.

²⁴⁶. Statement of Aims, p.12.

Italian or French line, any more than we pursue either a Moscow or a Peking line. We are an Australian Party; our line is an Australian line."²⁴⁷.

The communist parties of Italy, France and Spain were in agreement that there would need to be a diversity of socialist forms without the communist parties being the dominant force and where the building of socialism can depend on different political movements. Togliatti indicated that it was necessary to acknowledge that "the whole system is becoming polycentric and even in the communist movements we cannot speak of a single guide..."²⁴⁸.

The main emphasis of the Eurocommunist parties was to vehemently reject any theory or practice which could be regarded as Stalinist, a process which the Party in Australia had been embarking upon since the early 1960s. Australian Communists who visited communist parties in Eurocommunist countries were significantly influenced by the developments taking place there.²⁴⁹

The emphasis on democracy was critical within the

²⁴⁷. Laurie Aarons, Party Building and the Path to a Mass Party, report given to the Central Committee meeting, CPA, held February 1965, CPA Records, Box 15, Mitchell Library.

²⁴⁸. D. Childs, "Eurocommunism: Problems and Prospects", Contemporary Review, (February 1978), p.67.

²⁴⁹. Sendy, Comrades, especially Chapter 43, "The Italian Line", pp.204-209.

Eurocommunist program, as was the necessity for the communist parties to analyse and incorporate some of the political actions of the student movement and eventually the women's movement. In Australia the redefining of the united front enabled the links between the Communist Party and the emerging women's liberation movement to be more easily developed.

Carillo, one of the most forceful exponents of Eurocommunism summed up the principles of this model which became attractive to the Communist Party of Australia. Not only was the advance to socialism with democracy extremely important, so was the retaining of parliamentary processes including a multi-party system and elections, but also:

"Trade unions independent of the State and of the parties, freedom for the opposition, human rights, religious freedom, freedom for cultural, scientific and artistic forms of popular participation at all levels and in all branches of social activity.".²⁵⁰

Such a list of freedoms succinctly outlined areas where Western European communist Parties, and increasingly the Australian Party, had been critical of the practices and methods of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This developing criticism was an important political and

²⁵⁰. Santiago Carrillo, Eurocommunism and the State, (Connecticut, 1977), p.128.

psychological link between the Australian and Eurocommunist parties.

The issues of how to achieve a socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist country and of democracy became linked with the solution of the 'peaceful road to socialism', and the belief that socialism can be achieved non-violently and peacefully, particularly through parliamentary processes.

The issue of peaceful coexistence had been raised previously at the 20th Congress, February 1956, of the CPSU. E.A. Bacon had noted that this Congress was important for its view that world war could be avoided, that peaceful coexistence between socialist and capitalist countries was possible and "that the real possibilities for peaceful transition to socialism were developing in several capitalist countries."²⁵¹

The Communist Party of Australia also advocated the attainment of a socialist state without civil war. In its 1964 program the Party advocated:

"The Communist Party aims for peaceful transition to socialism, because that would accord with the interests of the working class and people as a whole.

²⁵¹. E.A. Bacon, "Outline of the Post-War History of the Communist Party of Australia", (Draft for discussion), in Brown, The Communist Movement, p.230.

History shows that the ruling class never gives up power voluntarily...

It will be necessary to overwhelm the various forms of resistance of the capitalist forces and to head off their attempts to turn to armed violence.".²⁵².

It was further embodied in the Charter for Democratic Rights²⁵³ which the Party adopted in 1967 and which stated that Australian Communists supported the view that socialism could be achieved through the struggle of the people themselves using "parliament and all the forms of democratic struggle through popular organisations and movements..."²⁵⁴.

Within the new spirit of openness and democracy such a peaceful transition was an imperative. Within the political framework of Eurocommunism this peaceful road was to be achieved via a series of electoral struggles in conjunction with the penetration of the state apparatus. The emphasis was now on dialogue not confrontation, on evolution and not revolution.

"The general strategy of Eurocommunism seems at

²⁵². Australia's Way Forward, pp.65-66.

²⁵³. Charter of Democratic Rights, Communist Party of Australia, (Sydney, 1967).

²⁵⁴. Ibid., p.5.

least implicitly to be built upon a conflict other than the direct opposition between capital and labour and a moving force other than class struggle. Its first object is to rally the 'popular' forces against 'state monopoly capitalism', to create the broadest possible mass alliance, and then to establish an 'advanced democracy' on the basis of this popular alliance, from which base some kind of socialism can be gradually constructed.". ²⁵⁵

The desire to search for a peaceful road to socialism had its roots in the general post-war social view which prevailed in the 1960s in Europe and Australia that war was not an appropriate method by which to achieve ends. The cold war and constant daily threat of nuclear war in the 1950s meant that peaceful methods were more justified and acceptable. This 1950s view of the world was further cemented by the moratorium movement of the following decade.

Another key issue raised by Eurocommunists was that of the State. This issue had been informed by the works of Gramsci although of course there was a theoretical basis which had been provided by Lenin. Eurocommunism challenged the traditional Marxist tenet that the masses had to smash the state. Rather the aim was to transform the state as it was no longer simply the bastion of the bourgeoisie. Berlinguer had

²⁵⁵. Wood, "Marxism Without Class Struggle?", p.246.

commented:

"In Italy, in particular, the state is the result of struggle - including armed struggle in the period of the resistance against fascism - and is therefore characterised by the strong presence of the working class movement, and of domestic forces." ²⁵⁶.

Some time has been spent here in discussing Eurocommunism and its influences on the Communist Party of Australia. Such a discussion is essential for a number of reasons. The discussion provides the parameters in which communist parties sought for a new post-1956 model for socialism; it assists in describing the political and social context in which the women's liberation movement was established in Australia; it demonstrates that the Communist Party was on the pathway to change which enabled it to accommodate the women's movement; it demonstrates the vital and visible links which existed between communist parties on an international basis and it also enables an analysis to be made of future problems, the hegemonic hitches, which would slowly assist in the demise of some Western European communist parties, and the Australian Party, nearly thirty years later. This last point will be developed in a later chapter.

²⁵⁶. Giovanni Berlinguer, "The Italian Connection...Is there a Third Way?", Australian Left Review, No. 81, (September 1982), p.18.

The legitimacy of Eurocommunist tenets and revolutionary principles appeared to be justified, indeed they seemed to be a political imperative, after 20th August 1968, when the "Soviet Union led the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact countries, except Romania, in an invasion aimed to restore the previous type of regime by the use of force, relentless pressure, duplicity and persecution of those who opposed them.".²⁵⁷.

The Prague Spring had conspicuously marked international communism at the crossroads. The invasion of Czechoslovakia indicated that in the Soviet Union old pathways would be maintained. Indeed they were to be further strengthened by Brezhnev stolidity.

Czechoslovakia was "a watershed for the communist movements"²⁵⁸. in advanced capitalist countries because it impelled them to develop a practical alternative to the Soviet model and forced them "after the invasion to elaborate that model for themselves.".²⁵⁹

For some Australian Communists it was unbelievable that the Soviet Union would invade another socialist country and impose its own bureaucratic control. This disbelief was further

²⁵⁷. Eric Aarons, "Ten Years After", Australian Left Review, No. 64, (May 1978), p.28.

²⁵⁸. "Editorial Statement", Australian Left Review, No. 66, (September, 1978), p.1.

²⁵⁹. Ibid.

strengthened because of the strong links and support which the Australian Party had made and given to Dubcek and the Action Program. Joyce Stevens comments on the implications of the invasion for some Party members:

"The Czechoslovakian events were like a bombshell. It disoriented people and it was very hard to find our feet. I know how I felt for a year after the invasion. I would think 'What does it all mean? What have we been defending? You had to re-orient your politics in a really fundamental way.'"²⁶⁰.

Other Party members viewed the invasion as a necessary action to curb reformism. The events in Czechoslovakia provided further elements to the already existing tensions over changes in the Australia Party's theory and strategies and the polarisation within the Party increased. The strains and stresses which began to appear in the Party with the 1967 Congress adoption of the Coalition of the Left and Charter for Democratic Rights documents, were precipitously intensified by the influences of the New Left, movement politics, the developing Eurocommunist model, and were now reaching a crisis point over criticism of or support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Bill Brown summed up the opposition point of view:

²⁶⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

"The period leading up to the 1971 split was one in which the CPA, along with the international communist movement generally, came under intensified pressure from both left and right opportunist tendencies. These included the continuing virulent trend of Maoism; the re-emergence of Trotskyism...the New Left trend which won many young people to support radical left policies while diverting them from class struggle against monopoly capitalism.

Eurocommunism was yet another trend used to sow disorientation. This trend counter-posed a nationalist line in place of adherence to the principle of working class internationalism."²⁶¹.

The Party members who supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia saw it as an action to "preserve socialism" ²⁶². and were critical of those who attacked the Soviet Union saying that such attacks were in essence conforming "to the line of the internationalist bourgeoisie."²⁶³.

The tensions in the Party came to a head during the 1970-1971 period and were only removed by the occurrence of the second major split to occur in the Party in less than ten years. Eric

²⁶¹. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.268.

²⁶². Ibid., p.273.

²⁶³. Ibid.

Aarons later commented on this political crisis by stating that "the issue of Czechoslovakia, while indeed a fundamental turning point, in no way caused the developments in Australia, but only put the seal on what had already been basically accomplished internally."²⁶⁴.

For those in the Party who had been advocating change, Czechoslovakia provided the catalyst for debate around all the issues which had been placed on the political agenda since 1967, and many of which were becoming incorporated within the strategic framework of Eurocommunism. The Prague Spring and the Action Program were identified by these communists as an excitingly new approach to the challenge of developing a socialist theory and practice within an advanced capitalist country.

In 1960 the Communist Party of Australia had supported the view taken at the 81 Communist and Workers Parties meeting that all parties are "independent and have equal rights".²⁶⁵. This view as has been demonstrated above had been increasingly strengthened in both theory and practice by the Australian Party. The necessary steps towards the development of an Australian road to socialism were being taken and Joyce Stevens comments that:

"I think that if it hadn't been for the invasion of

²⁶⁴. Aarons, "As I saw the Sixties", p.72.

²⁶⁵. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.262.

Czechoslovakia, some of the things might have happened without a split. If the party had had more time to change in some of those ways without that devastating event, it might not have happened like that because there had begun to be some changes in the Party before the split took place."²⁶⁶.

The split did however take place, and the Australian road to socialism became furcate. The split was a bitter political and personal process. Reg Wilding recalls that when he was Party organiser in the South Coast area he would have extremely irate members come and demand an explanation from him as to why the Party's official policy was to condemn the Soviet Union.²⁶⁷ There were physical attacks between members at some Party meetings over the issue.²⁶⁸.

Fundamentally the split was about methods of work, revolutionary strategy and the redefinition of class politics. Not only was it imperative for the Party to develop a new model for socialism which could be viable within the Australian political and social context, there were changes taking place within Australian society which the Party could not ignore. Sally Bowen comments:

"It was the climate. Young people had a different

²⁶⁶. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

²⁶⁷. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

²⁶⁸. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

outlook altogether on the question of authority within society. It was a question of educational changes, instead of having issues pushed onto people it was a question of bringing things out of people.".²⁶⁹.

The Party had lurched and limped along since the post-war years. It was time for change. Reg Wilding and Derek Beechey commented that no matter how difficult a process, there had to be change. In their view the Party could no longer operate on the basis of members being told what the line was on a particular issue. Such methods of work had alienated the Party both at the workplace and in areas of political activity where the Party worked with other Left forces.²⁷⁰.

Differences - the Enemy Within

The aetiology of splits on the Left has often been historically analysed within party organisations in terms of personalities. Ellis Peters, writing of a different time and about a different organisation, provides one reason for this:

"'The good who go astray into wrong paths do more harm than the evil, who are our open enemies,' said Canon Gerbert sharply. 'It is the enemy within who betrays the fortress.'

²⁶⁹. Interview with Sally Bowen, September 1987.

²⁷⁰. Interview with Reg Wilding and Derek Beechey, June 1988.

Now that, thought Cadfael, rings true of Church thinking. A Seljuk Turk or a Saracen can cut down Christians in battle or throw stray pilgrims into dungeons, and still be tolerated and respected, even if he's held to be already damned. But if a Christian steps a little aside in his beliefs he becomes anathema. He had seen it years ago in the east, in the admittedly beleaguered Christian churches. Hardpressed by enemies, it was on their own they turned most savagely."²⁷¹.

The 1970-1971 split demonstrated a Party which could not deal with differences, except by processes of expulsion or split. These methods of dealing with political difference were still operative in a Party which had adopted a firm view that democratic, open methods of debate and discussion were essential. Whilst discussions took place, there was still a prevailing view that to disagree with the leadership or the majority was being disloyal to the Party.

"I think that they [the Party leadership] decided to go on a new track and they had to get rid of everyone who wasn't going to come on that track with them. They used old methods to do what they were saying was going to be new".²⁷²

²⁷¹. Ellis Peters, The Heretic's Apprentice, (1989), p.29.

²⁷². Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

Such disagreements were dealt with by personal attack. Some members in the Party could see stalinist methods being used to push the Party along the new way forward. John Sendy has documented his disagreement with members of the leadership in Comrades Come Rally. Sendy circulated his views in a document on 16th November, 1973:

"I set out my ideas on conducting struggles inside the Party:

'Is it really necessary that every time there is a serious ideological difference or debate the issues have to be fought out to the bitter end? Should we always slug it out until one side goes down or capitulates?...As Alec Robertson pointed out last January the whole concept of the polarisation of differences between comrades is an OLD idea and a Stalinist idea'.".²⁷³.

Unlike the 1963 split over China which effected the Victorian Branch of the Party more than other branches, the 1971 split reached all areas of the Party across Australia. Reg Wilding recalls, "you never knew who was the next to leave".²⁷⁴.

²⁷³. Sendy, Comrades, pp.233-234.

²⁷⁴. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

Within the Communist Party the political pendulum was on the swing. From a position of avid support for the Soviet Union, the Party then swung to a position of extreme and vehement anti-Sovietism. "...it had replaced the previous blind support for the USSR with a new form of non-objectivity - an incapacity to see anything but the negative features of Soviet policy.".²⁷⁵

Such pendulum swinging created difficulties for Party theory and practice, and for some members who had supported the Party through an extremely difficult period. In the early 1970s, some members in the Party were concerned by the leftism which was occurring. In 1973 John Sendy made the following comment:

"The Party leadership has a poor record over the past view years in waging ideological struggle against many harmful, divisive, and disorganising ideas which have been voiced in and around the Party. From a correct position of striving to eliminate bureaucracy, of generally improving democratic practices in the Party and of trying to create, where practical, new organisation forms and methods, the leadership has too frequently capitulated to a trendy, anti-organisational and anti-leadership ideas or remained passive thereby

²⁷⁵. Sendy, Comrades, pp.230-231.

introducing or increasing confusion and concern.".²⁷⁶.

The Party after the split continued to endeavour to develop an Australian road to socialism. It is argued in this thesis that the period 1965 to 1975 contains the elements, issues and solutions which were to pose ever increasing political, theoretical and organisational questions and dilemmas for the Party. Some of these were dealt with positively, others were never really resolved. It is within this period that the problems confronting the Party in the 1990s must be analysed.

It is within this social milieu and political melee of the late 1960s that the women's movement in Australia emerged. Mavis Robertson commented on this issue in 1971:

"...the new left has not lost its emphasis on concern for the individual...The search for life styles and human relations which prefigure the future society has been a central concern. Little wonder then that out of this movement stepped a new women's movement..."²⁷⁷.

The women's movement was to challenge the Party in many aspects of theory, practice and organisation. These challenges

²⁷⁶. John Sendy, "The Real Issues Before the Party and the Congress", November, 1973, CPA Records, Box 5, Mitchell Library.

²⁷⁷. Mavis Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", Australian Left Review, (December-January, 1971), pp.8-9.

however, would assist the Party in its development of an Australian path to socialism. The women's movement would also pose difficult theoretical and practical problems about the kind of relationship the Party should develop with movement politics. The movement emerged as one element of an "interrelated ideological struggle" ²⁷⁸ taking place within the Party.

²⁷⁸. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

Because woman's work is never done and is underpaid or unpaid or boring or repetitious and we're the first to get the sack and what we look like is more important than what we do and if we get raped it's our fault and if we get bashed we must have provoked it and if we raise our voices we're nagging bitches and if we enjoy sex we're nymphos and if we don't we're frigid and if we love women it's because we can't get a "real" man and if we ask our doctor too many questions we're neurotic and/or pushy and if we expect community care for children we're selfish and if we stand up for our rights we're aggressive and "unfeminine" and if we want to get married we're out to trap a man and if we don't we're unnatural and because we still can't get an adequate safe contraceptive but men can walk on the moon and if we can't cope or don't want a pregnancy we're made to feel guilty about abortion and...for lots and lots of other reasons we are part of the women's liberation movement.

LIBERATING COMMUNISM.

"This journal is dedicated:

- to Simone de Beauvoir, the French woman
who exposed male supremacy for this era,
and gave us our feminism...
- and to the women and men of the black liberation
movement of the U.S.A.
who taught us directly the power and beauty
of the masses of people,
and so taught us the truth about women...
- to all the oppressed of this earth
whose dynamism and strength is stolen
for exploitation by others
and who fly when they break their chains."²⁷⁹.

In the midst of the late 1960s Communist Party angst over a new Way Forward, a political and social force emerged which challenged and renewed Party theory and practice. The second wave of feminism in the form of the Women's Liberation Movement began to take off in Australia. Its impact on the Communist Party was to be cathartic. This chapter analyses this impact in general terms, examining the ways in which the

²⁷⁹. Feminist Revolution, Red Stockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, (New York, 1978 ed.).

women's liberation movement issues and demands challenged the Communist Party as a social and political organisation. Following chapters will discuss more specific issues about the relationship between the movement and the Party.

The women's liberation movement emerged at a time when the Communist Party of Australia was endeavouring to discard and dismantle the yoke and heritage of Stalinism. This is discussed in the previous chapter. Mavis Robertson comments:

"At that time the experiences of the women's movement were relevant to the problems and difficulties that the Communist Party was trying to grapple with."²⁸⁰.

As noted in the previous chapter, the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement in Australia owed much of its heritage to the women's movements which had emerged earlier in the United States, Europe and Great Britain.²⁸¹. Women writers and feminists such as Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir became familiar names in Australia and their work was influential on a cross section of Australian women.

"Betty Friedan was an enormous influence on lots of people. She spoke at the same level to all those women who had wanted to be the queens in their

²⁸⁰. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

²⁸¹. Stevens, A History, p.28.

homes and have two beautiful children and so on, and then found it all went sour.".²⁸².

From 1969 onwards,²⁸³. the Australian women's liberation movement developed to match the following Redstockings Collective description of the American movement:

"* there is something around now called the women's liberation movement that millions of people all over the world know about and have reacted to, for or against, and in which large numbers of women have been involved, and which more people, men and women, feel themselves supporters of.

* this movement was started by women.

* this movement was launched by women who deemed it necessary to form women's liberation groups which excluded men from their meetings.

* these women's liberation groups soon publicly began to use the term feminist to describe themselves, as well as radical.".²⁸⁴

Internationally, feminists acknowledged the influences of

²⁸². Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

²⁸³. Stevens, A History, p.28.

²⁸⁴. Feminist Revolution, p. 14.

other 1960s liberation movements and political groups upon inchoate women's movements. In particular the political and social agendas, actions and methods of work of the civil rights movement in America was recognised.

"Not until the 1960s, when the black question was raised by the growing militancy of American blacks and revolutionary movements in developing countries, was the power relationship between autonomous movements and socialist organisations seriously contested. In the course of this confrontation the need for autonomous movements of self definition was clearly asserted. This was to be a decisive influence on the emergence of the women's liberation movement.".²⁸⁵.

The women's liberation movement acknowledged the libertarian reformism of the previous suffragette movement but demanded liberation and revolution for women within a political and social framework which borrowed from the black civil rights movement in the United States and the youth revolt of the earlier 1960s. Rowbotham notes that:

"...women's liberation does have strands of the older equal-rights feminism, and it also has a

²⁸⁵. Sheila Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement and Organising for Socialism", (Photocopy n.d.), p.20. Subsequently published as a chapter in Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, Beyond the Fragments, (London, 1979).

persistent revolutionary socialist connection, but it is something more than either of these."²⁸⁶

In Australia, after the Second World War, capitalism restructured within the hegemony of a United States new world order.²⁸⁷ The Australian reconstruction relied on developing technology, immigration and an increasing growth of multinational companies. The rise of industrial welfare capitalism provided an increase in the standard of living and in the availability of domestic goods and appliances. In addition, a larger percentage of the Australian population was able to participate in tertiary education, thus opening up for them more variety in employment and career opportunities.

Not all Australians benefited equally from this post-war reconstruction. "The groups who benefited least from abundance were Aborigines and those on social welfare, particularly single women and children."²⁸⁸ Credit became increasingly available for the family purchase of home and white-goods. Women's social and economic role was firmly placed within the ideology of the family.

In the 1960s youth and students began to question aspects of this post-war society, particularly its alienation, racism and

²⁸⁶. Sheila Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, Man's World, (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.ix.

²⁸⁷. Connell and Irving, p.292.

²⁸⁸. Stevens, A History, p.28.

reliance on war economics. Some women who were active in this revolution began to question what the liberation referred to really meant for them.²⁸⁹ Women began to critically analyse their roles, functions and activities within these earlier movements, and within the left generally.

"Women still produced and looked after the babies, had the worst jobs and lowest pay, did the cooking, made the morning tea and serviced the revolution. Small disgruntled groups of women met together to sort it all out."²⁹⁰

Mavis Robertson and Joyce Stevens provide descriptions of the political and social contexts in which the women's movement emerged in Australia. Mavis wrote:

"Whatever else the men on the new-left were challenging, in terms of human values, they found it difficult to give up their traditional privileges concerning women and the new-left women, conditioned from childhood to accept a role which above all deferred to men, found themselves playing out their 'normal' role in a new setting."²⁹¹.

And Joyce recalls that by 1969 there were a number of women's

²⁸⁹ . Ibid.

²⁹⁰ . Ibid.

²⁹¹ . Mavis Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.9.

groups meeting in various places in Australia.

"There was a small group of women meeting in Sydney in Balmain in 1969. I recall reading quite recently about women's demonstrations in pubs in Brisbane and Canberra in 1968 or 1969. It seems that the main organisations that started to become publicly seen as women's liberation happened in 1969, early 1970."²⁹².

In a more recent article Sandra Bloodwood offers another view about the material circumstances which led to the emergence of the women's movement in Australia.

"I would dispute the claim that the modern women's movement arose as a reaction to the politics of the left. Mass movements do not simply arise because of ideas. They depend on material factors in society. The women's liberation movement was able to inspire and involve thousands because of the changing role of women: as they entered the workforce in ever-growing numbers, demands were then raised for childcare, equal pay and so on."²⁹³.

Whilst Bloodwood is correct in emphasising that it is material

²⁹². Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

²⁹³. Sandra Bloodwood, "Reply to Meekosha and Pettman", Hecate, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1991), p.94.

factors which give rise to social and political movements, to dispute that "the modern women's movement arose as a reaction to the politics of the left" is historically inaccurate. A number of material factors usually lie at the basis for historical events. The emergence of the women's movement in Australia was as much of a reaction to the sexism of the men on the left, as it was a rebellion against the social and economic position of women in 1960s Australia. Women were beginning to make links between their social, political and historical situations within the home, at the workplace and within the political movements, organisations and parties in which they were involved.

"Increasing numbers of women are drawing on Marxist feminist theory to aid their understanding of the links between their unpaid labour in the home, their badly paid labour in the workforce and their general powerlessness in society."²⁹⁴

Mavis Robertson comments on the influence of the anti-Vietnam movement on women's political activities:

"Even while people were developing democratic methods to ensure the development of that movement, it was really about democratic methods for men. It was obvious when you thought about it. It was

²⁹⁴. Stefania Pieri, et. al., "Italian Migrant Women, Participation, and the Women's Movement", in Worth her Salt ed. by Margaret Bevege et.al., (Sydney, 1982), p.402.

really alienating for people like myself who had always worked in the peace movement, and were very involved in the movement against the Vietnam War but didn't want to go to meetings every week, let alone mass meetings.

The idea that democracy consists of interminable meetings is not a democracy for women with children.".²⁹⁵

Anne Summers asserted yet another reason for the emergence of the movement in an article in the National Times in 1972:

"Women's Liberation was started by women involved in New Left politics who became tired of the male politicians arguing for the liberation of everyone but their bedmates."²⁹⁶

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell in Sweet Freedom have commented that at regular intervals throughout history women rediscover themselves.²⁹⁷ This chapter attempts to discuss how women in the Communist Party of Australia, by developing a compossible relationship with the women's liberation movement, rediscovered themselves. This concentration on Party

²⁹⁵. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

²⁹⁶. Anne Summers, Article in the National Times, (April 3rd-8th, 1972).

²⁹⁷. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, Sweet Freedom, (London, 1982), p.9.

women and their history is not undertaken from a sectarian point of view. It is not the intention here to deny or ignore the work done by and the achievements of a vast number of socialist women, not necessarily members of the Communist Party, who raised issues and enhanced the development of a socialist feminist polemic in Australia. The women's movement was begun, developed, fought for and advanced by a range of women in Australia, some of whom were involved in political parties, some of whom were non-party political and all of whom came from a variety of economic, social and political backgrounds and experiences.

Rather the intention of this chapter is to give praise to those Communist women who fought and struggled to raise the consciousness of communists and socialists to the necessity of addressing women's exploitation and oppression within liberation politics. This chapter recognises the passionate intensity and intense passion of those Communist women who endeavoured to redefine a socialist revolutionary praxis in which personal relations and the social relations of production would be addressed, recognised and pursued with a similar vigorous equality as the socialist project and the economic means of production had been traditionally and rigorously pursued within the Party.

Sheila Rowbotham describes the essence of the struggle to achieve an adequate socialist praxis. She refers to the difficult relationship between feminism and Marxism, an issue

which has dogged the women's movement for decades.

"They cohabit in the same space somewhat uneasily. Each sits snorting at the other and using words which are strange and foreign to the other. Each is huffy and jealous about its own autonomy...It is tempting to opt for one or the other in an effort to produce a tidy resolution of the commotion generated by the antagonism between them. But to do that would mean evading the social reality which gives rise to the antagonism.".²⁹⁸

Communist women were among those feminists who ceaselessly endeavoured to develop a politically and socially workable relationship between feminism and Marxism and to develop a socialist feminist theory which could positively inform the Marxism which the women's movement of the 1960s had inherited.

Rowbotham also outlined some theoretical dilemmas and practical problems which Communist women in a number of Western capitalist Communist Parties analysed, pondered and debated in close liaison with their sisters in the women's movement:

"The questions which come out of women's liberation are of significance not only for women. How can we mobilise the resistance of many different sections

²⁹⁸. Rowbotham, Women, Resistance, p.246.

of society? How can we connect to our everyday living the abstract commitment to make a society without exploitation and oppression? What is the relationship between the objective changes in capitalism and our new perceptions of social revolution? What are the ways in which we can organise together without sacrificing our autonomy?".²⁹⁹.

At First

From 1969 onwards a number of women's liberation groups were established in Sydney and met, initially, by word of mouth so that women could talk to each other "about their feelings of frustration, unease and dawning of anger about their own stunted potentialities due to their sex.". ³⁰⁰. The post-war development of suburbs and the expansion of universities provided political environments in which women's frustration and rebellion grew. Women's groups met in the suburbs and on campuses discussing aspects of their personal lives which had previously been taboo topics for discussion.³⁰¹. They began to lay the groundwork for the development of feminist theories which could explain the root of these experiences and situations.

²⁹⁹. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, pp.xv-xvi.

³⁰⁰. Barbara Levy, Building a Movement, Sydney Women's Liberation Group, Photocopy, (n.d.), p.1.

³⁰¹. Stevens, A History, p.28.

Mavis Robertson recalls that in December 1969 there was a big anti-Vietnam demonstration which ended at the Town Hall in Sydney.

"Martha Ansara and others suggested that there be a women's contingent. We thought that this was a bit suspect partly because people like me who worked closely with husband and child, went to these things together so that if one got arrested, the other would be with the child. We compromised with Martha. Yes, we'd have the women's contingent but we'd also have a discussion about the women's movement."³⁰².

A leaflet was distributed at the Town Hall which called for a meeting of women to be held in early January. This meeting was held in the old USSR Friendship Society rooms in Druitt Street, and it was a big meeting.³⁰³. Mavis recalls:

"Martha Ansara and Barbara Levy gave 'speak outs' about how they were feeling. Lots of women thought that this was very peculiar and some of the older women were alienated by it all, but we were also impressed by the openness of it. Somehow the chords were being struck.

³⁰². Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

³⁰³. Ibid.

I went to the meeting and found it very liberating. All the things that were in my heart; all the things that I hated, that upset and distressed me seemed to have a logical explanation at last.".³⁰⁴.

The emergence of the women's liberation movement in Australia coincided with the period of Communist Party history when the leadership was undertaking a quest for a visionary resurrection. The socialist project in Australia required new life. A new revolutionary vision was essential for a Party which was experiencing political marginalism particularly within the Australian industrial context but also at a local political and social level. It was also essential for a Party which was endeavouring to critically analyse its political heritage and replace some of the old praxis with a new Marxist theory.

Within this quest, some Party leaders could accept the necessity for and advantages in endeavouring to understand the polemics of women's liberation. This was not however a unified view within the Party or the membership and the growing relationship between the Party and the women's movement provided a context for inner Party political antagonisms.³⁰⁵.

However, from 1969 onwards many Communist women began to work

³⁰⁴. Ibid.

³⁰⁵. See for example, Brown, The Communist Movement, p.258.

towards developing a positive relationship between the Party and the movement, demanding in the Party that they be able to participate in the movement independently of Party organisation; assisting in the development of a socialist feminist theoretical perspective and quickly becoming involved in a variety of women's liberation social, cultural and political activities.

In 1971 there was a meeting of a pre-Sydney District Conference working group at which the following issues were discussed: the need for the Party to have a clear view about what is oppressive to women; re-educating people to change the ideas they have come to accept about women's role; what the Communist Party attitude should be towards the women's liberation movement and towards Communist Party women in the movement.³⁰⁶

Many women members of the Communist Party who dived straight into the women's liberation movement, recognised that the issues being raised and discussed, and the debates being fought out by women's liberation were as applicable to a political organisation such as the Communist Party, as they were to any number of political institutions and organisations in Australia.

³⁰⁶. First meeting of the pre-Conference working group, 13th December 1971, in preparation for the CPA Sydney District Conference to be held in 1972, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

"Women's liberation has become the subject of many gimmicky headlines in the mass media on the basis of some unusual activities in the United States, Western Europe and Australia. But what does it signify to the revolutionary movement for socialist liberation? Is it a bourgeois cross-current disrupting the class struggle? Or a new reassertion of women's long struggle for emancipation from their double exploitation? Has the Left anything to learn from it?".³⁰⁷

Within a theoretical framework it was not difficult for the Communist Party to accept liberation politics. Lenin had defined such a framework and acknowledgment of the politics of liberation movements within the context of imperialist struggles had a long history in Communist Parties. Such Parties supported Lenin's view that:

"The ice has been broken in every corner of the world.

Nothing can stop the tide of the peoples' liberation from the imperialist yoke and the liberation of working men and women from the yoke of capital."³⁰⁸.

³⁰⁷. "Women's Liberation, the CPA and You", Tribune, (February 10th, 1971), pp.6-7.

³⁰⁸. V.I., Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 32, (Moscow, 1980 ed.), p.162.

The link between fighting imperialism and capitalism through liberation politics was clear and the Communist Party of Australia had customarily acknowledged such a view in its documents:

"The Communist Party at all times upholds the right of the peoples of Papua, New Guinea and other Pacific territories to full national independence and political and economic self-determination."³⁰⁹.

The imperialist context for taking up liberation issues was extended by the civil rights movement which broadened the definition of liberation. This was further extended by the student movement which redefined such politics within an anti-authoritarian framework.

When Communist women demanded 'liberation' however, this challenged not only the traditional Communist framework of liberation politics, it also challenged the orthodox Communist Party view of socialism as the deliverer of women's equality and freedom. The real challenge was to the socialist tradition which had placed women second on the agenda of the socialist project.

Whilst there was early Party support for many of the issues being raised within the women's movement and for some

³⁰⁹. Australia's Way Forward, p.32.

political agendas which were brought into the Party by Communist women active in the movement, some initial Party responses to the polemics of women's liberation ranged from sexist scepticism to outright antagonism.

"There was name calling first of all and the biggest sin was being a feminist. There was a diatribe against feminism. We would be told: 'You're being feminists and this isn't what we're on about'.".³¹⁰

This antagonism reflected different tensions which existed in the Party over a range of issues involved in the search for a new way forward. This was particularly the situation prior to the 1970-71 split where there were differences within the Party over political and ideological issues. Some of these antagonisms and differences were fought out in the Union of Australian Women, established by the Communist Party in 1950, with the primary role of undertaking and organising Party 'work among women'. Some UAW members could not accept either the changes which the Party was making to its political programs nor the Party's positive response to the women's movement.

In 1969 the Communist Party organised a Left Action Conference. This conference was aimed at drawing closer links

³¹⁰. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

between the Party and the New Left, particularly youth.³¹¹ There was some disagreement within the UAW about attending such a conference. Alice Hughes commented on this:

"I don't know who is kidding who when some Communist women in the national leadership of the UAW at the present time, who gave as their reason for its non-participation at a national level in the Left Action Conference ...as being that the UAW could not be considered part of the left."³¹²

In another report Alice Hughes outlines the disagreements which were appearing within the UAW:

"A major difference is whether the UAW should do more about working women, women's status, and the rights of women or whether the main emphasis should be placed on housewives - where should its base be?

Unfortunately for our Party and the mass movement, the main comrades in the national leadership of the UAW are those who oppose the general line of the Party as laid down at the 22nd Congress. I believe

³¹¹. O, Lincoln, Into the Mainstream, p.143.

³¹². Alice Hughes, "Traditional Women's Organisation and the Left", Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

this lies at the basis of these problems.".³¹³

Sally Bowen recalls that at a UAW Conference held in Wollongong in 1970 there were sharp disagreements about the militant way women had demonstrated a short time beforehand in Canberra for the release of Louis Christophedes, who had been gaoled for failing to register for national service.

"Some women in the UAW were outraged that women could act in that way. They didn't agree with radicalism.".³¹⁴.

Many of the women in the UAW disagreed politically and ideologically with many of the issues being raised in the women's liberation movement, and they disagreed when the Communist Party began to support some of these issues and place them on the Party's political agendas.

Laurie Aarons describes some of the tensions which existed pre-split and comments on the effect of the split itself:

"There was a feeling amongst some people that we were too tolerant, and gave into the women. Other

³¹³. Alice Hughes, "Report to Women's Cadres Meeting August 16th 1970, Brisbane, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

³¹⁴. Interview with Sally Bowen, November 1987.

people would say: 'If you don't do something about the demands of the women, all the women will leave the Party'.

A lot of women didn't agree with many of the issues being raised and expressed themselves quite forcefully. When the division took place in 1970-71, most of the conservative women had already left, at least about 80% had left. So the argument was primarily between the women supporters of the women's liberation movement in the party, and men. Those women who remained in the Party were mainly pretty militant women liberationists."³¹⁵

Those 'pretty militant women liberationists' fought to have discussions and debates within the Party on a number of issues which were being raised within the women's movement. In this endeavour they were highly successful. During the 1970s there were many Party discussions on such issues and both the Party's political agendas and public documents reflect the successful work of these women members. One example of this success was the adoption and continual debate on the Party's document Women and Social Liberation, first debated in the Party at its 22nd Congress held in 1970 and subsequently adopted in 1974.

There were a number of factors which contributed to the

³¹⁵. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

struggle involved to achieve this success. One factor has been briefly discussed above when referring to the UAW. Although many women who were opposed to the issues being raised and the methods being used in the women's movement left the Party with the split, there were still some differences of opinion in the Party over 'the woman question'. In many respects this was a debate over the orthodox Communist position on 'work among women', which perceived equality for women within a traditional political and social framework which accepted women's gendered and stereotyped roles in the private and public spheres.

"The Communist Party had very orthodox views on the women's movement and they promoted the UAW. The promotion of 'work among women' was all to do with the Communist Party wanting to follow the orthodox international model without thinking too much about it.".³¹⁶

It was not possible to simply and instantly discard this heritage. It had to be analysed for its deficiencies and replaced by a more appropriate and accurate ideological framework. Such an analysis finally led to a necessary rejection of past Communist practices and views about women's roles, functions, duties and issues within the socialist project.

³¹⁶. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

Within the influences of Stalinism and the parameters of the Australian labour movement, the orthodox view on women was defined within certain sexist ideological convictions:

"On IWD the thoughts of Australian women turn to issues of interest to every woman and mother. Like Mother's Day, IWD is a day to honour women in all lands.".³¹⁷.

These convictions were reflected within the Union of Australian Women. In a leaflet published in 1971 the UAW put forward the following platform, calling for:

- a living wage to adequately care for a family on a modern standard with proper housing;
- controlled prices and better quality goods;
- equal pay, status and opportunity for women with suitable hours for working mothers."³¹⁸.

In the same year the following New Year speech by Brezhnev appeared in Moscow News. Brezhnev thanked:

"the workers in plants, factories, mines, on

³¹⁷. Communist Party of Australia script for the IWD March, 1968, CPA Records, Box 74, Mitchell Library.

³¹⁸. Leaflet advertising the Union of Australian Women, 1971, CPA Records, Box 70, Mitchell Library.

construction projects, collectives and state farms,
and workers in science and culture;

Soviet women who have won the profound gratitude
and respect for their great work and maternal care
for the growing generation;

the youths and girls who continue the revolutionary
traditions."³¹⁹

Not only is there a similar ideological thread running through
the above three quotations, but also, the format of the
Brezhnev speech, acknowledging firstly industrial workers,
then women and then youth, is very reminiscent of pre- 1967
Communist Party of Australia documents.

The antagonisms within the Party over this traditional view
on 'the woman question' were played out within inner Party
tensions and differences towards the newly emerging women's
liberation movement which were present pre-split. After 1971,
the conventional Communist view on the 'woman question' was
still espoused by the Socialist Party of Australia which
carried forward the UAW line on this issue.

"The SPA holds the view that it is not possible to
achieve full equality under capitalism, although

³¹⁹. Leonid Brezhnev, "New Year Speech", Moscow News, (9th
January 1971).

certain gains can be won. Basic equality can only be achieved with the winning of socialism and with the working class taking power and ending capitalist exploitation. The establishment of a socialist society is impossible without the united struggle of the working class which means the unity of men and women. To project the view that men are the main enemy is to assist capitalism divide the working class and to stifle not only the achieving of socialism, but the liberation of women."³²⁰

Women liberationists in the Communist Party were not only challenging this view, and the tenet that socialism was the answer to the 'woman question', they were also endeavouring to establish a current praxis which would enable women to participate equally in both the road to socialism and in a socialist society when achieved. They were stating that it was not good enough for women to have to wait for the revolution, and that the Party needed to develop real equality in its methods of work to achieve the revolution.

This was not only the view of Australian Communist women. There was a strong link between women in the Australian and British Communist Parties about the issues being raised and their proposed solutions. Such links continued the well established relationship which existed between the Party in

³²⁰. Ina Heidtman, "Sixty Years of Struggle by Communist Women", Australian Marxist Review, n.s., No. 4, (Oct. 1980), pp.35-36.

Australia and Communist Parties in other parts of the world.

"The subordination of women in society as a whole could be reflected in revolutionary organisations. Many revolutionary men were not able to cast off a deep contempt for women, when they became socialists. They didn't apply their other ideas to women.

This was one of the great unresolved dilemmas and it was to be debated fiercely throughout the revolutionary movements as part of the continuing question of women's emancipation."³²¹

The orthodox Communist view on women involved a program which Barbara Ehrenreich indicates was passed down to Communist Parties from the nineteenth century. This socialist program included the view that woman would be granted libertarian equality through legislation involving divorce and possession of property, and also that women needed to be incorporated into social production. "Through the combination of democratic rights and integration into production, it was thought that no obstacles to women's full participation in political life would remain, and sexual equality would be achieved."³²²

³²¹. Rowbotham, Women, Resistance, p.77.

³²². Barbara Ehrenreich, "Contemporary Feminism and Socialist Movements", Australian Left Review, No. 63, (March 1978), p.8.

Such a process had been temporarily put into place in early post-revolutionary days in the Soviet Union. The knowledge that revolutionary and progressive legislation had been adopted in the Soviet Union inspired Australian Communists to develop a vision of what a socialist society could achieve for women. The post-1956 acknowledgment of the disastrous demise and dismantling of this legislation under Stalin had only slightly dimmed this vision until the effects of the women's liberation movement necessitated its total re-appraisal.

A number of Communist Party women took up the issues and debates about a new way forward for women. The attempt was to work for a way forward which would enable women to achieve political, social and economic equality within a socialist society. Mavis Robertson commented that "the fact remains that when revolutionaries confine themselves within the terms of the system and refuse to make a total analysis of their situation they inevitably fall into reformist practice with reformist results."³²³.

The practice of 'confining themselves within the terms of the system' was vigorously taken up by women in the Party over such issues as the family, sex stereotyped roles for men and women in the Party and the question of gender. These issues are further explored in following chapters.

Joyce Stevens commented:

³²³. Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.8.

"Feminism has provided important new insights into how ideology and authoritarianism are formed and reinforced in the family, the nature of 'women's work', sexual repression, and how it is possible to change ideas on a mass scale. An integral part of this has been the setting up of alternatives now, in personal and public life.".³²⁴

Other Communist women criticised the legacy of international communist views on the role of women in society and the ways in which the Party in Australia had unquestioningly adopted the Stalinist line on this issue. Stella Nord raised this question by commenting on the implications of the Party's work in the UAW. Stella noted that the leadership positions in the UAW were dominated by Communist women and that this led to narrowness and isolation of Communist women from non-Party women. "In that period Communist women in progressive women's organisations were making the same sectarian mistakes as Communists in trade unions."³²⁵.

Carol Aarons wrote an article in Praxis which analysed the position of women in Communist countries. The article noted that:

"After 56 years (in the Soviet Union) there has

³²⁴. Joyce Stevens, "Some Questions on the Future of the Women's Movement", Scarlet Woman, No. 5., (March 1977), p.4.

³²⁵. Nord, "Communists and Radical Women's Organisations", CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

never been a woman President, Premier, Party Secretary of the Central Committee.

It seems to me there is a general lack of development of creative Marxism in the socialist based countries. This applies particularly to women and their social liberation. No real Marxist attempt has been made to analyse the position of women and the family...This, when the women's liberation movement is making strides (however diversified) in many countries of the Western world; when women are beginning to study the source of their oppression and are striving to find ways to break out of their bondage."³²⁶.

Such criticisms were not uniformly agreed to within the Party. Some members saw such statements as those quoted above as unnecessary, provocative and historically inaccurate. In the December 1970-January 1971 issue of Australian Left Review, Judy Gillett and Betty Fisher, Communist Party activists in Adelaide, wrote an article entitled "Paternalism and the CPA". The authors maintained that:

"The indulgent complacency within which a paternalistic society traps and chains women's consciousness is reflected in the totality of the

³²⁶. Carol Aarons, "Women and Socialism", Praxis, No.2, (March, 1974), p.51.

CPA's assignment of roles with its ranks - by the methods of work over the years which encompass its attempt to state a revolutionary position regarding women's place in society - and its failure, so far, to do this."³²⁷.

To which Ted Bacon made a reply in the March 1971 issue of the same journal. Bacon maintained that the Party's constitution "has always explicitly accorded equal rights to all members, male and female."³²⁸ He further noted that an amount of organisational and financial effort had gone into enabling women to participate equally within educational processes in the Party and was adamant about the 'major political - not merely menial' role that women played in the Party. Whilst Bacon acknowledges that paternalism does exist as a barrier to the realisation of full rights for women in Australia, including in the CPA, he also maintains that:

"Despite the sweeping charges made by the joint authors of the article 'Paternalism and the CPA', there have always been, and still are, not a few male CPA members who have given a lot of attention, both theoretical and practical, to the problems of

³²⁷. Judy Gillett and Betty Fisher, "Paternalism and the CPA", Australian Left Review, (December 1970-January, 1971), p.39.

³²⁸. Ted Bacon, "Women's Liberation and the CP", Australian Left Review, (March 1971), p.32.

women's liberation.". ³²⁹

Bacon's arguments did not acknowledge the issues being raised by socialist feminists about the complexities of gender, the sexual division of labour and the ideology of the family.

Within the traditional Australian social view of women and their place in society, there is no doubt that the Communist Party and its position on and encouragement of the activities of Communist women was ahead of its time.

"The Party had always had views about women's rights. One of the attractive things about the Party was that it was an organisation that looked at a range of social issues. It didn't just look at class issues, but it also involved itself, and supported and promoted an organisation that looked at women's issues and rights. In the same way the Communist Party also had a view on and was prepared to be active around, and get its members to be active around aboriginal rights and issues when no other political organisation was doing anything about such issues.". ³³⁰

However, once the traditional context in which these activities took place is analysed, the conclusion can only be

³²⁹. Ibid.

³³⁰. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

that the Party upheld paternalistic practices which were cemented by sexist attitudes to women.

It was this sexism which was also another factor which contributed to the antagonisms within the Party over its relationship to the women's liberation movement.

Reg Wilding recalls the discussion which took place at a special meeting of the National Committee convened in the early 1970s to discuss the women's movement.

"Joyce and Mavis had raised issues about women in the Party and the lack of representation of these issues in the Party itself. All the men got stuck into the debate, although we didn't really know what it was about. The women were challenging things in the Party and they knew their subject. The men didn't. We were still back in the dark days and we didn't understand the importance of the feminist movement." ³³¹

Tensions in the Party were also the result of generational differences, which remained in the Party even after the split. Those women who remained in the Communist Party represented a cross section of political eras. "There were two different generations of women with very different ideas which became

³³¹. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

sharply developed with the women's liberation movement.".³³².

Party women such as Joan Goodwin and Jean Bailey, who had been involved in the Party for many years and had been actively encouraged to be publically involved in Party activities have different views on the Party's heritage for women. These women had seen the strengths of Party women who had organised both politically and socially for the Communist Party, particularly during the War years and during the hard times of the anti-Communist 1950s.

Joan Goodwin maintains that the women liberationists in the Party were "too strident".³³³. Joan Goodwin comments further that there were things that needed changing in the Party but that some women overstressed these issues. "There is a need to persuade people - to recognise that there are other ways of looking at things.".³³⁴

Jean Bailey recounts stories about the involvement of Communist women in a variety of local community activities in the Newcastle area, from selling Tribune, to working around the New Theatre, peace work, organising and leafleting for May Day and International Women's Day, working with newly arrived migrants to the area, assisting residents in floods and raising all kinds of protests and demonstrations about

³³². Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

³³³. Interview with Joan Goodwin, June 1987.

³³⁴. Ibid.

numerous local issues.³³⁵. Jean Bailey remembers this period as a time when "We had a great feeling of comradeship in those days, we were like a family. We did have arguments and personality clashes, it wasn't looking through rose tinted glasses. But when the Party split it ruined a lot of things.".³³⁶.

Jean Bailey comments that the feminists of the 1970s thought that they had started it all. This was reflected in the Party by a view which rejected all those things which had been done before the split, because those who remained in the Communist Party wanted desperately to make a public statement that the post-split Party had rid itself of stalinism. Of the activities of many of the older women Jean comments that "All this past history has disappeared and the younger members don't know about it.".³³⁷.

The generational tension was a product of the necessity of the Party to be genuinely de-stalinised but this caused a dilemma for the older women who had been active in and helped the Party achieve great things when the Party had been solidly tied to the Soviet model.

Alice Hughes summed up the differences which were being debated in the Party during 1970.

³³⁵. Interview with Jean Bailey and Jean Davidson, May 1987.

³³⁶. Interview with Jean Bailey, May 1987.

³³⁷. Ibid.

"In the ideological debate we hear various points of view about these [women's liberation] groups such as they are too way-out or radical to be of any consequence in organising women for socialist change. Therefore there is no need to pay any attention to them - or they are seen by some comrades as a challenge to the UAW- or to put it more simply, they pose the idea that the UAW is and will be the only militant or radical group that will develop among women."³³⁸.

The growing relationship between the movement and the Party involved a two-way effect and can be seen to have been putting the principle of a 'coalition of the left' adopted by the Party in 1967, into practice. Joyce Stevens comments on the complex ways in which this two-way process developed:

"For the first five years of the women's liberation movement I felt that I was really schizophrenic. In the women's movement you had to defend the idea that you couldn't take women's politics and divorce it from other social considerations. In the Party you had to keep on saying to people, 'class isn't the be all and end all of everything'. It was as if your polemics were weighted in different directions

³³⁸. Hughes, "Report to Women Cadres Meeting", p.1., CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

depending upon where you were.".³³⁹

It is not the intention here to give a detailed history of the women's liberation movement in Sydney or other parts of Australia. It is necessary, however, to outline in general terms the ideological issues raised by the movement so that an investigation of the specific influences of the movement on the Party can be undertaken.

Although the terms 'women's movement' is used generically, there were many different views within the movement about the theory and practice of women's liberation. The argument here is that the movement provided an environment and a context in which Party women were encouraged to debate and develop ideas about women's oppression.

The women's movement was to develop different definitions of 'revolution' and 'socialism' and these stimulated Communist women to develop innovative views of what a socialist society might look like.

"The women's movement has much to contribute to overcome the problems which hold back the growth of [socialist] organisation...

[It] has made important insights which are directly relevant to how we organise as socialists...[It]

³³⁹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

has radically extended the scope of politics.".³⁴⁰

This vision was to be a challenge to that imagined by some in the Party. The women's liberation challenge assisted in a re-definition of the Party's 'battle of ideas', where the emphasis was on the battle taking place within a socialist feminist context. Coote and Campbell comment that socialist feminists saw their feminism as the human face of socialism.³⁴¹ Communist women active in the women's movement pointed to sexist and patriarchal practices in the Party. The feminist vision being developed was based on a view of a society which would be non-sexist, non-patriarchal and liberating. It was also based on the premise that if such a praxis was not achieved before the socialist revolution took place, any such revolution could not be socialist.

As the women's liberation movement developed, it attracted women from different economic, social and political backgrounds and as the struggles took place, feminists endeavoured to develop the practice into a feminist theory. Despite both theoretical and practical differences which developed within the women's movement, the movement itself had a profound influence on the Communist Party. The women's movement endeavoured to replace male dominated ideas and structures with those which exposed the sexism which

³⁴⁰. Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, Beyond the Fragments, Pp.12-13.

³⁴¹. Coote and Campbell, p.31.

prevailed, and also created environments compatible with and encouraging to the participation of women.

"At first, like the black movement, women became aware of the tip of the iceberg, the culture and consciousness of capitalist society. The distortion in the Marxist tradition which tended to identify the material world only with the conditions of commodity production and the social relations which came directly from work on the cash-nexus, held back understanding of the interaction between commodity production and other aspects of life under capitalism.".³⁴²

The first meetings of women in Sydney in which Communist women were active, brought together women who discussed their oppression, frustration, exploitation, and domination.³⁴³. Such meetings raised women's consciousness about the ideology and hegemony of a culture which entrenched, defined and redefined women as the second sex.

Internationally, the women's movement took up similar issues and debates about women's oppression and many of these issues were subsequently taken up by feminists in Australia. Barbara Ehrenreich explains why this was the case:

³⁴². Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.xv.

³⁴³. Levy, p.1.

"...feminism offers important insights into relations of domination and submission which exist between other social groups, such as classes and ethnic groups. Second, by its insistence on a politics which embraces both the 'private' and the political-economic sphere, feminism points the way to a more comprehensive socialist politics for the industrial capitalist countries."³⁴⁴

The movement in Australia adopted slogans for women's liberation which were to become universal. 'Sisterhood is Powerful', 'The Personal is Political', 'Don't Agonise, Organise', and 'Women of the World Unite'. In some ways it was reminiscent of the internationalism of the One Big Union of decades before. Women called themselves radical and feminists and they openly invited and incited all women to rebel and to join the mass movement whose basic aims involved women acting for their own liberation - summed up best by the slogan "We invite all women to rebellion".

Women's liberation groups were formed where women could explore and discuss their experiences, particularly their personal experiences, in environments where men were excluded. Judy Gillett commented:

"The women's liberation umbrella is a wide one and should be able to embrace all attitudes reflected

³⁴⁴. Ehrenreich, p.13.

in the movement. The very revolutionary ideals of many radical feminists is important for the movement and they have much to offer in tactics of confrontation, analysis, and challenge..."³⁴⁵.

This umbrella enabled women from a variety of socio-economic and political backgrounds to discover that there was a circumstantial commonality to their oppression and situation within society.

Women liberationists challenged status quo history and revealed the position of the invisibility of women within historical contexts which overflowed with patriarchal observances and analyses of the past. Such recordings succeeded in creating facts, explanations and stories which either defined women within a traditional secondary role or ignored the actions, words and hopes of women altogether. Feminists attempted to restore women to their rightful place in history.³⁴⁶.

The movement re-discovered earlier feminists, including those active in the previous century, especially the suffragettes and analysed more clearly the historical importance of these women. At the same time an understanding was gained of the successes and failures of the previous wave of feminism and

³⁴⁵. Judy Gillett, "Is there Room for us all Under the Umbrella?", Join Hands, (August 1972), p.11.

³⁴⁶. For a detailed discussion of these issues see Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden from History.

the implications of these for the current movement. Joyce Stevens notes that the suffragettes provided the largest and most significant international women's movement prior to the 1970s.³⁴⁷ However, differences within the suffragettes movement about methods of organisation, tactics to be adopted and the presentation of the aims of the movement led to a split in the early women's movement.³⁴⁸

The actions of the liberation movement were not simply about meetings and discussions. A new kind of direct action began to take place - action not seen since the days of the suffragettes. Women took to the streets in vast numbers marching and demonstrating over such issues as abortion, equal rights, equal pay, against discrimination, and for justice and equity.³⁴⁹

All of these activities had an effect on women in the Communist Party and additionally, there were specific ideas and practices in the women's liberation movement which had a profound effect on the Party and which provided material for many heated debates within the Party. Some issues had more influence than others on the theory and practice of the Party, and these will be examined more closely. It is necessary to add however, that whilst the women's movement as a whole

³⁴⁷. Stevens, Taking, p.14.

³⁴⁸. Ibid.

³⁴⁹. See Joyce Stevens, A History of International Women's Day for a detailed discussion.

impacted upon the Party, to separate out these influences without then integrating them into a consummate political and social perspective is to suggest an historical artificiality which skews the political reality.

The relationship between the Party and the movement was an organic one developed and moulded by the women who were active in both political contexts and the outcomes, in some respects of a doctrinaire nature, were also invaluablely empirical.

"Involvement in the women's liberation movement debates and campaigns was an invaluable experience for Communist women. It was there that many of us learnt to see the world through our own eyes. The women's liberation movement challenged the private concept of family life and the relationship between capitalism and the oppression of women had a deep effect on the Party."³⁵⁰.

Joyce Stevens comments that the effect of the women's movement on the Party was like a scatter bomb. This effect was particularly in relation to the personal issues and experiences that women in the Party had experienced.

"These experiences tended to make us want to change everything at one time. I suppose that the first

³⁵⁰. Woman's Place is Everywhere. The Women's Liberation Movement in Victoria. (n.d.), CPA Records, Box 70, Mitchell Library.

couple of years were passionate, traumatic, nerve-racking, exhausting years when people put labels like 'Better dead than wed' and 'This exploits women' over typewriters and insisted that women have the right to meet on their own - a whole range of things".³⁵¹

Joyce Stevens comments further that initially women in the Party endeavoured to use traditional Marxism as support for the activities and issues being taken up by Party women involved in the women's movement:

"In terms of the political work of the Party, at first we tried to show that there were some strands in Marxism that gave the green light to do some of the things that the women's movement was on about".³⁵².

Within the theoretical perspective, the movement challenged the traditional political economy theory of the Party, and assisted in the development of a socialist feminist theory. The orthodox political economy of international Communism emphasised wages, industry, and economic relations and ignored or relegated to secondary importance social relations, personal politics and women's unpaid domestic work.

³⁵¹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

³⁵². Ibid.

"We began to question whether or not wages were also the first thing for women...we found that women were more concerned about the way that they were treated and made to feel inferior. So while on the one hand we pursued some of the traditional interests of the Party, on the other we were starting to try and apply some of the sort of feminism that we were getting out of the women's movement.".³⁵³

However, there were two areas of political influence on the Party, each represented by a slogan, which were to cause heated debate and to change the political and social lives of women in the Communist Party. The first area was represented by 'The Personal is Political' and the second by 'Separate to Integrate'. Each of these will be dealt with more specifically in subsequent chapters but some introductory remarks will be made about the importance of the issues raised by the women's movement within the parameters of these polemics.

Some Specifics

'The Personal is Political' not only challenged the theoretical perspective of the Party that politics was simply and uniquely confined to the public sphere of activity, it also enabled women to raise, explore and analyse their personal lives and make connections between the public and

³⁵³. Ibid

private spheres within the framework of exploitation.

Joyce Stevens describes the Women's Commission, held in Sydney in 1973:

"The commission itself...was in many ways a watershed for the Sydney movement. It was an exercise in mass consciousness raising about areas of women's lives which had hitherto been ignored and closeted. One hundred and thirty-eight women, many of whom had been unable to reveal physical and sexual assaults to their closest friends or family, rose to talk, some making their debut in public speaking as well.

Women sat taut, breathlessly silent as speakers struggled to overcome grief and pain. Some sat alongside the speakers, holding their hands, caressing arms and legs in silent support and sisterhood."³⁵⁴.

'Personal is political' challenged the prevailing view that the divide between women's public and private lives was legitimate. It demanded acknowledgment that what were called 'personal problems' often had their roots in the political system which oppresses women. Vogel expresses this point by stating that "socialist feminists concern with psychological

³⁵⁴. Stevens, A History, p.41.

and ideological issues"³⁵⁵ challenges and opposes the crude economic determinist view of women's position, a view which Vogel insists is "common within the socialist movement".³⁵⁶.

These points were raised by feminists particularly in relation to women's position in the family and to the issues of sexuality. The social construction of gender and the concomitant role stereotyping in which women, both in private and public work areas, had been placed were vehemently challenged by women who demanded that the personal is political.

"Feminists have also, and perhaps most importantly, restated for socialists the role of consciousness, have shown simply but profoundly, how advanced capitalism can ensure a form of socialisation which condemns women, children and men into roles of incomplete human beings and underlined the force of a changed consciousness."³⁵⁷

The women's movement challenged the view that the private life of the family was sacrosanct and that whatever happened to women within this domestic sphere was nobody else's business. It challenged the restricted and restricting Marxist

³⁵⁵. Vogel, p.29.

³⁵⁶. Ibid.

³⁵⁷. Mavis Robertson, "Nobody Lives Happily Ever After", Women and Politics Conference, (Canberra, 1975), photocopy, p.18.

construction that only those issues which could be associated with or reduced to economics were valid topics for public debate and discussion.

"Women's liberation promised to go beyond what is regarded as the narrowly economic perspective of socialists in order to revolutionise the deepest and most universal experiences of life - those of 'personal' relationships, love, egotism, sexuality, our inner emotional lives.".³⁵⁸

'Separate to Integrate' raised issues of a different nature within the Party. Women in the movement began to dispute many of the methods involved and tactics used in male-dominated political organisations. They also raised the difficulties women experienced in being able to attend meetings of various political groups given the demands of domestic life. Women pointed to the systemic ways in which women's participation and activity within such groups were rendered extremely difficult. And, women noted that quite often issues of importance to them never reached the agenda.

Women supported the establishment of separate organisational space and environments for women so that there was the availability for women to discuss amongst themselves issues which were thought to be important and pertinent. This would

³⁵⁸ . Eli Zaretsky, Socialist Revolution, January/April, 1973, in Mavis Robertson, "Nobody Lives Happily Ever After", p.17.

enable women to learn to debate and discuss issues without being harassed, put down or ignored by men.

The slogan also represented a concomitant outcome of separating out and that was to take the debates and discussions from the women's groups back into general areas of political activity and to integrate women's views and perspectives on issues into the general political framework of groups and organisations. In this way it was thought that the polemics of the women's movement could be raised in male dominated political organisations and parties. In this way it was hoped that the traditional political and social hegemony could be changed.

'Separate to Integrate' challenged the traditional way in which the 'woman question' was politically organised and dealt with in the Party. 'Work among women' was carried out within a separate political sphere within the Party, it was marginalised and treated as of secondary importance.

"When I joined the Party it had views about women's rights, but it seemed to me that these issues were not really part of the mainstream and that the Party didn't see them as being part of the mainstream. Such issues seemed to be siphoned off into a separate organisation and they weren't the real issues that were taken up by the Party.".³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

It was never equally integrated within the Party's political agendas or given equal status with the work carried out by the boys in industry. Jean Bailey comments that although there was commitment to 'work among women' in the Party, "the Party didn't put so many resources into the UAW, they just said 'you go and do it'".³⁶⁰

This political framework was predicated on some very traditional Communist heritage:

"Our ideological conceptions give rise to principles of organisation. No special organisations for women. A woman Communist is a member of the party just as a man Communist, with equal rights and duties. There can be no difference of opinion on that score. Nevertheless, we must not close our eyes to the fact that the party must have bodies, working groups, commissions, committees, bureaus or whatever you like, whose particular duty it is to arouse the masses of women workers, to bring them into contact with the party, and to keep them under its influence. That, of course, involves systematic work among them."³⁶¹

And although this heritage was subsequently amended to allow

³⁶⁰. Interview with Jean Bailey, May 1987.

³⁶¹. Clara Zetkin, "Lenin on the Woman Question", in The Woman Question, p.90.

for special organisations for women, the idealistic and absolutely incorrect view that men and women were equal in the Party because they were all Communists, anchored an obscured reality of women's inequality and oppression. Within this context separate women's organisations and auxiliaries entrenched the view that women's issues and concerns were peripheral to the 'real' political agendas being set and debated.

The women's movement raised a multiplicity of questions about organisation itself and what forms and methods of organisation suited women.

"IWD as a women's day raised the contentious issues of how women should organise, and men's relationship to that. The women's liberation movement cast new light on 'women only' activity. The movement wanted women to develop their own ideas, strategies and strength away from the patronage and often aggressive misogyny of men."³⁶²

The political perspective on organisation represented by 'Separate to Integrate' included the view of the necessity of an autonomous women's movement.

"For women working in male-oriented movements and

³⁶². Stevens, A History, p.40.

organisation, it involves recognising and struggling against the danger of submerging the interests of women for the 'good of all'. Participation in, preservation and building of the autonomous women's movement is a vital component of this struggle."³⁶³

Joyce Stevens commented that the women's movement should endeavour to unite all women who believe in a radically different society. Joyce maintained that the movement "is essential to preserve for women, the right to be the architects of their own liberation, to develop their own confidence and abilities in a supportive and feminist environment."³⁶⁴

As the women's movement developed the issue of separatism became a fundamental point of debate. Some women held the view that the only successful way in which women could achieve political demands was to remain separate from institutions and organisations which were male dominated. 'Separatism' as an organisational method was to develop into a cultural and lifestyle politic. The implications of this will be examined in a later chapter.

³⁶³. Joyce Stevens, "Feminism and the Class Struggle", Australian Left Review, (July 1975), p.23.

³⁶⁴. Joyce Stevens, "The Autonomous Women's Movement and Revolutionary Social Change", Women and Politics Conference, p.23.

Paula Rix comments that 'separate to integrate' worked both ways:

"because some of the abilities to look at oppressed groups other than the class really did come from the women's movement. The civil rights movement was of course a fore runner to the women's movement so there was an ability to extrapolate and transfer that analysis of oppression to other groups and that eventually flipped back to the Party."³⁶⁵.

In relation to organisational issues, there was a second matter which arose, and which is still being currently debated. That question involved debates about what kind of relationship should develop and exist between movement politics, class politics and political parties.³⁶⁶ This matter arose within the Communist Party as a debate about organisational and political relationships which could exist between the women's movement and the Party itself, although the debate had its roots in the rise of 1960s movement politics, and developed in later years into a debate about the Party's relationship to the rise of the 'new social movements'.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

³⁶⁶. See for example, Ralph Miliband, "New Social Movements and Class Struggle", Chapter 4 in Divided Societies, (Oxford, 1989), pp.95-114.

³⁶⁷. See Australian Socialism. A Proposal for Renewal, CPA Special Congress, (Sydney, 1984).

This relationship has been central to arguments over the past decade about which revolutionary agents can best represent the working class in its struggle to achieve socialism. These alternative agents have been variously identified as "students, women, practitioners of various alternative 'life styles', and popular alliances of one kind or another, more recently the 'new social movements'".³⁶⁸

In the early 1970s however, the debates in the Party were about what influences the movement should have on the theory and practice of the Party, and also on the political agendas for inner Party discussion. This matter was raised at meetings of the Sydney District Women's Collective in early 1973. A meeting held on 30th March 1973 discussed the following ideas from a previous meeting of the Collective:

"The influence of the women's liberation movement
on the Party -

what influence should women's liberation
ideas have on Party structures;

how far should the movement's ideas be
embraced by the Party;

how should the Party reflect the concepts
raised by women's liberation;

³⁶⁸. Wood, The Retreat, p.15.

do the established ideas of socialism cover the concepts raised by women's liberation."³⁶⁹.

Two years prior to this discussion a Party member, E.B. Wilson, had written to Stella Nord and raised the issue of the movement and the Party but within a very different context:

"I am still wondering why women's liberation has to be attached to any political party at all since the record of the men on the left is often even worse than that of any others. In fact I could never understand, ever over the years, why any woman would ever want to become a member of the Communist Party of Australia at any stage since it completely ignored basic women's problems while taking refuge behind theoretical questions."³⁷⁰

The question of what kind of relationship should exist between the Party and the movement also involved debates about the relationship between class and gender and between feminism and Marxism. These matters will also be further explored in chapter 7.

³⁶⁹. Notice of meeting for the Sydney District Women's Collective of the CPA, Friday 30th March, 1973, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

³⁷⁰. Letter from E.B. Wilson to Stella Nord dated 2nd June, 1971, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

The women's liberation movement had a catalytic effect upon Marxist political theory, including Marxist historical analysis and dialectical materialism. One of the ongoing debates within socialist feminism has been the relevance, accuracy and usefulness of a Marxist analysis in relation to the oppression of women.

For one discussion see Women and Revolution ³⁷¹. This book includes a number of essays which endeavour to put forward a critique of Marxism and feminism.

For a view which questions the validity of a Marxist critique to feminism see Christine Delphy, Close to Home. ³⁷². Delphy states that since the emergence of the women's movement in a number of countries including France and the United States, the Marxist view has been represented by politics developed outside the movement. Delphy maintains that this politic has been supported by traditional Communist parties and some other groups on the left, and that militant women in these parties and groups have brought it into the movement. ³⁷³

"Most women in the movement consider this line unsatisfactory, in both theory and strategy for two basic reasons:

³⁷¹. Lydia Sargent, ed., Women and Revolution, (Boston, 1981).

³⁷². Christine Delphy, Close to Home, (London, 1984).

³⁷³. Delphy, p.57.

1. it does not account for the oppression common to all women, and
2. it concentrates, not on the oppression of women, but on the consequences this oppression has for the proletariat.".³⁷⁴

From the beginning of the development of the women's movement, feminists had challenged status quo Marxism. Kate Millet challenged the relevance of class divisions to women; Shilamuth Firestone argued for the substitution of sex for class.³⁷⁵

Over the decades women's liberation polemics have included attempts to marry capitalist patriarchy with socialist feminism³⁷⁶. It has developed a 'woman centred' position which in turn has developed into 'politics of difference' which has adamantly supported an emphasis on the differences between the sexes as a celebration of woman. It has also been informed, although less rigorously by theories about racism.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴. Ibid.

³⁷⁵. A discussion of these debates is contained in Chapter 1 of Michele Barrett, Women's Oppression Today, (London, 1980), pp. 8-41.

³⁷⁶. See Zillah Eisenstein, Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism, (New York, 1979).

³⁷⁷. See Hester Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought, (London, 1984), for a discussion of current feminist theoretical trends and the anthology New French Feminisms, Elaine Marks and Isabell de Courtivron, eds., (New York, 1981), as an example of the influence of French discourse polemics upon theories of women's liberation.

Whilst these debates have maintained a relatively high profile within the theoretical and academic pursuits of the current women's movement, a number of feminists have continued to support a view which, whilst admitting to inadequacies in the Marxist theoretical perspective, maintain that it does provide a framework in which women's oppression and liberation can be discussed. In the 1980s in particular, some socialist feminists have attempted to reclaim Marx and class analysis as tools for analysing women's oppression.³⁷⁸

The arguments put forward by these writers point to the deficiencies in the ways that Marx has been traditionally interpreted, particularly where Marxism has been juxtaposed with the sexism, chauvinism and racism of traditional male society.

"The questions that socialist feminists raise - concerning the roots of women's oppression, the persistence of sex divisions of labor in all areas of social life, the meaning of women's liberation, and the organisation of the struggle against sexism and for socialism - require answers that go beyond what socialist theory has so far been able to provide. All indications suggest, that the socialist theoretical legacy is not only unfinished

³⁷⁸. See Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women and Ellen Meiksins Wood, The Retreat from Class.

but seriously flawed."³⁷⁹

With the influence of the women's liberation movement, Communist women sought to develop a dialectical materialism which included perspectives on women's liberation. Such perspectives acknowledged that there are a multiplicity and a complexity of ways in which women are gendered into oppression, exploitation and invisibility. Socialist feminists began to develop a Marxist analysis which could identify the roots of this gendering process.

Communist women began to apply ideas from the women's movement to their experiences within the Party and to voice the opinion that the Party had its own cultural hegemony, inherited from both the international Communist movement and from the domestic labour movement. This hegemony placed women's politics, work and ideas as secondary, in a Party where theoretically everyone was equal.

Mavis Robertson commented:

"Sexism in the party is all pervasive...

A step towards the eradication of sexism has come with the very effectiveness of the women's movement. It's not much of a start, but it's something when male communists become aware that

³⁷⁹. Vogel, p.33.

they have to be selective now when they tell their sexist jokes." ³⁸⁰.

Communist Liberation

As previously indicated, this chapter puts forward the view that the relationship which developed between the women's movement and the Communist Party was a two-way relationship. As well as Communist women taking ideas and actions from the movement to the Party, these women were also able to importantly and vigorously influence the women's movement.

"Communist women were among the first in the emerging women's movement in Australia. Suddenly our struggle became important, suddenly we weren't prepared to wait until after any revolution, suddenly it became clear that the things that had concerned us had only been peripheral to the really important ('class') struggle." ³⁸¹

In 1973 women in the Party produced a women's Tribune. ³⁸²
All work on issue No. 1803 was undertaken by Party women, and the issue contained a number of discussions about issues

³⁸⁰. Mavis Robertson, Report to the meeting of the National Committee, Communist Party of Australia, held on August 11th and 12th, 1973, p.5, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

³⁸¹. Judy Munday, "Sexism in the Left", Women and Politics Conference, (Canberra, 1975), p.10, photocopy.

³⁸². Tribune, No. 1803, May 8th-14th, 1973.

arising from the women's liberation movement. In 1977, Tribune explored the relationship between Communist women and women's liberation. An article headed "Women's Liberation and the Communist Party", contained an explanation about how Communist women worked in the women's movement. In answer to the question about why Communist women are active in the movement, Tribune stated:

"We want and need the WLM. We've seen it grow and we've been part of that process. We are women by birth and feminists and communists by commitment. We need the women's movement as much as any other women."³⁸³

Communist women had practical skills, developed over a long period of Party history, which were beneficial to the women's movement. "We were people who already had a lot of experience in movement building. We knew how to chair meetings; we knew how to be efficient with time; we could tease out of the mass of things being thrown into the ring, the things that were essential."³⁸⁴

Such practical skills were useful when it came to organising meetings and conferences. Joyce Stevens comments that Communist women had good organisational skills.

³⁸³. "Women's Liberation and the Communist Party", Tribune, (May 25th, 1977), p.7.

³⁸⁴. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

"Now I don't mean by that they had all the answers about the best ways to organise the women's movement. They knew how to organise a march. They knew how to get a conference together. Women in the women's movement offered a feminist critique of some of the ways that the left had done those sorts of things, which Communist women in the main, were quite receptive to, but at the same time, there were lots of women in the women's movement who used to think that conferences just happened."³⁸⁵

In addition to practical and organisational skills, Communist women brought their own militancy into the women's movement. Judy Munday comments that these women played a big role in the movement because they were political people, interested and committed to women's rights. Judy states that Communist women could see the women's movement as an arena in which to voice their dissatisfaction with the rate of progress in achieving women's rights, a dissatisfaction which included working through traditional political organisations, including the Party.³⁸⁶

As indicated earlier in this chapter, Communist women brought their desire to develop a socialist feminist critique of women's oppression to the movement.

³⁸⁵. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

³⁸⁶. Interview with Judy Munday, May 1991.

"I think that Party women tried to be a part of that section of the women's movement that wanted to explore the relations between gender and class in a new context. Wherever women in the Party worked, whether they were working in a special interest group or making films or working somewhere else, they did contribute to that discussion and debate in the Party and the women's movement."³⁸⁷

There were numerous debates and discussions in the Party on a number of issues which arose within the women's liberation movement.

At the 1972 Sydney District Conference a resolution was carried which stated that:

"We recognise that many of the demands traditionally accepted as women's problems should in fact be regarded as issues for the whole radical movement and the Communist Party, and integrated into the general policy of the Communist Party."³⁸⁸

Inner Party work to develop such a policy and to develop a Party program which acknowledged women's exploitation,

³⁸⁷. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

³⁸⁸. Resolution from the Sydney District Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, held on March 3rd-5th, 1972, CPA Records, Box 38, Mitchell Library.

contributed to general debates, discussions and documents which were produced by feminists in Australia. Such discussions and documents contributed to the development of an analysis of women's paid and unpaid work, the ideology of the family and the issues of gender and sexuality.

The first draft Party document on women's liberation was produced for the 1970 Party Congress. This draft was used as the basis for developing a Party program on women's liberation. In the introduction to this document the writers stated that:

"In our view the movement here will not be developed out of an American analysis but from the development of theory and activity relating to actual situations in this country. Such work can generate a force capable of tackling exploitation as it exists and is practised in Australia."³⁸⁹

The women's movement provided an environment in which women from a variety of work areas could participate in questioning and developing issues about women's economic, social and political position within society. Women from offices, factories and from the campuses endeavoured to formulate a theory and practice which could encompass a variety of views about the origins of women's oppression.

³⁸⁹. Women and Social Liberation. A Communist Viewpoint, (1970), Introduction.

"It was part of the women's movement notion that it was necessary to try and develop a situation where everybody wins and no one had to leave or be pushed out. [It] was not always very good at this - but it tried.".³⁹⁰

Such a variety of backgrounds though, was also the basis of both generational and class clashes between women themselves. Such clashes were based on different approaches about how to analyse and how to develop answers to the many issues which were being raised.

Paula Rix comments that "Communist women did a good job in that they were able to drag some issues back to class issues. The women's movement really could go onto some esoteric extremes. Communist women had a good presence and role to play in anchoring some of the activities."³⁹¹.

Trade Unions

From its early days, the Communist Party worked politically through the trade unions. "From its outset in 1920, the Communist Party of Australia was concerned to bring working-class women into the arena of political life."³⁹² The way in which this was to be achieved was by the Party's 'work

³⁹⁰. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

³⁹¹. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

³⁹². Stevens, Taking, p.9.

among women'. As analysed in the previous two chapters of the thesis, this work was undertaken within an economist view of class and a view that male industrial worksites provided the greatest revolutionary potential.

Party work in organising women industrially included the establishment of auxiliaries "to support men's struggles"³⁹³ and 'work among women' in workplaces where there were women trade unionists. Bill Brown comments that there were negative features in Communist policy and practice in the pre and post-war years.³⁹⁴

"In the trade unions the forms of women's organisations were mostly confined to 'women's auxiliary' work rather than mainstream involvement in the shaping and implementation of union policy. Women union leaders were rare. Among exceptions were Flo Davis, NSW Secretary of the Hotel, Club and Restaurant Employees Union and Della (nee Nicholas) Elliott, NSW Assistant Secretary of the Federated Clerks Union. Both were well known communists and played a leading role in the struggle for equal pay."³⁹⁵

Even though the Party's policy on 'work among women'

³⁹³. Ibid., p.10

³⁹⁴. Brown, The Communist Movement, p.258.

³⁹⁵. Ibid.

dominated, in practice many Communist women took active roles in their trade unions and in issues such as equal pay. The parameters of these activities were such that politically and historically much of this work has remained unrecorded. Books such as Audrey Johnson's Bread & Roses are important historical records of these activities.

The anti-Communist battle of the 1950s had repercussions for the Party within trade unions, with the loss of Party leadership in unions such as the Federated Clerks Union. Such losses have had major implications for the political and industrial progress for the predominantly female membership of this union.

Joyce Stevens comments that "only the veterans among us" ³⁹⁶ can remember when ALP bodies in NSW were not dominated by the right-wing. This domination has created problems for the left who work in these unions and labor movements. These problems include the development of policy and the blocking of resources for left wing projects. ³⁹⁷

"For Left women activists it presents even more problems, not only because the Right is hidebound and conservative in industrial relations, but also because of its protection of traditional family

³⁹⁶. Joyce Stevens, Lightening the Load, (Sydney, n.d.), p.25.

³⁹⁷. Ibid.

relations and the sexual division of labor.".³⁹⁸

One account of the kind of battle which progressive women were involved in during the 1950s is provided by Stella Nord, who recounts the fight that right-wing union officials waged against married women in the meat industry union.³⁹⁹

With the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, the role of women in unions, the ways in which women's issues had often been ignored and women's participation in trade unions became the subject of debate. Party women began to challenge the traditional view of 'work among women' and to demand that equal participation not just remain a theory but that the Party support this in practice.

Communist women participated in linking issues of women's oppression in paid and unpaid work.

One such activity was the establishment, by Communist women, of the first working women's group. Joyce Stevens comments that it was not only at a theoretical level that Communist women contributed to debates about class and gender:

"We were also sensitive to the fact that there were

³⁹⁸ . Ibid.

³⁹⁹ . Stella Nord, "Right-wing Union Officials versus Married Women. Australian Meat Industry Employees Union, Queensland Branch, in the 1950s," pp. 430-436, in Elizabeth Windshuttle, ed., Women, Class and History. Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978, (Melbourne, 1980).

women in the women's liberation movement who couldn't really cope with some of the women off the campuses. I found them challenging and even when I thought some of their ideas crackpot, it made me think about things in a way that I hadn't ever done in the Communist Party. But I know that some of the other women who came out of the offices and other jobs, found some of the discussions too esoteric and that's the reason why we set up the working women's group."⁴⁰⁰.

Mavis Robertson comments that the working women's group was able to develop policies and form an important view on working women. Such a view was partly predicated on the knowledge that a majority of women "worked in rotten jobs".⁴⁰¹.

It is not intended to provide a detailed analysis or discussion of the activities of Communist women in trade unions in the 1970s; this is a task beyond the scope of this work. It is however essential to note and discuss the fact that Communist women continued to participate in trade unions and to regard this work as an essential part of socialist activity. It is also important to note the contribution that Communist women made to the debates about women and work which occurred during the 1970s. Such debates were developed through a range of conferences and meetings in which Communist women

⁴⁰⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁴⁰¹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

participated.

The Sydney working women's groups proposed that a women's liberation trade union conference be held in August 28th-29th, 1971. It was suggested that this conference immediately precede the ACTU Congress to be held that year. The issues discussed at the conference dealt with women in unions, the leadership in unions, union structures and the major issue of women joining unions.⁴⁰² During the 1970s a number of such conferences were held, including the alternate trade union women's conference in Sydney in 1973.

Party women also took part in the debate which occurred in the women's services area in the 1980s about whether trade unions were appropriate ways for women to organise industrially. This debate became a site of :

"bitter disagreement between feminists who consider that, as workers, we need award coverage as a tool in the struggle for improved conditions, especially increased government funding - and feminists who believe that award coverage poses too great a risk of co-option of feminist struggle."⁴⁰³

Joyce Stevens traces the history of the Women's Employment

⁴⁰². Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 70, Mitchell Library.

⁴⁰³. Chris Vidal, "Women's Services Need Unions Need Women's Services", Scarlet Woman, No. 16, (Autumn 1983), p.8.

Action Centre (WEAC) ⁴⁰⁴ and discusses the ways in which women have attempted to "organise within and across unions" ⁴⁰⁵ during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Party as a political organisation could also offer practical assistance to women. Such assistance included the provision of space in which women could debate issues and hold meetings and also practical day to day assistance with publications, leaflets, organisation of meetings and conferences and a range of technical assistance which was required in order that the movement could more easily operate.

CONTINUING TENSIONS

The ideas and actions which Communist women brought into the women's movement did not occur without political tensions. Such stresses occurred over ideological issues as well as over practical activities. Mavis Robertson comments that "There's no doubt in my mind that we had a bigger influence than our numbers and that some people resented this." ⁴⁰⁶

When reflecting upon the establishment of the working women's group Joyce Stevens remarked that some people thought that "we set it up because we wanted to have Communist Party hegemony

⁴⁰⁴. Stevens, Lightening, p.7.

⁴⁰⁵. Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

in the women's movement.". ⁴⁰⁷ Such differences about methods of work and how to achieve priorities are part of the political process irrespective of whether the differences take place within a political party or within an organisation or movement.

Communist women brought to the women's movement a mixture of practical skills which had been encouraged and developed over many years in the Party, and they also brought a vision of the kind of Australian society in which they would like to see women participating.

"In general, it will be through struggle and action around the many aspects of women's oppression that the majority of women will come to challenge capitalist and patriarchal values and act for a revolutionary change to a democratic socialist society.". ⁴⁰⁸

This vision was based upon a fundamental view that whatever achievements were attainable within the feminist revolution, there could only be sustained equality and justice within a socialist society.

In its policy document Women and Social Liberation, adopted by the 26th Party Congress held in 1979, the Party stated:

⁴⁰⁷ . Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁴⁰⁸ . Women and Social Liberation, p.6.

"The Women's Liberation Movement has created a widespread recognition among women and some men that women suffer oppression as a sex. This movement has acted as a catalyst to change the political perspectives of many traditional women's organisations and has given rise to an expansion of women's rights, struggles and organisations."⁴⁰⁹

Whilst the movement assisted in changing the perspective of the Party on the 'woman question', Communist women assisted in enriching the definition of women's liberation. This enrichment included bringing to the movement a view that a socialist critique was fundamental to understanding women's oppression. Whilst the women's movement pointed to mandatory changes which had to be made to the traditional communist view about women's political and social position, Communist women challenged the view that women's liberation could be successfully achieved within capitalism.

"The women's movement should aspire to unite all women who stand for a radically different society, and the liberation of women. This movement is essential to preserve for women, the right to be the architects of their own liberation, to develop their own confidence and abilities in a supportive and feminist environment. It can ensure that the struggle against sexism is an integral part of the

⁴⁰⁹. Ibid., p.1.

socialist revolution, before and after the 'great day', until human liberation can become a real possibility.".⁴¹⁰

Tensions also arose between women in the movement and the Party (as well as within the women's movement itself) about the role of and relationship to the Australian Labor Party. This issue became paramount with the election of the Whitlam government in 1972. This win was viewed by some women as a great achievement for women, as it heralded the introduction of a range of legislation which assisted with reforms relevant to women's employment and to women's economic and social position.

The issue of the Labor Party had always been a thorny one for the Communist Party. The relationship between the two parties had veered from an original mutually respectful engagement when the CPA was established, to rocky separation during the 1930s, to bitter sectarianism prior to and after the 1949 Coal Strike. By the late 1960s, the Communist Party was suggesting that it work in a left coalition with the Labor Party, a coalition of a different political kind from that pursued in the 1920s within the 'united front'. By the 1960s the Communist Party was rejecting the united front basis of the vanguard party. By the early 1970s the Communist Party had rejected its vigilant sectarianism of decades before,

⁴¹⁰. Stevens, "The Autonomous Women's Movement and Revolutionary Social Change", p.14.

particularly prevalent during and after the 1949 Coal Strike when "there is no doubt that the Communist Party saw itself as able to undermine and replace the Labor Party",⁴¹¹. but the criticism of Labor as a party of reform and not revolution remained. John Sendy summed up the position in 1971:

"Perhaps the CPA in its currently more realistic and advanced policies in a new political situation still adheres to a sort of ambivalent attitude towards the ALP - on the one hand holding the view that the ALP cannot be 'changed' and on the other encouraging the left in the ALP to make the attempt."⁴¹²

The changes to the Communist Party's view of political work in Australia which had been taking place since the 1960s, and which were marked by a rejection of the arrogance of previous decades, an arrogance which had at its base a view that only the Communist Party had all the answers, were signified by the emphasis on coalition work. A major priority of the Party at the time of the emergence of the women's movement was:

"To develop and invigorate our left coalition concepts by developing discussion about radical left programs between interested Party

⁴¹¹. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

⁴¹². John Sendy, "Socialism and the ALP Left", Australian Left Review, (March 1971), p.13.

members...and others on the Left, especially the best ALP left elements."⁴¹³

Such a desire to work in cooperation with the Labor Party was also a product of the Communist Party's realisation by the early 1970s that the socialist revolution was not just around the corner. In addition, the Party also realised that the possibility of the Communist Party ever reaching the position of being elected into government in Australia was a dream. The halcyon days of Communist electoral victories particularly in local government, were finished. The emphasis was now on building the Left. The Party :

"envisages the building on a united, diverse, revolutionary leadership to the widest strata of working people, a leadership able to utilise the experiences and gains of the advanced sections in developing united action, discussion and understanding of revolutionary strategy through the whole working class."⁴¹⁴.

However, although the emphasis was on building a broad left, entrism into the ALP was rejected as a main strategy, and the Party adopted the view that the building of a strong CPA as

⁴¹³. Minutes of the Communist Party of Australia National Committee meeting held 3rd-4th November, 1973, CPA Records, Box 18, Mitchell Library.

⁴¹⁴. The Left Challenge for the '70s, p.38.

an effective revolutionary structure was mandatory.⁴¹⁵.

At its Congress in 1974, the Communist Party noted that the election of the Whitlam government created "new opportunities and new problems for revolutionaries". The CPA had now to "work out more concretely its independent theoretical positions and politics which challenge capitalist ideas."⁴¹⁶

This Communist Party ambivalence to the Labor Party spilled over to the women's movement. In 1972 Australia was marked by an economic boom which assisted the Labor government's introduction of and support for a number of initiatives beneficial to women. But the onset of a recession from 1974 onwards placed great strains on what the Labor Party perceived it could continue to fund.

In January 1976 there was a national meeting of Communist women held at Minto. The meeting discussed the changed situation where not only was there economic recession but there had also been a political coup. Fraser was now Prime Minister. The meeting analysed the effects of the Labor Party in power:

"The Labor Government's funding of women's movement projects had a two-sided effect. It made possible

⁴¹⁵. Ibid.

⁴¹⁶. Communist Party of Australia, Strategy for Socialism, (1974), in "CPA Documents of the Seventies", p.45.

some activities which had the potential to expand the movement's contact with women, particularly working class women, through shelters, health centres, etc. At the same time, the projects were tied to funding, and it was attempted to confine them to the limitations of the welfare state. The government intended only reforms, i.e. providing immediate remedies for individuals, while the women's movement tried to use the opportunity to organise women around their oppression."⁴¹⁷

There were a number of discussions in the women's movement about the role of the state. This became an issue in the 1970s when, under the Whitlam Labor government, funding was provided to a range of women's services and resource areas. There were benefits but also limitations to the autonomy and politics of the movement as a result of such funding.⁴¹⁸

The Communist Party had endorsed the Marxist-Leninist view that it was essential that within a socialist society the State would be abolished. This perspective had been further informed by the theories of Gramsci but had also been changed and influenced by Eurocommunist views about the role of the State.

⁴¹⁷. "Draft resolution from the National Meeting of Communist Women, Minto, January 1976", Join Hands (March 1976), pp.1-2.

⁴¹⁸. For one discussion of these issues see "Half Way Where?", Scarlet Woman, No.2, (September, 1975), pp.12.15.

"Expansion of state intervention in social life, especially since World War 2 also raises many issues, and the present period of intensified crisis and class struggle has resulted in controversies about revolutionary strategy which involve the state."⁴¹⁹

There were also contradictions here for feminists. On the one hand the intimate relationship between the development of the welfare state and the consolidation of the ideology of the family was clear. On the other hand, women and femocrats defended what was viewed as a positive interventionary role of the state vis a vis legislation and bureaucratic benefits to women.

"Internationally feminists are making use of the state, of governments - local, state and federal - and, in turn, governments and political parties are making use of feminism and feminists. What kind of alliance is this? What are its implications? What frame of reference is appropriate and meaningful to make sense - in the Australian context - of the 'femocrats' who are the most visible category of women embodying (and profiting from) the alliance with the state?"⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹. Eric Aarons, "The State Today", Australian Left Review, (July 1975), p.40.

⁴²⁰. Hester Eisenstein, Gender Shock, (North Sydney, 1991), p.27.

Other tensions began to exist within the Communist Party itself. The question about the kind of relationship which could and should exist between movement politics and the Party came under more intense discussion. With its declining base, the Party needed to analyse where its future membership could be drawn from.

"Such diverse yet related ideas being developed by women's liberation, the Aboriginal and anti-racist solidarity movement, the movements for workers' control and self-management, are all examples of counter-hegemonic ideas which need to be encouraged and developed as an integral challenge to bourgeois ideology."⁴²¹

However, the tensions which began to emerge about the relationship between movements and the Party were to have a significant effect on the theory and ideology of Marxism in later decades and were to provide the basis of disagreements within the Party over what kind of organisation the Party ought to be and over the content of Marxist theory itself.

Paula Rix raises some fundamental concerns about movement politics. Paula remarks that the setting up of the working women's groups was an attempt to look practically at ways to amalgamate a feminist and Marxist analysis. But Paula says:

⁴²¹. Strategy for Socialism, pp.48-9.

"My major criticism of this period is that the bulk of us who were working with the working women's group were struggling to know how to amalgamate those two things. At that time people were saying that a Marxist analysis meant stalinism. So what you tended to do was to get off on issue based things. The dilemma for women in that group, and they exemplified the marriage of the Party and feminism post 1968, was that absence of Marxist analysis".⁴²²

The questions about the relationship between the women's movement and the Communist Party had, by the 1980s, broadened out to a dilemma about where the Party stood in relation to the new social movements and the ideological tensions between class politics and movement politics. This tension had major implications for the socialist project.

In 1972 a front page article in Tribune headed "Women, Freedom and Socialism" stated:

"A deeper struggle facing all the left is to realise that the revolutionary path to a truly liberated socialist society can be successfully marked out only by men and women who have already honestly faced and shaken off the falsely unequal values and attitudes imposed on them by the class

⁴²². Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

society in which they live and work. Their gain will be a great new accession of revolutionary strength, a new quality of human unity and creativity, a new certainty that all humanity can win emancipation in a world-wide socialist society.".⁴²³

This "certainty" gradually diminished within the 1980s international economic, political and social framework which saw the triumph of Thatcherism in England, and a swing to the right in a number of Western Capitalist countries, including Australia. Additionally, uncertainty increased about the viability of Eurocommunist theories. For some Communists there was political confusion about the way forward and about Marxist ideology itself as a means of achieving the socialist vision.

In the 1980s some political theory was developing with the rubric Beyond Marx. As well as pre-figuring the demise of the Communist Party, this has had implications for the development of socialist feminist theory.

"We are led...to ask whether the recurrent emphasis on equality in marxist politics does not, in the final analysis, have the effect, not only of bringing feminisms into line with marxism, but of

⁴²³. "Women, Freedom and Socialism", Tribune, March 9th-16th, 1972, Front-page.

reducing them to a commonness with it. The political and institutional power of marxism is such that any feminism can only be tolerated insofar as it accepts marxism's fundamental premises and modes of thinking. This amounts to a form of subjugation that can never provide the space for developing theories and practices independently."⁴²⁴

The rise of movements such as the women's liberation movement and the decline in the number of members joining and remaining in the Communist Party necessitated a thorough analysis of this situation, which the Party undertook on a continuing basis. However, the hegemony of movement politics was to oust class analysis as the central tenet of Marxist ideology. The traditional communist heritage which the Party quite rightly questioned in 1967 was to be completely rejected and with it went the necessary Marxist historical analysis which was essential to prevent the hegemony of movement politics from subsuming fundamental class analysis.

"Disillusioned by the way in which the socialism of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has developed, and by the many setbacks experienced by left-wing parties in Western Europe, European Marxists have increasingly sought the roots of this failure in

⁴²⁴. Judith Allen, and Paul Patton, eds., Beyond Marxism? Interventions after Marx, (Leichhardt, 1983), p.136.

Marxism itself (historical materialism)." ⁴²⁵

The authors continue by stating that this situation has been reinforced by the development of discourse politics which has resulted in the construction of an eclectic pluralism which has replaced the supposed dogma of Marxism.⁴²⁶

However, in the early 1970s, the influence of the women's movement on the Party and the inspiration which Communist women brought to the movement challenged and renewed both the theory and the practice of the Communist Party and pointed to ways in which a socialist revolution and society could be achieved.

The optimism which marked the early relationship between the Party and the movement was to be marred by many difficult ideological dilemmas. One of the most enduring of these was the Party's inability to discard the essentials of Stalinism and still maintain the essentials of Marxism.

⁴²⁵. Fine, et.al., p.35.

⁴²⁶. Ibid., p.36.

Woman is confronted with the necessity of emancipating herself from emascipation if she really desires to be free.

Emma Goldman, The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation.

CHAPTER 4: DEFINITIONS AND DIALECTICAL DILEMMAS.

Orthodox Definitions.

Internationally, the women's liberation movement challenged the gender bias inherent in definitions in many areas of left and socialist political theory and activity. The women's movement pointed to the denial of women as historical agents, a denial which was the outcome of the patriarchy which imbued trade unions, political parties and organisations, and the left generally. The assertion that definitions were sex blind, and the concomitant attempts to restore a gender balance to those definitions, are some of the most important contributions made by socialist feminists to the development of a Marxist theory and practice.

"[Socialist feminists] have been concerned with understanding the historical development of patriarchy...and with unearthing the patriarchal character of economic class relations.".⁴²⁷

At the basis of the gender bias of definition and fundamental to it, was the male, economist definition of 'working class'. One of the consequences for women of this definition was a material reality which excluded them from the traditional,

⁴²⁷. Coote and Campbell, p.32.

orthodox definition of working class. This definition exalted the blue collar male, predominantly denied the historical and political existence of women as workers and placed women's work firmly in the home within the parameters of 'wife' and 'mother'. As previously discussed, for Communist women, this historical development had its basis in the politics of the traditional male dominated labour movement, and in the Stalinist version of international Communism.

In Australia, as overseas, women in the women's liberation movement deliberately and passionately raised theoretical and practical issues which emanated from this definition, and in the Communist Party women began to challenge similar concerns within the Party. The male, economist definition of working class was an all encompassing gender biased denotation. It marked important areas of political work in the Party. "The only unions that mattered were the heavy industry ones. The Marxist analysis believed that the heavy industries, where there were strong unions, would be the areas which would lead to the revolution. Heavy industry had to be taken over because it would be the basis of socialism."⁴²⁸. In the main, both the employees in heavy industries and the unions which represented them were male dominated.

The definition had organisational implications. Equality of representation of women in left political organisations, including the Communist Party, reflected a horizontal bias

⁴²⁸. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

where, irrespective of the total number of women members in the organisation, women representatives were concentrated at the lower levels, and were rarely elected as representatives at the higher levels where power and decision making were most evident.

This horizontal organisational structure rendered women's participation as unequal, peripheral and marginal. Where women did actively participate, it was most often within the gender structured and stereotypical women's work which included secretarial, catering and support duties. Within political parties and organisations, such an unequal position for women was gratuitously and unequivocally sustained, and until the women's liberation movement, remained substantially unchallenged, because the position was supported by a definition of working class which maintained a number of tenets:

a) as men are the breadwinners, their work is critical to the household economy and a women's place is to support her husband by making the domestic environment as pleasant as possible for him, particularly as he works in the heavy industry area which requires a relaxing and pressure free domestic milieu as a reward for work carried out in dirty, noisy and unpleasant surroundings.

b) men's work is critical to the overall social

economy, and political and economic agendas are therefore defined by issues pertinent to this work.

c) the existence of left political organisations such as parties and trade unions is to ensure that such agendas support the important and essential industrial issues at the heart of this male, blue collar working class.

"Men and women are brought up for a different position in the labour force; the man for the world of work, the woman for the family...For a man the social relations and values of commodity production predominate and the home is a retreat into intimacy.".⁴²⁹.

Feminists demanded that women be liberated from the chains of this masculine delineation which restricted them to stereotyped work patterns and prevented them from actively and in their own capacities, establishing and influencing political, social and economic agendas within organisations which purported to represent them.

As indicated in the earlier chapter, Heritage and Legacy, the Communist Party generally embraced such socially acceptable aphorisms and incorporated them into Party praxis, although

⁴²⁹. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.61.

as also indicated in Crossroads and Cracked Pathways, there had been an inner Party challenge to this praxis by the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the male, economist definition of working class was so entrenched within the theory and practice of the Party, that to dislodge it, communist women had to undertake a revolutionary struggle of their own, a struggle which required enchaining chauvinism, paralysing patriarchy and promoting a new Marxist political praxis.

Mavis Robertson in a report to a meeting of the National Committee of the Party, held in August 1973, indicated the task ahead:

"In seeking to redefine class, it should be noted that the demands of the women's movement for self-determination, autonomy, control and a redefinition of power are the most comprehensive and advanced working class demands. Our concepts do not reject marxism but illuminate and develop it - and may transform it."⁴³⁰.

Of course within the hegemonic capitalist culture, the existence of class is concealed, but Communist women signified a point of convergence which exists between the two opposing world views of capitalism and Communism. This point of convergence was featured by the common hegemonic culture which, within both capitalism and socialism produces and

⁴³⁰. Robertson, Report, p.4.

reproduces sexism and patriarchy. One of the links within this point is the male, economist definition of working class, accepted by the Party with political consequences.

"The concept of a 'real' working class displaces women's struggles from the centre of working class struggle, and reproduces the separation that capitalist patriarchy imposes between private and public, community and work, family and politics. It ignores critical sites of struggle which are taking place within the class, particularly in relation to women and capital. The working class struggle becomes defined as primarily the economic struggles at the point of production by male workers.⁴³¹"

In the pre-women's movement Party theory and practice, oppression was placed within a class analysis. Oppression referred to the dominant class tyranny over the workers. Sexism and racism were seen as tools of capitalism to divide society. However, Communist women challenged this simplicity of this view and proposed a more complex theory.

"No social organisation, revolutionary party included, can be unaffected both in its ideology and forms of organisation by the social oppression of women, which has existed since the beginning of

⁴³¹. Margaret Penson, and Linda Carruthers, "Some Thoughts Concerning Feminism and Socialist Struggle", Praxis, No. 40, (November 1985), p.9.

history, and which is deeply entrenched in our culture, economy and social structures.⁴³²."

The realisation of this point of commonality not only led communist women to confront these issues within the Party, it also necessitated the development of a different theoretical perspective on the question of class, now informed by a debate which was attempting to analyse, question and judiciously reconcile the relationship between feminism and class.

The debate on feminism and class produced a number of dialectical dilemmas for the Communist Party, not the least important of which was the need to admit that contradictions existed in the current body of Marxist theory itself, as it had been defined and developed over the last fifty years. One element where the contradictions were raised was in the definition of dialectical materialism, defined within a framework which was noted for its lack of recognition for women's social oppression as an historical and material condition.

Sheila Rowbotham sums up:

"The emergence of the women's movement has shown the underdevelopment of marxism on relations between sexes and the connection between this and

⁴³². Joyce Stevens, "Shitwork and the Revolutionary Party", Join Hands, (August 1972), p.15.

women's subordination within the left. It has meant that socialist women, both inside and outside left groups, have challenged the power of men to determine marxism in their own image. The imperatives of feminism requires that we make many aspects of marxism anew."⁴³³.

Women in the Communist Party in Australia began to raise a number of issues central to the development of a feminist socialist dialectical materialism. Joyce Stevens raised the issue within the practical area of Party membership:

"How far can the Communist Party go in trying to overcome the social divisions between men and women when they are so deeply entrenched in the whole of society...Women are no longer going to be prepared to work for or join revolutionary parties that do not strive to change their consciousness and practice in respect to the social position of women.".⁴³⁴.

Communist women began to assert that marxist dialectical materialism had to take account of the contradictions present in the social lives of women, and further, that this oppression could be demonstrated to have existed prior to the development of the capitalist class system. The demand was for

⁴³³. Rowbotham, The Women's Movement, p.10.

⁴³⁴. Stevens, "Shitwork and the Revolutionary Party", p.17.

the Communist Party to recognise that the material conditions of oppression were not just simply economic.

"[Communists] accept that the movement for women's liberation expresses a growing consciousness that female oppression may not be simply narrowed down to economic exploitation but exists in all human relationships and institutions in capitalist society.".⁴³⁵.

The combination of the male, economist definition of class and entrenched patriarchy provided a contradictory paradigm for the Party which necessitated the re-defining of a number of traditional communist theories embodied in the socialist project, including revolutionary and liberation politics, the dictatorship of the proletariat and class struggle itself. Communist women active in the women's liberation movement, began, from 1970 onwards, to assist in the development of a theory of socialist feminism, to endeavour to integrate this theory into traditional marxism, and thereby attempt to create a feminist socialism. Communist women, in developing this theory raised questions about the organisational role of the Party as a revolutionary party. The need to transform Marxism was in some respects an international socialist feminist conviction. "It is Marxist theory itself that must be developed, and socialist practice that must be

⁴³⁵. Women and Social Liberation, p.3.

transformed."⁴³⁶

There were political consequences to this project. One such outcome was the necessity to link the demands of feminism with socialism. The term marxist feminist came into use to describe those feminists who were demanding that unless marxism itself was transformed then the oppression and subordination of women could not be adequately understood. Within the Communist Party many women and some men, became committed to such a transformation, and to the development of a marxism informed by feminism.

Another repercussion was the necessity to re-define the political agenda of the 'woman question'. This issue is summarised by Smith:

"The problems for Marxist-feminists have been how to represent feminism within class struggle, how to understand the relations between patriarchy and capitalism, how to confront and oppose male chauvinism in the working class...how to relate revolutionary organisation and struggle to the autonomous women's movement and how to bring understandings learned there into the struggle for socialism."⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶. Sargent, ed., Women and Revolution, p.198.

⁴³⁷. Dorothy Smith, "Women, Class and Family", Socialist Register, (1983), p.1.

The consequences of such a project were not only political in nature. There were also personal legacies involved in the undertaking. Communist women realised that they had to inexorably and indomitably contest and dispute the stereotypical party view of women's role, both in the Party and in society generally. Joyce Stevens makes the following comment:

"There was no political culture in the Communist Party that allowed for a different way of looking at the social position of women. Women like me who were uppity about things, because we had mothers who encouraged us to think in different ways, we felt as though we were guilty. We couldn't fit ourselves into the acceptable mould. And I think that's what made a lot of the women in the Party who became very active, and therefore had to make certain demands on their personal life, quite hard in some ways, because you had to close your mind against the general acceptance of what you were supposed to be like.".⁴³⁸

It is not surprising that women on the left and in the Party probably felt that a male reference to 'working class woman' was a political lapsus linguae.

Such a project not only created dialectical dilemmas for

⁴³⁸. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

Communism, it challenged traditional, orthodox Communism, and it also challenged the newly acquired visionary resurrection politics of post-1968 communism.

Despite the general acceptance of the New Left ideology within the Party in the late 1960s, which had facilitated a change of emphasis away from bureaucracy to democracy, accepted a political culture influenced by youth and endorsed socialism with a human face, class struggle was still the nucleus of Party theory and practice.

There will be no attempt made here to become involved in a detailed doctrinaire discussion of class and class struggle within a Marxist perspective. There has been much polemical discussion and academic pursuit of this topic which can be referred to. For the purposes of this thesis, two texts will be relied upon. The first is Lise Vogel's analysis contained in Marxism and the Oppression of Women, and the second is Ellen Meiksins Wood and her work entitled The Retreat from Class.

The intention and emphasis here will be to analyse the empirical implications of the challenges to the doctrinaire orthodoxy held by the Communist Party, prior to the women's liberation movement. The interest here is to examine ways in which the practical polemics raised by women in the Party who were influenced by the women's liberation movement, disputed and imputed the orthodoxy and demanded that it be replaced.

In order to undertake such an analysis, reference to theoretical Marxism is an imperative, but not a primary concern.

To challenge definitions of class and class struggle was to strike at the very heart of Communism. Class struggle is to Marxism what paraheliotropism is to plants. And although by the 1970s the Communist Party could be described as a crepuscular and decrescent organisation within the Australian political environment, the theory and practice of class struggle was not only an historical link to international Communism, it was also the *raison d'être*, the *joie de vivre* and the essential panacea for daily Party activity.

Class struggle was and is defined as the process whereby the working class can liberate itself from the oppression of the capitalist system.

"Class struggle is the nucleus of Marxism. This is so in two inseparable senses: it is class struggle that for Marxism explains the dynamic of history, and it is the abolition of classes, the obverse or end-product of class struggle, that is the ultimate objective of the revolutionary process."⁴³⁹

Within Marxist polemics, class oppression is created by the particular nature of the production and exploitation within

⁴³⁹. Wood, "Marxism without Class Struggle?", p. 239.

the capitalism system. Only the working class has an interest in destroying this system and replacing it with socialism. Wood continues to define other propositions within the Marxist paradigm. Firstly, the working class can create the conditions for liberating all human beings in the struggle to liberate itself; secondly, given the unresolvable contradictions which exist between the workers and capital, class struggle is the main process which will achieve socialism; and thirdly, the working class is the one social force which has the potential to develop into a revolutionary force.⁴⁴⁰.

For feminists the male, economist definition of the social relations of production encompassed two elements of the prevailing cultural hegemony. The first was the machismo of patriarchy, and the second was the masculine world of monetary capitalism. Within this socio-economic view, economism reduced the observable, legitimised processes of production to explanations based on the relationship between man and machine. Economism and reductionism provided twin explanations for the position of the working class vis a vis capitalism and provided a framework in which working class struggle could take place.

For a revolutionary political party such as the Communist Party, it was necessary to be able to act as the force liaising between the theory of Marxism and the day to day activities of the workers. An economist explanation of

⁴⁴⁰. Ibid., p.242.

capitalism and a strategy and revolutionary objective based on class struggle provided a relatively easy world view of class and its struggle to transform society. Such explanations also legitimised the liaison role of the Party.

This indefatigably economist view also supported and enmeshed well with the prevailing cultural view of the male as the breadwinner supporting his family. Although women worked, their wage was considered to be secondary to that of their husbands' and the politics of paterfamilias rendered any male who was economically supported by his wife, to a position of extreme low self- esteem.

Marx's writings, particularly Wage-Labour and Capital and Value, Price and Profit were widely, seriously and thoroughly studied in the Party.⁴⁴¹ Schools organised by the Party for its members assiduously discussed and analysed Marx's views on the nature of capitalism and the forces of production. Other works of Marx and Engels may have received less attention, as did the works of other theorists such as Auguste Babel. Such schools enabled and assisted members to study Marxist theory and endeavour to understand how working class oppression was caused by the capitalist system.

The problem with this process was that the members who attended these schools gained an understanding of oppression as it referred to their working conditions, relationship to

⁴⁴¹. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

the boss and the need to fight for better wages. There was only a very limited understanding of women's oppression based on sex. This issue of women's oppression had been raised in the theoretical writings of the Marxist Magi, Engels, Marx and Lenin. But the understanding and development of the points raised by these theorists, remained both in the left and in the Communist Party, limited and superficial. "The left understands clearly enough how workers are exploited by capital, e.g. economic exploitation, and even how women are more exploited than men by capital, receiving less pay for their labour (outside the home), but there was no appreciation of what domination on the basis of sex was."⁴⁴².

This surface deep understanding of sex oppression ensured that the 'woman question' remained a separate and marginalised praxis within the Party. Mavis Robertson referred to the influences of feminists in demanding that oppression and exploitation be re-defined within the second wave feminist framework.

"Juliet Mitchell, a follower of Althusser, says that women 'are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles they are marginal'. While her book is very important, and often positive, the above view is more sophisticated than Stalin's description that we are 'reserves of the working class', but it fits

⁴⁴². Munday, "Sexism in the Left", p.9.

with the concept of trade union auxiliaries, or wives' committees, and it is part of the old Marxist orthodoxy of separating economic, social and political roles.".⁴⁴³.

But as indicated elsewhere in this thesis, the Party's orthodox view on 'the woman question' was a complex view, primarily because it had been influenced by early international communist women, and by Australian communist women in the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite the underlying sexism and the hegemony of patriarchy which was socially and culturally enmeshed in the Party's praxis, there was compared to society generally, a progressive view on women and work which needs to be acknowledged, and which owed its existence to the influences of the earlier 1930s feminists in the Party. In an article written in 1966, entitled "Women in the Work Force", Joe Palmada makes the following comments:

"The main point we are making is the growing importance of women, as part of the workforce and for us this is not just a question of their significance to the economy, but their role as an important section of the working class and the ways and means of involving them in the overall general

⁴⁴³. Robertson, Report, p.3.

struggles of that class."⁴⁴⁴.

Whilst the overall tone of the article reflects the old views of the Party on the 'woman question', and whilst the framework of the discussion about women and work is well within the traditional economist view, there are some interesting points made about the issue of equal pay. Women's wages are still defined within the "struggle for living standards",⁴⁴⁵. but there is an acknowledgment that "subjective factors play a big part in preventing unions generally taking up this demand - traditional prejudices, male chauvinism, and narrow craft outlook".⁴⁴⁶.

The article concludes by stating that:

"Equal pay committees as constituted have somewhat narrow aims. The nature of present-day developments demands that the scope of the campaign be widened to include status, opportunities, discrimination, welfare,...".⁴⁴⁷.

The article points to the duality of the opinions held in the

⁴⁴⁴. Joe Palmada, "Women in the Workforce", Communist Review, No.289, (February-March, 1966), p.40.

⁴⁴⁵. Ibid., p.41.

⁴⁴⁶. Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷. Ibid.

Party on 'the woman question'. On the one hand, there was the economist framework, but on the other, there was an obscured understanding that the economist interpretation could not sufficiently explain the economic and social position of women. Communist women began to analyse and explain this discrepancy. Mavis Robertson pointed to the oversimplified ways in which equality for women was traditionally seen in the Party and referred to past Communist Party literature which showed women as truck drivers, engine drivers or tractor drivers and "made a simple equation between this and equality."⁴⁴⁸.

Judy Munday develops these points further:

"The Party saw the woman question, but there was no attempt to break out of the current social position of women. It was really a case of improving women's rights within the prison..You're never going to get equal relations between husbands and wives, for example, unless there is economic independence in a relationship."⁴⁴⁹.

Whilst the Party acknowledged the double oppression of women, the basis of this oppression was seen, prior to the women's movement, as having its roots in the capitalist system. "It was the system that was to blame. Men were victims of the

⁴⁴⁸. Women and Social Liberation, (1970), p.17.

⁴⁴⁹. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

system and women were doubly oppressed."⁴⁵⁰. The cornerstone for this belief came from the works of the Marxist fathers. One such reference was the often quoted Engel's work, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. Engels had maintained that:

"We can ...see that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time."⁴⁵¹.

In the introduction of her report to the August 1973 National Committee meeting, Mavis Robertson noted that Marx considered women's economic dependence on men as fundamental. As had Engels, Marx assumed that women would become liberated with socialism because they would be economically independent. "Women appeared to Marx as an indication of a state of society, not as a social group or movement developing consciousness in history."⁴⁵².

⁴⁵⁰. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

⁴⁵¹. Frederick Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, (New York, 1972), p.221.

⁴⁵². Robertson, Report, p. 1.

Similarly, Lenin ascribed the unequal position of women to domestic labour, and maintained that the emancipation of woman would occur within an economist framework corresponding to that of Engels and Marx, that is when the national economy is socialised and women participate in common productive labour.⁴⁵³.

Prior to the women's liberation movement, the Communist Party, inheriting from previous decades of international communism, had a particularly strong view on its definition of 'feminism'.

"Some of the problems of the Party in the 1950s were that women were encouraged to work on one front, to change society on the class front, and it was much more difficult, although we did it, to come out and fight against male chauvinism. This was done, but you were branded a feminist, and being a feminist was the worst thing that you could be." ⁴⁵⁴

Barbara Curthoys continues by commenting on how badly the Party had treated women who were seen to be feminists, for example, Jean Devanney and Lucy Barnes.⁴⁵⁵.

⁴⁵³. V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 30, p. 43.

⁴⁵⁴. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

⁴⁵⁵. Ibid.

Communist women, active in the women's liberation movement, began to confront the orthodox Party definition of 'feminist', and to defy the view that such women throughout Party history were tainted by the bourgeois brush.

"It is the biggest put down to attack the feminist theorists on the grounds that they are middle class. As Barbara Jones of Melbourne puts it so neatly 'Would someone please point out that Marx didn't write 'Das Kapital' from the bottom of a coal mine nor Lenin write 'State and Revolution' while lumping cargo on a wharf'.⁴⁵⁶

One of the battles which Communist women had in the Party was against the charge that not only were feminist theorists bourgeois, but that the whole women's movement itself was a middle class movement. Whilst there was truth to this charge, the basis of this view in the Party stemmed from the belief that the only real battles were class (and therefore male) battles, and that the women's movement was introducing classless and petit bourgeois politics into Marxism.

"Feminism was being middle class. This was an insult and anti-working class. This was the logic. If you pursued feminist analysis you were bourgeois so you couldn't apply it to the class struggle. That was [an issue] which women in the Party

⁴⁵⁶. Robertson, Report, p.3.

started to explore.".⁴⁵⁷

In challenging the male, economist definition of working class, Communist women raised a multiplicity of questions regarding the nature and basis of women's oppression and exploitation. One of the most difficult issues raised was that of patriarchy because this confronted the orthodox view that oppression existed because of capitalism. To feminists it was evident that patriarchy pre-dated the development of capitalism, and was present in a variety of societies both capitalist and non capitalist.

The attempts by feminists to unravel the question of patriarchy led to a number of diverse political views within the women's liberation movement. Some feminists saw this issue as one on which to hoist the petard of 'class is dead'. "Patriarchal exploitation is the common, specific and main oppression of women.".⁴⁵⁸ Other feminists opposed this view:

"[Socialist feminism] placed itself in opposition to a growing radical feminist tendency that considered male supremacy the root of all human oppression and the main obstacle to female liberation.".⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1990.

⁴⁵⁸. Delphy, p.74.

⁴⁵⁹. Vogel, p.1.

The issue of patriarchy proved to be a complex one. Whilst there was some agreement amongst socialist feminists that patriarchy is central to capitalism, nevertheless it was also clear that it pre-dates capitalism.⁴⁶⁰ Whilst rejecting a view that patriarchy was the main enemy, socialist feminists had to embark upon a process of theoretically understanding the dynamics of capitalist patriarchy.⁴⁶¹

This challenge was met by some in the Party who tenaciously endeavoured to reject a seen falsehood in classical definitions of capitalist relations, but by others, especially Communist women, by endeavouring to pool collective consciousness raising experiences and thereby come to a new understanding of a Marxism informed by feminism. Again Mavis Robertson puts this battle into perspective when she indicates that there was :

"...an age old refuge of the left which answers all insoluble problems with 'it's a class question - comrade'. Meaning in translation: 'that's for after the revolution - don't side track us now, and if you persist in solving or trying to solve it now, you are (a) self-centred; (b) bourgeois; (c) feminist; (d) counter-revolutionary.'. That fits in with the way that women were dealt with. The charge was that the women's liberation movement was a

⁴⁶⁰. Stevens, "Feminism and the Class Struggle", p.21.

⁴⁶¹. Coote and Campbell, p.33.

middle class movement and hence, less important.".⁴⁶².

Although the debate on patriarchy in the Party was a difficult debate, Communist women were successful in their attempt to incorporate the issues of patriarchy into the politics of dialectical materialism, and to have the paradigm of oppression re-defined to include women's oppression based on sex. Such views were assimilated and consolidated into the document Women and Social Liberation, adopted by the Party in 1979.

"Communists believe that the early division of labor, based on sex, through which women have been made responsible for the physical maintenance of men and children, and the domestic tasks associated with this, plays a crucial part in the specific oppression of women.

This division of labor did not arise with capitalism but pre-dated the division of labor based on class...

In capitalist society these sex divisions exist alongside class divisions and they interact with

⁴⁶². Mavis Robertson, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

each other."⁴⁶³.

Significant and substantial polemical problems arose from these debates about definitions because feminists were categorically stating that there were shortcomings within Marxist theory. Such a challenge was not only seen by some in the Party as middle class, to them it was historical and political anathema.

"Socialist feminist theory starts from an insistence that beneath the serious social, psychological and ideological phenomena of women's oppression lies a material root."⁴⁶⁴ The problem which socialists feminists were pointing to was that Marxism had not adequately analysed the nature and location of that root.⁴⁶⁵

Mavis Robertson defined the necessity to raise debate about definitions by indicating that although socialism has many achievements, there are some shortcomings, mainly arising from the dogmatic emphasis upon the central contradiction of capitalism, that is between wage labour and capital which in practice, devalues the oppression experienced by women.⁴⁶⁶

There was a further hegemonic framework which feminists

⁴⁶³. Women and Social Liberation, p.2.

⁴⁶⁴. Vogel, p.29.

⁴⁶⁵. Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶. Robertson, Nobody Lives Happily Ever After, p.17.

challenged, not only in relation to Marxism, but as a general dispute to ways in which information and knowledge are structured and organised within capitalism. The feminist view perceived that this intellectual organisation was based on a masculine world order which legitimises the actual pieces of information itself and also knowledge about and within the capitalist system. The framework for this organisation of information has its roots in the development of the scientific method, and as well as impinging on the ways in which information in the sciences is acceptably ordered and organised, it is also an important framework for the development of Marxist philosophy and for definitions within that philosophy.

"In our culture women have traditionally been portrayed as passive and receptive, men as active and creative. This imagery goes back to Aristotle's theory of sexuality and has been kept throughout the centuries as a 'scientific' rationale for keeping women in a subordinate role."⁴⁶⁷

For Marxists, Marxist philosophy was a science. Emphasis was placed on scientific socialism and on a party of Communist science with its base firmly in the working class.⁴⁶⁸ Emphasis was on the objective forces which not only

⁴⁶⁷. Fritjof Capra, The Turning Point, (London, 1983), p.19.

⁴⁶⁸. Communist Party of Australia, Constitution, (Sydney, 1967), p.4.

necessitated the transformation to socialism, but could also be defined as those forces which would be instrumental in bringing about such a transformation.

Within the women's liberation movement, feminists demonstrated another point of convergence between the two philosophies and politics of capitalism and socialism. That point dealt with perceived and acceptable masculine perspectives on objectivity and subjectivity. This issue became important for the women's liberation movement, and eventually for Communist women, because of the framework and definition which established an acceptable world of thought and action, that which is objective, and which negated what was defined as subjective.

Within the scientific method values are placed not only on the method of research and investigation, but also on the structure and organisation of the outcomes of such enquiry. This is a method which determines an objective result, thereby negating unwanted unverifiabiles. Definitions of objective and subjective provide the yang and yin for scientific discovery and activity. The language used is extremely important. The objective is revered because it is defined within parameters which are controllable, mathematical, measurable, provable, logical, quantifiable. The subjective is scorned because it is defined as illogical, ephemeral, immeasurable, uncontrollable, emotional, metaphysical.

It is no coincidence that the language used to describe the

acceptably objective is the language which pertains to the public domain of masculine activity both in the sciences and in the market-place. The description of the subjective depicts stereotyped definitions of what is regarded as feminine.

Further to this, it is interesting how the sex stereotyped definitions of objective and subjective also fit hand in glove with the nineteenth century social and cultural view of the two spheres - the public domain and the private sphere. The first sphere, the public domain, was defined with the same language used to describe the objective world of the sciences and was the domain where the skills, definitions and activities of men were highly valued and rewarded. The second, sphere, with the language ascribed to the subjective, and to the description of the second sex, was a world of domestic femininity, marked by not only the delineations applicable to the term subjective, but also by a firm dividing line which maintained that women could not participate actively in the first sphere.⁴⁶⁹

Approximately two hundred years of sex stereotyped socio-cultural views of respectable and acceptable masculine and feminine spheres was re-defined within developing capitalism.

"The existence of a sphere of 'private life' as

⁴⁶⁹. See chapter 2, "The Public/Domestic Dichotomy and the Universal Oppression of Women", in Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought.

distinct from the realm of political economy, is a characteristic feature of industrial capitalist society...Patriarchal restrictions, combined with women's traditional centrality in child raising, dictated that the home, rather than the socialised workplace, was woman's 'proper' sphere of activity.".⁴⁷⁰.

And this centuries old maxim impacted on nineteenth century socialism. The theory of dialectics established a world view that was objective and could be logically explained. This view was posed against the metaphysical view. Dialectics provided a framework for logical disputation and critical enquiry, both features of the scientific method.

Dialectical materialism had to demonstrate that the material circumstances in which the working class were located, resulted from the exploitation and oppression of the capitalist system and that this process had an historical and material basis. It was essential that these material circumstances were understood to arise from objective realities and did not exist because it was the will of God, or because a reward for a poor, abysmal and exploited life would be reaped in heaven.

Further, the dialectical view had to demonstrate that such objective conditions with bases in power and ownership could

⁴⁷⁰. Ehrenreich, p.10.

be changed, could be transformed. The working class within this framework was the class agent which had the most to gain from a socialist revolution, and were therefore the agents of socialist transformation.

In a booklet entitled Philosophy A Guide to Action for the Common Man ⁴⁷¹. published by the Party in 1965, there is a discussion of the definitions of Marxist philosophy and dialectics. The discussion emphasises that philosophy is not "a highbrow hobby for an academic elite. It is an outlook on the world, a method of thought, a guide to action, an instrument for changing the world."⁴⁷². At the same time, the discussion on dialectics is placed within a scientific framework.

"There is in fact no phenomenon in which we do not find conflicting tendencies, stresses, forces moving in opposite directions.

All scientific discovery confirms that this is a universal law. This law is called in dialectics the law of contradiction..."⁴⁷³.

Feminists and Communist women began to confront these

⁴⁷¹. Communist Party of Australia, Philosophy - A Guide to Action for the Working Man, (Sydney, 1965), p.5.

⁴⁷². Ibid.

⁴⁷³. Ibid. p.14.

definitional frameworks, not in order to deny the fundamental tenets and principles of Marxist philosophy and history, but to demand that the balance between subjective and objective be restored into Marxist theory and practice.

"It is remarkable that an Engels and a Bebel did such pioneering work on the family and on the position of women. One need not, of course be so tolerant of their followers who ignored, or forgot, this aspect of Marxism and one cannot afford to be tolerant of present day socialists who refuse to acknowledge anything other than an economic perspective.".⁴⁷⁴.

Other feminists were raising the necessity for re-defining the methods used to develop a Marxist theory, and were also indicating that the theory had been developed through a practice which was sex blind and was therefore fundamentally flawed because of this historical and political gender bias. Sheila Rowbotham, quoting Beatrix Campbell, raised this issue:

"...feminism necessarily identifies both the subjective and objective condition of existence as problems of politics. In other words, the person became a political problem. This challenged a way of practising politics that treats revolutionary

⁴⁷⁴. Robertson, "Nobody Lives Happily Ever After", p.17.

personnel as agents rather than subjects.".⁴⁷⁵.

Additionally, the male economist definition of working class was firmly based on the Marxist view of the theory and practice of the social relations of production. The orthodox Marxist political and economic theory associated with the social relations of production included the theoretical tenets established by Marx and Engels. But as it had developed it had also emphasised that production was a predominantly male activity which took place on the factory floor. Any reference to women in this context was also a reference to women on the factory floor, not in offices. Barbara Curthoys remembers that Communist women were encouraged to work in factories in which women were employed and that to work on the factory floor was considered to be one of the best things that a woman could do.⁴⁷⁶.

Historically a set of patronising paradoxes had developed within the theory and practice of Marxism. Communist women active in the women's liberation movement, identified the paradoxes and had to deal with the patronising political battles which ensued.

Not only did socialist feminists raise the contradictions inherent in traditional Marxist definitions, they demanded

⁴⁷⁵. Bea Campbell, "Sweets from a Stranger", Red Rag, No. 13, p.28, in Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement", p.11.

⁴⁷⁶. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

that recognition be given to, and a theoretical perspective be developed on the social relations of reproduction. The influence for this demand came directly from the women's liberation movement. Vogel notes however, that as with patriarchy, there were theoretical differences about the term 'reproduction.'⁴⁷⁷ The demand and the concomitant theoretical development of Marxism which followed provided valuable contributions to the body of Marxist theory, a process which is still continuing.

In raising the issue of the social relations of reproduction, feminists were demanding recognition of not only the double standard endemic within society, but also the double burden which women undertook on a daily basis, moving from the work to the home environment, where in the former there was unequal pay, and in the latter no pay at all.

Communist women undertook a major battle within the Party on these issues. It was difficult from the first to develop a reconciliation between the orthodox view and the re-definitions about working class and class struggle that were emerging via the women's liberation movement. It was difficult to take the orthodox view of class struggle, endeavour to transform the theory and practice of this struggle into a process where women were recognised and in which women could participate. Judy Munday described the battle:

⁴⁷⁷. Vogel, p.27.

"The left had never heard of sexism. And feminist was a dirty word...This attitude, with the advent of women's liberation, became translated into the now familiar argument that it is divisive to concentrate on women's issues - that all attention must be given to the class struggle (read male) and with the achievement of socialism all will be solved...

Women in the left began to understand that we would still be doing the dishes and raising the children or handing back the guns, with business as usual after the barricades go down. The essentials of women's oppression would remain in tact...".⁴⁷⁸.

In the end Communist women realised that the orthodox view was so fundamentally flawed that a transformed revolutionary praxis based on gender and class would have to be realised.

Although the men and women in the Communist Party shared an overall belief that capitalism had to be transformed, both genders were as susceptible and subject to the subtle and obvious social conditioning prevalent and endemic to the capitalist system. What Communist women would discover in similar ways to other feminists in the women's liberation movement, was that it was easier for women to understand their own position of oppression under patriarchy, and most

⁴⁷⁸. Munday, "Sexism in the Left", p.9.

difficult for men to understand the theoretical basis for a feminist socialism.

Decades of patriarchal conditioning and orthodox communist theory made the understanding and embracing of a feminist dialectical materialism extremely difficult for most Communist men. "No socialism without women's liberation, no women's liberation without socialism" was understood, peripherally, as a necessary slogan. The struggle for Communist women was to have such a slogan totally, structurally and unmitigatingly accepted and embraced within Party praxis. Party women were confronting the cultural hegemony which marked the Party itself, as well as society generally.

Communist women began to demand two things. Firstly, that traditional Marxist theory must be centrally and not peripherally informed by an analysis of women's oppression and, secondly, that such an analysis could not be provided unless Marxism itself was transformed.

The male dominated theory and practice of Marxism acknowledged the requirement to deal with the 'woman question', but within a revolutionary paulo-post-future. This view maintained that working class liberation would break the chains of capitalist exploitation but it placed the 'woman question' and women's liberation into a utopian future. Socialist feminists and Communist women demanded liberation in the complete meaning of the word.

Communist women joined with other sisters in the women's movement to demand that liberation be given a revolutionary meaning for women.

"Since women's oppression existed long before capitalism, something more than a change in the ownership of the means of production is required to end women's oppression. Women believe that they must organise against their specific oppression in the course of revolutionary struggle against capital and maintain a continuity of struggle until sexism is defeated."⁴⁷⁹.

The meaning of liberation as applied to women's liberation was to refer to the complete emancipation of women in all spheres of life. "The liberation of women demands a totally different society with radically different work, living and personal relationships."⁴⁸⁰ Joyce Stevens continues by stating that liberation for feminists means not just the ending of capitalism, but the demise of the social and cultural ideologies, and the "personal relationships which have divided men and women since the earliest days of human history."⁴⁸¹.

Communist Party women understood the requisite of demanding

⁴⁷⁹. Robertson, Report, p2.

⁴⁸⁰. Joyce Stevens, "Tendencies in the Women's Liberation Movement", Join Hands, (March 1976), p.18.

⁴⁸¹. Ibid.

that the theory and practice of liberation itself required liberating from the traditional, orthodox Party view, which had previously been applied in particular to the many anti-imperialist struggles which had over the decades, commanded Party support.

"We still felt that socialism was needed. But if we were going to fight for a changed society it was to be a society which freed us, which saw our liberation as one of the essential foundations of the new society, an end not only to economic exploitation of one class by another, but also an end to exploitation and oppression of one sex by another." ⁴⁸².

By demanding that a feminist socialism, which acknowledged a material basis of women's oppression, be incorporated into traditional Marxism, Communist women were also demanding that current revolutionary praxis in the Party also be re-defined and transformed. These women demanded that the praxis be informed by socialist feminists who had as their vision not only a socialist society which would be non-sexist, liberating and non-patriarchal, but that the transformation to this society should begin immediately and not be postponed until after the socialist event.

This demand also endorsed the belief that the orthodox view

⁴⁸². Munday, "Sexism in the Left", p. 10.

that equality for women would be achieved after the revolution was in fact a patronising view, and in the final analysis, non-Marxist. The actions involved in undertaking this demand touched on every aspect of life within the Party, from its organisation, to day to day political activities, to Party administration itself.

The contesting of orthodox definitions and conventional revolutionary praxis was also a challenge to the Party itself as a political party. To assert that many male Communists were sexist and that working class definitions were theorised within a gender biased structure, and to demand that Marxist theory and practice be transformed within socialist feminism, was to demand and assert that certain aspects of the Party as a political organisation had also to be transformed.

These challenges were undertaken by Party women on a number of different fronts. By the mid-1970s women working within the Party offices as functionaries, women members attending Party branch meetings, women members active in trade unions, and the few women elected onto Party decision making bodies, demanded that the Party as a whole examine and analyse its praxis, organisation and role as a Communist Party and that this analysis take place within the parameters of a feminist socialist materialist dialectic, and within the new political, social and cultural paradigms of the women's liberation movement.

Such demands were summarised by Sheila Rowbotham, who, whilst writing of another Communist Party in another country, was expressing an international view about the influence of the women's movement on Communism:

"So the women's movement is contesting not simply at the level of programs and constitutions, which is why we could never find adequate words to meet the aggressive question from men in left groups in the early days 'Well what is it that you want?' The dispute is about an idiom of politics. It is about how we think about what we are doing; how we see ourselves historically... These open up fundamental disagreements about how you organise for socialism and what is the relationship of parties to other movements. They involve the power to define what is politics.".⁴⁸³.

As a Leninist Party in origin, the Communist Party in Australia had in its early days embraced the theory and practice of the vanguard party.⁴⁸⁴ This belief had been eroded from the 1950s onwards, and in theory had been discarded by a range of post 1968 Communist parties, including the Australian Party. The 1967 'Coalition of the Left' position adopted by the Communist Party of Australia was a

⁴⁸³. Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement", p.13.

⁴⁸⁴. Party of the Working Class, p.23.

recognition that vanguardism was now passe.⁴⁸⁵ Again Sheila Rowbotham comments that the women's movement had been influential in breaking the concept of a vanguard party by questioning the criteria used in assessing 'advanced' and 'backward' and by stating that this assessment "is not a neutral and objective process but a matter of subjective control."⁴⁸⁶.

Women in the Communist Party also raised questions about the relationship of the Party to movement politics. In the past history of the Party such an issue had been dealt with within the framework of the united front. Now difficulties were being raised about how to deal with cross-class issues and movement politics. The issue of the relationship between the Party and movement politics will be dealt with in a later chapter.

As with all issues raised in the discussion about definitions, the outcomes of the debates were as important as the debates themselves. There were of course for Party women, cathartic peregrinations involved in obtaining outcomes, but from the beginning of the women's liberation movement, the important process for Party women involved in the movement was that they went back to the Party where their ideas started to be reflected, particularly in the way that they approached their own political work." They started to see that their work in the women's movement was more important than the work that

⁴⁸⁵. Statement of Aims, p.12.

⁴⁸⁶. Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement", p.23.

other people in the Party determined as important.".⁴⁸⁷.

One the most visionary and fulgent effects from the challenges which Communist women made to Party theory and practice during the early 1970s was the development of a praxis informed by women who had come to an understanding of the need to re-define many aspects of Marxism itself. "The real point for everyone committed to revolutionary change is to accept that a movement for such change has both the right and the need to redefine everything and only then will the movement be capable of achieving human liberation...".⁴⁸⁸

Within the action of re-definition, feminists in the women's movement and women in the Party would need to undertake the Herculean task of analysing the gender division of labour.

⁴⁸⁷. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁴⁸⁸. Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.15.

The fact of the matter is that while Australian women have acquired political equality with men, they have not acquired economic equality. They are subject to restrictions in industry and the professions. Equal pay for equal work has not yet been obtained. Women are still regarded as cheap labour...

Teachers, particularly suffer from this humiliating sex discrimination. Married women are debarred from permanent employment in the Education Department.

Katherine Susannah Prichard, About Australian Women.

CHAPTER 5: WHY IS IT THAT ONLY WOMEN ARE BEHIND THE
TYPEWRITERS?

"In their efforts to understand patriarchal capitalism, socialist feminists have directed attention towards two main areas: firstly, the sexual division of labour and secondly, the functions of the nuclear family, including its effects on sexuality and the invasion of women's bodies by church, state and men generally and how family relationships help to structure deeply held ideas as ideology.".⁴⁸⁹

These two areas of feminist concern roused bitter and antagonistic criticism for those women attempting to challenge the sexual status quo, as well as raising difficult polemical issues which posed complex theoretical and practical questions about women's oppression. In many respects, challenging definitions, whilst demanding and exhausting for the feminists engaged in the battle, could be accepted by the Left with some social and political grace. After all, surely the political panacea required was only a slight readjustment to the definition of class, so that women were included in it, and then it could be business as usual.

Confronting and defying the ideology of gender and family

⁴⁸⁹. Joyce Stevens, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

however, was going too far. Such a confrontation struck at the divine right of kings - home and family, and raised issues about the nature of social organisation and the basis of human relationships which were regarded as inviolable by society generally, and as the conflict was to demonstrate, also by the Left, including the Communist Party.

Feminists began to quickly realise that biological determinism underpinned and cemented functions of and within the family, and the gender roles assigned to both sexes. Initially, feminists raised a number of questions about gender and family in order to endeavour to analyse the ways in which the gender division operated within capitalism. The consequential issues were revealed to be complex and to touch on a multiplicity of women's social and psychological incubuses. There are still many issues here which have not been adequately dealt with in socialist theory and practice.

Vogel points to the fact that the socialist theoretical tradition has not been able to develop adequate answers to 'the woman question'. She indicates that socialist feminists, recognising this failure, have posed a number of difficult questions which must be analysed. These questions involve the following interrelated areas:

"First, all women, not just working-class women, are oppressed in capitalist society. Women occupy a subordinate place, moreover, in all class

societies, and some would argue that women are subordinated in every society, including socialist society. What is the root of women's oppression? How can its cross-class and transhistorical character be understood theoretically?

Second, divisions of labor according to sex exist in every known society: women and men do different types of work...What is the relationship of these sex divisions of labor to women's oppression? Given women's childbearing capacity, how is it possible for women to be truly equal?..

Third, women's oppression bears strong analogies to the oppression of racial and national groups, as well as to the exploitation of subordinate classes. Are sex, race, and class parallel oppressions of essentially similar kind? Does female oppression have its own theoretically specific character? What is the relationship of the fight against women's oppression to the struggle for national liberation and for socialism?".⁴⁹⁰

The ideological patterns and ideas which established and maintained the gender division of labour dominate every aspect of women's lives - political, social, economic, cultural and psychological. Feminists pointed to the ubiquitous and

⁴⁹⁰. Vogel, p.7.

permeating patterns which have been historically present in a range of societies and social groupings. For socialist feminists this fact raised similar theoretical and polemical problems to the raising of questions about the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.

"The sexual division of labour varies greatly with different economic and social conditions...In many, though not all, societies women are confined to the work of the care and maintenance of men and children: food preparation, cleaning and other tasks associated with childbearing and sexuality, and women are seen as part of men's property...⁴⁹¹."

Socialist feminists stated that not only was the gender division of labour present outside capitalist societies, a point which challenged the traditional socialist conceptual framework of capitalism, they also raised issues about gender which delved into and exposed both conscious and unconscious beliefs and patterns of human behaviour.

"...people branched out into unexplored territories. The rediscovery of our early perception of ourselves and our own sexuality entered politics - not as a theoretical question

⁴⁹¹. Pat Vort-Ronold, "Women and Class", Women and Politics Conference, (Canberra, 1975), p.73.

but as a passionate and practical demand...".⁴⁹²

Within the Communist Party, socialist feminists acknowledged these gender arguments, and endeavoured to assist with the embodiment of gender issues into a Marxist theory and practice.

Women in the women's liberation movement and in the Communist Party pointed to the many complex ways in which gender based definitions infiltrated and invaded women's lives. The ideological construct for the gender division of labour was firmly based on the Western patriarchal definitions of yin and yang, exemplified by the two spheres view of society which had traditionally supported the conceptual framework for gender based activities.

Within this prosaic framework, unequivocal and misogynist mores and myths were developed as the acceptable social template. On the one hand there was yang: masculine, active, firm, strong, aggressive, competitive, rational and analytical. Counterposed and secondary to this was yin: feminine, passive, contemplative, cooperative, intuitive and synthesising.

Such a framework ensured that a gender division of labour was legitimised because it reflected the proper and prescribed roles for the sexes. Within this ideological construct, women

⁴⁹². Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.23.

were confined to domestic chores, particularly nurturing and rearing, and within production, confined to sex stereotyped areas of employment which reflected this domestic role - retail, clerical, textile, process and assembly work, secretarial and service industries. Within this definition women's work had to be light and clean and reproduce women's qualities of delicacy, dexterity and patience.⁴⁹³

Sheila Rowbotham points to some of the issues raised by feminists:

"The whole paraphernalia of not competing with men, of becoming stupid when confronted with machines or ideas, our delicacy, our incompetence, our softness, our capacity for boring, monotonous work...our sentimentality have no more a mysterious source than the 'ignorance' of workers, the cheerfulness of the 'naturally' grinning 'nigger'. They serve the same 'useful' economic function of making groups who lack power and control within capitalism accept this state of affairs with the minimum of resistance."⁴⁹⁴.

Feminists defined the major problems of this hegemonic

⁴⁹³. See Anne Game and Rosemary Pringle, Gender at Work, (North Sydney, 1983), Introduction.

⁴⁹⁴. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, pp.77-78.

ideology of gender as patriarchal power which ensures women's oppression and subordination, and also as the dogmatic belief that the role assignments of yin and yang were absolutely separate and unchangeable.⁴⁹⁵ Feminists stated that this immutability is based on a socio-scientific tenet which maintains that in the world there are the two, male and female, with rules and roles established on the basis of biology. The two is as enshrined in the twentieth century as it was for Noah, enlisted as God's agent for the two, millennia ago. Where there is one it is male. 'Man', the generic term symbolises the incorporation of woman and denies her identity and independence.⁴⁹⁶

The unchangeable roles of male and female have been developed within a variety of historical environments, from the medieval church sanctification of the Blessed Virgin, to the industrialised Victorian consecration of production and reproduction.

In the twentieth century, the ascendant ideological culture of science has reinforced these role constructions. Feminists investigating the politics of gender could not ignore the scientific and biological view of 'man'. This view operates within a static conceptual order, just as the capitalism in which it operates. In biology this static order relies particularly on orthodox Cartesian reductionism where

⁴⁹⁵. Firestone, p.11.

⁴⁹⁶. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.xi.

organisms are seen as machines constructed from separate parts.⁴⁹⁷ Understanding how the organism functions is based on reducing it to the smallest constituent parts.

"The spectacular success of molecular biology in the field of genetics led scientists to apply its methods to all areas of biology in an attempt to solve all problems by reducing them to their molecular level. Thus biologists became fervent reductionists, concerned with molecular details."⁴⁹⁸.

Science has hurtled down the road of specialisation. The separate scientific disciplines may investigate natural phenomena but only rarely cross-link either the analyses or the final results. Nor may communication occur on a cross-academic disciplinary basis. This static order is as consolidated as that of the two spheres view. The resultant paradox is that scientific culture sustains and permeates the ideological hegemony of capitalism.⁴⁹⁹

Feminists raised these issues when investigating gender. Shilamuth Firestone⁵⁰⁰. represents one view of the gender

⁴⁹⁷. Capra, p.23.

⁴⁹⁸. Ibid., p.114.

⁴⁹⁹. Ibid., p.23.

⁵⁰⁰. Firestone, Chapter 1, "The Dialectic of Sex", pp.11-22.

question - the radical feminist view. Other feminists raised other aspects of the politics of gender.

Germaine Greer begins her discussion on gender by referring to our knowledge of DNA:

"It is true that the sex of a person is attested by every cell in his body. What we do not know is exactly what that difference in the cells means in terms of their functioning...To make any assumptions about superiority or inferiority on this basis is to assume what is very far from being proved. Perhaps when we have learnt how to read the DNA we will be able to see what the information which is common to all members of the female sex really is...

It is an essential part of our conceptual apparatus that the sexes are a polarity, and a dichotomy in nature."⁵⁰¹.

Reductionism is also an essential ingredient in the ideology of gender as propounded by twentieth century capitalism. The activities and roles of the two sexes can be reduced to well defined, singular constituent elements, thus creating order and enabling human behaviour to be readily observed. Cartesian reductionism creates a static order of yin and yang which dominates every sphere of human activity from childhood to

⁵⁰¹. Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch, (London, 1970), p.25.

adulthood, from the bedroom to the kitchen, from factory floor to office, in novels, newspapers and television, which is produced and reproduced in theatre and film, and in academies, parliaments and churches.

Slowly, the women's liberation movement began to untangle the implications of this reductionist view and gradually replace it with a view which insisted that the simplistic socio-scientific constructs of male and female, have in reality founded and ensconced inordinately complex patterns of behaviour which must be exposed and annihilated if there really is to be women's liberation.

The examination of the gender division of labour has led to a profusion of socialist feminist texts, studies and personal recounting about the oppressive, invasive nature of such a division, especially as reproduced within capitalist patriarchy. This process was as essential to Communist women as to other feminists, especially as it became clear that the sexual division of labour was ubiquitously active in the Communist Party.

The gender issue has been continually addressed by feminists in their attempt to understand its operation and implications. Much of the theoretical work on this issue was undertaken and published after the mid-1970s, but the views and arguments raised at that time are as valid in the 1990s, as they were retrospectively for the pre-1970s.

"The sexual division of labour refers to the allocation of work on the basis of sex, within both the home and the workplace, as well as that division between home and workplace which has been characteristic of capitalism. This division of labour operates through a series of dichotomies which, on the one hand, refer to male and female spheres and, on the other, correspond to social divisions that are characteristic of capitalism: public / private , work / non-work , production/consumption...It is essential to take account of the ways in which gender relations and class relations shape each other."⁵⁰².

The last sentence was crucial for socialist feminists. An understanding of gender relations was necessary in order that a comprehensive and informed theoretical perception about women's oppression could be developed. But, as with women's oppression as a general issue, it was necessary to tease out the complex relationship between gender and class.

The issue of gender and class has been dealt with theoretically in a number of different ways, depending of course on the political and social framework in which the theorist is operating. Vogel, however, points to the continuing problem which has vexed the gender question - the problem of dualism.

⁵⁰². Game and Pringle, pp.14-15.

"Again and again, theorists using the concepts of patriarchy and reproduction analyse women's oppression in terms of two separate structures; for example, capitalism and patriarchy, the mode of production and the mode of reproduction, the class system and the gender system."⁵⁰³.

Women in the Communist Party dealt with the issue of gender and class by participating in the ensuing and continuing debate about the problem of dualism, and by endeavouring to develop an adequate dialectical materialism informed by feminism. This participation also represented an attempt to further synthesise Marxism and feminism.

Marx and Engels had referred to the division of labour in The German Ideology:

"The division of labour...which is based on the natural division of labour in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, simultaneously implies the distribution and indeed the unequal distribution...of labour and its products, hence property, the nucleus, the first form of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the

⁵⁰³. Vogel, p.28.

slaves of the husband."⁵⁰⁴.

But even more so than with the 'double oppression' of women, traditional Marxist recognition of the gender question had been scant and superficial and the development of a Marxism which assimilated and consolidated such a concept, represented a Marxist theoretical lacuna.

Vogel suggests that Marx's mature writings do offer the rudiments of a theoretical foundation in which the situation for women in relation to gender and social reproduction can be analysed but Vogel continues:

"As the years passed, and the problem of women's oppression became codified in the form of the so-called 'woman question', the very possibility of taking the perspective suggested in Marx's mature work diminished."⁵⁰⁵

The views which Engels put forward in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State⁵⁰⁶. were analysed and debated by the Communist Party. In an article entitled 'Feminism and the Class Struggle', Joyce Stevens argues the following points:

⁵⁰⁴. Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, Collected Works, (London, 1981 ed.), Vol. 5, p.46.

⁵⁰⁵. Vogel, p.72.

⁵⁰⁶. Frederick Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, in Marx and Engels, pp.561-583.

"It [Engels' work] was a major contribution when sex differences were still regarded as primarily biological and natural. He showed that environment and production were significant factors in the emergence and development of the family and in determining the distribution of power between the sexes.

Yet Engels' view that "The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman" is not supported by a great deal of evidence from what is now known about human history".⁵⁰⁷.

Joyce Stevens continues by raising questions about the origin of the differences between the sexes and states that whilst environmental and economic factors are significant, it is still a subject of much speculation.⁵⁰⁸

Communist women took up these issues and examined their relevance to every respective Party theory and practice: in its acceptance of sex stereotyped roles as reflected in the Party's economist attitude to women's work, in the domestic lives of Party members and in the gender based practices of day to day Party activities and functions.

⁵⁰⁷. Stevens, "Feminism and the Class Struggle", p.21.

⁵⁰⁸. Ibid.

These actions involved challenging the Party's orthodoxy on the political role of Party women in general, which was underpinned by a view which denied the existence of gender politics.

In a document entitled Communist Party Policy for Women,⁵⁰⁹ the Party echoed Engels' views about the origin of women's inequality and it also stated the orthodox Communist view on 'feminism'. Chapter One of the policy deals with "The Role of Women in Society" and under the sub-heading 'The source of women's inequality', it is stated that:

"The history of women's inequality is bound up with the fact that with the development of property and the beginning of class society, women were isolated almost entirely from social production and relegated to purely domestic occupations."⁵¹⁰

Whilst this economist view acknowledged the existence of women's inequality, it was placed within the traditional Marxist view that such inequality had its roots in the development of capitalism. The methods to be adopted in fighting this inequality were therefore established as those which would deal with the demise of capitalism and place women within the arena of social production. The tactics to be

⁵⁰⁹. Communist Party of Australia, Communist Party Policy for Women, (n.d.), CPA Records, (Box 74), Mitchell Library.

⁵¹⁰. Ibid., p.1.

adopted by Party members in order that women's equality could be addressed are outlined in the same policy document in Chapter Five headed "To Win Socialism.". Under the sub-heading 'Feminism' it is stated that:

"...when men do not treat women as equals, some women react by seeing men as responsible for their inferior position. They become feminist...they support women because of their sex instead of on the basis of their policy. The advancement of women will help women to gain equality, but only if the policy of those women is working class and therefore in the interests of the people in general and of women too."⁵¹¹.

This instruction clearly denies the existence of gender as an argument supporting women's inequality, and indeed goes further by indicating that use of gender as a basis for organising women is anti-working class. This view reflects the ways in which the Party's policies of this time were misinformed by a narrow definition of class.

Women in the Party began to raise the issue of gender from the time of the 22nd Congress held in 1970. One of the earliest references to gender is contained in the original blueprint for the document Women and Social Liberation adopted by the Party in 1974. The blueprint was entitled Women and Social

⁵¹¹. Ibid, p.17.

Liberation: a Communist Viewpoint which was adopted as a discussion paper by the Party at its 22nd Congress in 1970.

The paper stated:

"So long as the mystique that surrounds women as wives and mothers is retained, for whatever reason, so long as the child bearing role of women is presumed to be their main life role, so long as the care of children is seen as an individual mother's responsibility the pressures acting against even the equality in pay envelopes, let alone the wider areas of liberation, can be overpowering."⁵¹².

The economist framework is still present but there is a glimmering reference to the gender question as exemplified by the relations of social reproduction and sex stereotyped roles. This would provide the basis of a more complex analysis on the question of gender, as Party women examined and incorporated the arguments being raised in the women's liberation movement.

The document also contained detailed figures about women and work, including the industries women work in, the areas in which women concentrated by age, and the average wages of men and women.⁵¹³ This was an area of discussion being developed in the early 1970s. It would be a source for debate and

⁵¹². Women and Social Liberation, 1970, p.11.

⁵¹³. Ibid., pp. 18-22.

analysis, as it became clearer how the relationship between women and work reflected the gender based division of labour.

Gender issues within the conceptual framework of the ideology of women's inequality and oppression offered a new way of defining and developing a feminist historical materialism. Kuhn makes the following comment when referring to some of the early written works of feminists:

"When such work was begun, there was a tendency to appropriate existing theory, first by pointing to its amnesia where women were concerned, and second, by attempting to insert the 'woman question' into existing work and hence to add to rather than transform it."⁵¹⁴.

It is not surprising that a similar point can be made about the early writings and discussions put forward by Party women on the question of gender. Party women were a product of both the culture of the Party and of society generally. Joyce Stevens makes this comment:

"The sex division of labour is central to the role of women in the family and society generally. One of the important changes to the Women and Social Liberation document which will go to Congress, is

⁵¹⁴. Annette Kuhn, and AnnMarie Wolpe, (eds.) Feminism and Materialism, (London, 1978), p.2.

that it now has a new section on how this division of labour structures and segments the workforce. In this respect some of our past understanding has been faulty."⁵¹⁵.

This comment indicates that the issue of gender necessitated that a totally new investigation of the relationship between gender and class had to be undertaken. The old theoretical paradigm required shifting and transforming in order that the elements of gender could be incorporated into the Party's analysis of feminism and class. Such a shift was reflected in the Women and Social Liberation document adopted by the Party at its 26th Congress held in 1979:

"Usually, all caring and nurturing work within the family is performed by women as private unpaid work.

This process strengthens and reinforces both the division of labor based on sex and class divisions...The family as it exists is thus a specific area of women's oppression."⁵¹⁶.

As the compossible relationship between women in the women's liberation movement and in the Communist Party developed,

⁵¹⁵. Joyce Stevens, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

⁵¹⁶. Women and Social Liberation, 1979, p.2.

Communist women critically analysed the role of gender inequality both in the Party and in the Left generally. Such criticism assisted in the development of a socialist critique of gender which, whilst arduous, was essential to the informing of Marxism. Mavis Robertson made the following assertion:

"In too many families on the left the situation is the same. The woman stays home to mind the children while the man does his revolutionary work and her duty to the revolution is defined as keeping him free from the mundane, if necessary, chores of everyday living...the subordination of women is not simply essential to a ruling class but carries with it important privileges for men."⁵¹⁷.

Party women assisted in raising these issues in a number of areas where women worked and were politically active - in trade unions, political parties, and at work, whether in the workplace or as functionaries in political organisations. Within trade unions, women's lack of representation and the structure of these organisations were raised as reasons which contributed and sustained women's inequality. Party women, along with other feminists, demanded that the Left examine the ways in which women were disenfranchised within trade unions because of the patriarchal division of labour and the unequal

⁵¹⁷. Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.6.

distribution of power.

At its 22nd Congress in 1970 the Party discussed the following resolution on the organisation of women and the trade union movement:

"In the course of this campaign for full equality a concerted and sustained effort must be made to recruit women workers into the unions and secure their promotion to union responsibilities as shop stewards and members of leading union committees and full-time union officials."⁵¹⁸.

Perhaps the most difficult task for Communist women was to challenge the gender division of labour which existed in the Party itself. Not only did Communist women have experiences to relate about their workplaces and their trade unions, they also began to share experiences about their domestic lives and their experiences as members and functionaries in the Party.

This challenge opened up a political, social and cultural Pandora's box. If in the original Greek myth Hope was all that remained when the box was opened, then in the ensuing Party struggle, Communist women battled to maintain the hope that eventually the Party would recognise the essential need to redefine dialectical materialism which included not only the

⁵¹⁸. Resolutions and Proposals submitted by Party members and Organisations, Resolutions to the 22nd National Congress, 1970, p.44, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

redefinition of class but also the recognition of the politics of gender.

In the light of the women's liberation movement Party women questioned the nature of the Party as an organisation effected by male chauvinism. Mavis Robertson commented on the fact that the Communist Party was male dominated, stating that "the political priorities are set by male standards and that CPA leaders accept the capitalist definition that trade unions and workers are male and women are 'their wives'". Mavis continues that "the political contribution of women in the Party is to help the men - to do the domestics so that the men can go to meetings and make speeches".⁵¹⁹.

Over the next few years the Party examined its theory and practice in the light of the issues raised regarding gender, definitions of feminism and class. During this examination however, some fierce debates took place as some members recall, particularly when the debates touched on the personal lives and views of Party members. Laurie Aarons comments that "the issues about sexuality and relations between the sexes were often discussed with considerable heat."⁵²⁰.

However, Communist women were persistently refractory. It is an interesting exercise to follow in a chronological order

⁵¹⁹. Mavis Robertson, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

⁵²⁰. Interview with Laurie Aarons, 1991.

some of the discussions and debates which occurred on sexuality and sex roles. Such an exercise demonstrates the ways in which the issues of gender, feminism and class were developing. It also demonstrates the demand which Communist women made about the continual necessity for the Party to forge links with the women's liberation movement.

In July 1970 there was a week-end school held at Minto on the influences of the newly emerging women's liberation movement. As part of the discussion four papers were delivered and discussed:

1. 'How our society views women, how women view themselves and the psychological, social, political implications'.

2. 'The family - its dual role in our society, the positive and negative aspects, its radical potential and should and can it be transformed?'

3. 'Women at work, their attitudes, problems, demands, perspective, organisations.'

4. 'Communists and the radical women's movements',⁵²¹.

⁵²¹. Discussion papers delivered to a weekend Party meeting, Minto, July 18th and 19th, 1970, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

This was one of the first attempts which Party women made to raise issues being dealt with in the women's liberation movement on the social construction of women and on the family.

In the following year another similar discussion was held, again at Minto which indicated that the need for women's social liberation had been embraced by the Party. The agenda was endorsed by the National Executive at its meeting on the 20th and 21st January, 1971 and included a discussion with the aim of "considering a revolutionary approach to women and social liberation with special consideration to the themes:

a) Women, the family and sexual liberation

b) Women and class."⁵²².

At the Sydney District Conference held in 1972 there was a discussion about the need for the Party to integrate many of the demands and issues being raised by the women's liberation movement into the general policy of the Party. The adopted resolution included the view that:

"An important aspect of this process will be for the CPA to strive to eliminate sexist attitudes from its own thinking and practice and to examine

⁵²². Minutes of the CPA National Executive meeting held on 20th and 21st January 1971, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

what relationships exist between the exploitation women suffer as workers and as women. In this respect the following are suggested:

...(vi) break down stereotyped roles in the Party that relegate most women to routine technical and administrative work which inhibits their political potential."⁵²³.

The gender question was now on the Party's political agenda.

In a 1977 Tribune article entitled "Women's Liberation and the Communist Party", Communist women made a further statement about the relationship between the Party and the movement:

"The CPA...is bound to reflect the same sorts of conflicts between men and women that are around in the larger society - this is true of all left groups.

As communists we recognise that the working class is decisive for revolution. But without the intervention of an autonomous women's movement that struggle will reflect the sexism of capitalist

⁵²³. Resolution adopted at the Sydney District Conference of the CPA held on March 3rd - 5th, 1972, CPA Records, Box 38, Mitchell Library.

society."⁵²⁴.

And in 1974 after its 24th Congress, the Party published a document entitled Summary of Results⁵²⁵. which indicated to members the discussions and decisions which had taken place at that Congress. Under the heading "Women and Liberation" the document stated:

"Both the general political resolution and the decision on women and social liberation focussed on the need to end the social division of labour based on sex and to work to change the social practices, attitudes and assumptions that help to perpetuate it.".⁵²⁶.

As with the orthodox definition of class, the Party's practice in relation to the roles assigned to men and women reflected the sex-stereotyping which occurred in society in general. Such practice exemplified the 1930s retreat of international Communism away from a revolutionary feminism and towards the patriarchal subordination of women based on gender inequality.

After the women's liberation movement began to gain momentum in Australia, Party women began to examine their own lives

⁵²⁴. "Women's Liberation and the Communist Party", Tribune, (May 25th 1977), p.7.

⁵²⁵. Summary of Results, decisions of the CPA's 24th National Congress, 1974, CPA Records, Box 4, Mitchell Library.

⁵²⁶. Ibid.

both domestically and politically, and to realise that 'the woman question' as expressed historically within Communism lacked a gender analysis and that therefore the Party's position on class politics was inadequate.

But to raise the issue of gender did more than just challenge Party theory. It touched on the core of relationships between men and women in the Party, about the way they worked together, held meetings, set agendas and political priorities, and even more difficult and threatening, about the ways in which Communists lived together. The personal lives of members were taboo areas for political discussion,⁵²⁷ and now women in the Party were making links between their political and personal lives and demanding that a revolution occur in both.

Joyce Stevens recalls that "the most controversial questions in those early years were the questions about the family and sexuality and shitwork and the revolutionary party. They were really to do with the whole notion of woman and gender."⁵²⁸ Joyce comments that these issues raised very difficult questions.⁵²⁹

Party women began to contest and challenge the old orthodoxy which defined women as domestic and ancillary whether in the

⁵²⁷. See Stevens, Taking, Chapter 3, "Personal Politics and Double Standards", pp.100-106.

⁵²⁸. Interview with Joyce Stevens, 1990.

⁵²⁹. Ibid.

home or when working for the Party. Judy Munday comments on some of the ways in which the gender division of labour operated in the Party:

"If you went to a Party branch function you would be told that men can bring a bottle and women can bring a plate. This was so reflective of the way that the Party saw the roles in the family and in society generally. I thought that it was grossly unfair that men could just bring a bottle but women had to go away and think about preparing something."⁵³⁰

This role assignment was also challenged by women who worked as functionaries in at Dixon Street, the Party headquarters in Sydney. Again Judy Munday recalls some of the issues which had to be taken up by women who worked in at the Party building:

"When I first went to work for the Party, it was the women who put the kettle on and made the tea, and women who did the dishes. Some people thought that this was a small issue to raise but it wasn't. It was really reflective of the social attitudes held in the Party towards women."⁵³¹.

⁵³⁰. Interview with Judy Munday, 1991.

⁵³¹. Ibid.

In the July 1981 issue of Praxis, Aileen Beaver in an article entitled, "A History of the Sydney Women's Collective", recalls the struggle which took place in the Party on the question of gender and the sexual division of labour.

"A small group of Sydney women full-time Party workers bore the brunt of the struggle, challenging the defined roles of women Party workers - they were not supposed to be involved in political work in working hours, such as the women's movement, yet it was O.K. to make the tea and coffee, type up reports for others (usually men) to give at meetings and conferences." ⁵³².

One illustration of how Party women 'bore the brunt' of this struggle is provided by Joyce Stevens and it involved the issue of 'shitwork and the revolutionary party'. In the August 1972 issue of Join Hands, Joyce wrote an article on this issue and described the following:

"Two delegates to the [1972] National Congress described themselves as shitworkers for the Communist Party in their credential forms. It would be interesting to know if anyone receiving these views thought that either of these two were men, but of course they weren't...A great deal of

⁵³². Aileen Beaver, "A History of the Sydney Women's Collective", Praxis, No. 23, (July 1981), Special Issue, p.19.

hostility has been expressed at this action which has been described as despicable, the most insulting and derogatory term ever used in the Communist Party, part of a power struggle, and it has been said that it is a principle that there is no such thing as shitwork in a revolutionary party."⁵³³.

This debate led as Joyce Stevens later indicated, to excesses on both sides but she says that it was very difficult to have the notion accepted that the social division of labour held women in oppressed positions. Joyce states that:

"Men would say 'women aren't the only ones who do shit work. I mean look at Harry and Jack etc.' So a lot of debate in the early days was very personalised."⁵³⁴

Tensions within the Party building came to the point where a meeting of women comrades who worked for both the National and Sydney Districts was held in early March 1972.⁵³⁵ This meeting arose from disagreements and arguments which had occurred in the building about "methods of work, allocation of responsibilities, relations between comrades, women's

⁵³³. Stevens, "Shitwork and the Revolutionary Party", p.13.

⁵³⁴. Interview with Joyce Stevens, 1990.

⁵³⁵. Internal Party memorandum, signed L. Aarons and N. Olive, 15th March, 1972, CPA Records, Box 69, Mitchell Library.

liberation and its application in the work of full-time workers and a number of other questions."⁵³⁶ The meeting decided that those present should set out their views on these issues in writing and that these views be circulated for collective consideration. Another meeting of comrades working at Dixon Street was then held on April 5th, 1972.⁵³⁷

Joyce expands on some of the issues which were discussed at these meetings and on some of the debates which occurred:

"We had endless debates in the Party building about issues such as whether or not typewriters oppressed women and why do such a stupid thing as putting a sticker on a typewriter. What's a typewriter? a typewriter is a typewriter. How can a typewriter oppress a woman? So then we had to go into things like, well, how come all the people sitting over here at the typewriters are women and all the men sit behind desks with pens in their hands. Some of the arguments would be rational and some would be heated...the sticker thing was considered to be one of the most outrageous things that we did."⁵³⁸.

The stickers which were placed on the typewriters said amongst other things "better dead than wed" and what a contentious

⁵³⁶. Ibid.

⁵³⁷. Ibid.

⁵³⁸. Interview with Joyce Stevens, 1990.

issue was raised when Party women questioned such sacred myths as marriage, the family and sexuality.

From the early days of the women's liberation movement, women began to challenge the institutions of marriage and the family, and to question and analyse the cultural, psychological and social implications which these institutions had for women. Communist women took these issues and debates into the Party.

A young woman becoming a wife should think of her new state not as one that is to make her happy but as one in which she is to make her husband happy. Her own happiness will be a by-product of that determination, and will be assured in no other way...The good wife realises that in becoming a wife she contracts to forget self and put her husband's happiness above her own wishes and desires...In the marriage contract she handed over the right to her body for the actions of marriage; she does not try to take that back again. She contracted to make a home for her husband in whatever place his work might call him; she does not proclaim any spurious independence in that regard...In dress she tries to please, even in the privacy of the home; in speech she encourages, comforts and shares her husband's interests; in her household tasks she tries to be perfect that he may think of no place as more pleasant than his home.

Catholic Weekly, 26th February, 1953.

CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND HIEROPHANTIC CULTURE.

From a 1990s historical hindsight, there is little need to speculate about why the women's liberation movement blossomed and burst forth in Western capitalist countries in the 1960s. The social sterility and psychological miasmas of the 1950s contained the seeds of a multiplicity of rebellions.

The 1950s was not only the period when the old, carved oak dining table was discarded from the dining room, to be replaced by the 'modern', grey and silver formica, and when multi-coloured and garish plastic was mandatory, it was also the period when women were mendaciously and ignominiously wooed and pursued by consumer capitalism, and the dream world of mythical femininity.

"The suburban house and the consumer revolution made possible by technology on the one hand and hire-purchase on the other, helped undermine traditional ways of life and values."⁵³⁹

The burgeoning pop music industry reiterated to young women at every minute of the day, just how important being a 'real' woman was. The 'real' meant being feminine. That translated as being passively in waiting for 'Mr. Right'. Such feminine behaviour indicated that a young girl would mature into a socially and psychologically well adjusted older girl. Dusty

⁵³⁹. Curthoys and Merritt, Vol. 1, p.2.

Springfield sang "all you've got to do is care just for him, do the things he wants to do.. and you will be his", whilst women read magazines which told them more specifically how to "stand by your man", and were encouraged to engage in domestic and personal consumerism, so that both home and body could be acceptably aesthetic and accessible to her man.

But the cracks, contradictions and strains inherent in post-war definitions and constructions of gender had to finally split asunder. The tensions between the myth and reality caused a social and political earthquake. Against tides of opposition, derision and harassment, feminists in the 1960s fought to break the chains of 1950s sterility and stagnation and the suffocation of sanctimonious morality and stultifying suburbia.

"The contradiction which appears clearly in capitalism between family and industry, private and public, personal and impersonal, is the fissure in women's consciousness through which revolt erupts.".⁵⁴⁰

Betty Friedan wrote a best seller ⁵⁴¹ and women rushed to form a ground swell of rebellious dissatisfaction and angry indignation at the system, and at the ideologies and processes essential to that system, which suggested that if a woman was

⁵⁴⁰. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.xv.

⁵⁴¹. Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, (New York, 1963).

not happy with her post-war modern life, then she was a misfit or mad or both, and in any case needed tranquillising.

By the late 1960s Australian women were becoming involved in a rebellion against the suburban familial environment and the boring, deskilled, low paid work in which they were employed. Janne Reid comments:

"How to solve the problems of women in the workforce? I haven't the answers but the only glimmer of hope I've seen is by the young girls and women in women's liberation. For the first time in my knowledge they are challenging the whole myth of femininity and the role of the family. They are becoming angry and vocal at being the exploited half of the population...I feel it will only be by a major confrontation by women on these issues that even a potential solution will be possible."⁵⁴²

Feminists began necessarily vehement attacks on 'the family', because it was identified as the social construction which had historically and continually reproduced the economic, social, psychological and ideological oppression and subordination of women.⁵⁴³ The family unit designated gender constructions and divisions, and the ideology of the family adamantly maintained

⁵⁴². Janne Reid, Unpublished paper on Women and Trade Unions, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

⁵⁴³. Rowbotham, The Past, p.18.

that the only permissible, normal and acceptable sexual and human relationships which could exist between men and women were between those who were married, and preferably, had children. Homosexuality, 'living together' and divorce were unnatural, immoral and sinful. A divorcee was of course regarded by many men as sexual 'fair game'.

To attack the family unit and to demand that society accept diverse definitions of sexuality was viewed by many as threatening the 'very fabric of society and civilisation as we know it'. Many feminists received vicious abuse and attacks demonstrated by Germaine Greer's visit to Australia in the 1970s.

Feminists undertook an examination and analysis of the gender division of labour, particularly as it is practiced and perpetuated in the family. Women's social and domestic experiences demonstrated the complex ways in which the hegemonic ideology of family, gender and sexuality are structured, constructed and operate.⁵⁴⁴

Such analyses illustrated that the gender division of labour and sex stereotyped roles socially maintain and ideologically structure the nuclear family model of husband (breadwinner), wife (domestic) and, by the 1970s, their 2.5 children. Underpinning and supporting this domestic division of labour is the dominating culture of masculinity and femininity which

⁵⁴⁴. Ibid., pp.21-22.

enshrines certain acceptable sexual mores and practices and structures sexuality within a social and psychological ideology sanctified by the hierophantic powers of church and state.

Feminists also began to analyse the ways in which these socio-economic and cultural paradigms operate to ensure women's oppression and to maintain men's power. Socialist feminists began to examine the historical relationship between the nuclear family and industrial capitalism, and to develop theoretical perspectives on the relationship between wage labour, capitalist production and the domestic mode of production. Veronica Beechey summarises some of these findings:

"The background against which the position of women in capitalist production must be understood is the separation of the family from the means of production, which occurs in the course of capital accumulation...As capitalist production develops the production of commodities for exchange takes place within the workshop or factory, while the woman as a domestic labourer in the family continues to produce use values for family consumption, whether or not she is also engaged in wage labour in the factory, workshop or home."⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁵. Veronica Beechey, "Some notes on Female Wage Labour in Capitalist Production", Capital and Class, No. 3, (1977), p.48.

To date, socialist feminists have evolved an extensive body of academic and theoretical work on the role of the family, on the dominating capitalist ideology of sexuality, and on how these maintain and support capitalist production, labour power relations and social reproduction. These studies and the experiences of women which have been vocalised via the women's liberation movement, have identified women's powerlessness and exploitation as features of these processes, particularly through the operation of the gender division of labour.

Mavis Robertson commented in 1971 that one important area for research was the family, and noted that the women's movement contributed to a general understanding about the ways in which capitalism uses the family institution to maintain its own rule:

"Women have given vivid descriptions of how the family disciplines children and conditions male workers while repressing women; how it is a centre of consumption, how it hides from view the socially necessary labor which goes on behind closed doors and how it reinforces the concept that many responsibilities which should be social remain individual.".⁵⁴⁶

Feminists have maintained that the social, economic and cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity sustain

⁵⁴⁶. Robertson, Report, p.4.

women's secondary role both domestically and in the paid workforce and that definitions of gender have ensured that women's inequality is entrenched both in the home and in the workplace.

Socialist feminists examined Marxist orthodoxy in relation to issues on 'the family' and 'gender'. There have been many debates on traditional Marxist definitions of wages, production and labour processes, as well as on concepts such as 'the industrial reserve army'. Traditional Marxist theory on these issues has now been more fully informed by analyses of the role of the State in maintaining the capitalist mode of production and the relationship between the development of the welfare state and the ideology of the family.

"...the state enacts legislation in various ways constitutive of a family in which dependency of women and children, or conditions become legally enforceable and are progressively incorporated into the administrative policies of welfare agencies, education and health care."⁵⁴⁷.

Feminists insisted, and still insist, that the patriarchal family, although preceding the rise of industrial capitalism, remains fundamental to the economic, social, political and ideological framework of the capitalist mode of production. "Male supremacy, marriage, and the structure of wage labour -

⁵⁴⁷. Smith, p.31.

each of these aspects of women's oppression has been crucial to the resurgence of the women's struggle.".⁵⁴⁸.

For socialist feminists it was necessary to analyse and incorporate the role of the family as it operates within capitalism, into a Marxist critique of class struggle and revolution. These processes again involved redefining orthodox Marxist theory and practice so that a feminist socialist dialectical materialism could be advanced and embodied within traditional Marxist definitions. Mavis Robertson comments:

"Feminism has disclosed to socialists that capitalism rests on workers, the housewife and the proletarian.

Thus the demand for class struggle, if it ignores the crucial role that women perform for the maintenance of capitalism, as house workers and mothers, and it if ignores the role of the family which maintains the false divisions between personal and political life and acts as a basic unit of consumption, then class struggle will always be truncated. In all probability there will be no socialist revolution and if there is, it will be distorted and incomplete.".⁵⁴⁹.

⁵⁴⁸. Marlene Dixon, "Why Women's Liberation?", a Ramparts Reprint, Women and Liberation, (1970), CPA, draft, p.6.

⁵⁴⁹. Robertson, "Nobody Lives Happily ever After", p.17.

Marx and Engels discussed the family and women's position as housewives. One of the most quoted works in relation to this issue is that of Engels' The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, although Lenin also referred to this question on a number of occasions:

"If we do not draw women into public activity, into the militia, into political life; if we do not tear women away from the deadening atmosphere of household and kitchen; then it is impossible to secure real freedom, it is impossible even to build democracy, let alone socialism.".⁵⁵⁰

As within the general conventional Marxist view on 'the woman question', the problems raised by the politics of housework and gender would be ameliorated after the revolution. Socialist feminists had to tenaciously fight for a reconsideration and redefinition of many of these issues, and this necessitated criticism of the old Marxist texts and tenets. Beechey summarises some of the problems which arose when a feminist socialist critique was made of Engels' work.

Beechey states that whilst Engels is correct in identifying that the centrality of production and the family determine the position of women and that this has been an historic phenomenon, Engels' theories are deficient in a number of

⁵⁵⁰. V.I. Lenin, "Letters from Afar, Letter III", Collected Works, Vol. 23, p.329.

respects:

"(i) That he fails to recognise the role of the woman's domestic labour in reproducing labour power within the family;

(ii) That he does not regard the sexual division of labour as problematic, and therefore requiring explanation;

(iii) That he does not analyse the role of the State in reproducing the position of women within the family, and in circumscribing the forms of employment available to women;

(iv) That he fails to analyse the ideology of domesticity which is involved in reproducing a particular form of family and the relations of male domination and female subordination;

(v) That he uncritically presumes that the monogamous family would disappear among the working class as women were drawn into social production."⁵⁵¹.

Whilst the criticisms are numerous, most socialist feminists made such appraisals not as an act of rejecting Engels and

⁵⁵¹. Beechey, p.47.

traditional Marxism, but in the spirit of developing a more informed Marxist theoretical perspective on gender.

Women in the Communist Party also raised these issues within the Party. Martha Ansara commented in Join Hands that:

"Until recently few explanations of the continued existence of the family had been offered. The havoc of the personal life of the working class especially the problems women faced was not considered political and only recent CPA programs have indicated that capitalist exploitation is also the crisis of our private lives."⁵⁵².

Just as challenging the status quo on ideas about the family and sexuality were met with hostility in society generally, women in the Communist Party who raised these issues also experienced a difficult time in the Party. Communist women identified the task as a revolutionary challenge which must try to demystify the position of women as defined by bourgeois society⁵⁵³, but it became clear that the bourgeois definition of women's position was also in many ways accepted by the Party.

By the late 1960s, the culture of the family was as strong in

⁵⁵². Martha Ansara, Marie Taylor, and Margot Oliver, "Origins of Women's Oppression", Join Hands, (March 1976), p.17.

⁵⁵³. Women and Social Liberation, 1970, p.14.

the Communist Party as it was in bourgeois society. The development of this position owed as much to the 1930s international Communist rejection of and retreat from a variety of feminist positions, as it did to the influences of Australian society generally on a political Party operating within that society.

This historical position had led the Party to a view that the emancipation of women could be defined within terms of equal pay, the provision of kindergartens and the opportunity for women to have access to work and education, and "beyond that 'socialism was the answer'".⁵⁵⁴ Mavis Robertson continues:

"The defined role of woman was mostly ignored and seldom challenged so that the left added weight to all the concepts of woman defined by bourgeois society and accepted as 'natural'".⁵⁵⁵

Kollontai's views on women's sexuality as expressed in writings such as Red Love were long forgotten in the Australian Communist Party, until Communist women in the 1970s re-discovered her works.

Ironically however, whilst progressive views on marriage and sexuality had been rejected by international Communism decades before, those in society who were vehemently anti-Communist

⁵⁵⁴. Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.5.

⁵⁵⁵. Ibid.

used issues of morality as solid reasons why Australians should reject Communism. Those of us who were pummelled and moulded by a 1950s Catholic education, particularly if delivered by Irish nuns, remember the two sided Catholic coin of denunciation and denigration of Communism. On the one hand we were told that Communists were amoral, believing in free love, sex outside of marriage, abortion and contraception; on the other hand Communists were described as dour, unhappy people most marked by women not allowed to wear make-up.

This 1950s view, and the entrenched ideology of gender and family meant that contradictions existed in the Party's theory and practice on these issues. Whilst workers on the shop floor may have accepted and expected Communist delegates to take revolutionary positions on industrial issues, these same workers would not have supported such revolutionary views on issues which impinged on their domestic environment. Indeed, generally speaking, the support which the Communist Party received in individual workplaces was never reflected in overall, long-term membership or electoral support. This may have been for several reasons, but the 1950s view of Communists as amoral, subversive, violent revolutionaries maintained a tenacious hold on the Australian political and social psyche.

Laurie Aarons makes the following comment on the Party's dilemma:

"The idea of the family was strong. Even if Communists didn't agree with the idea, they had to publicly agree with it. You can't talk to people and have them listen if you immediately say things which will turn them off. It was the same with morality issues, about whether we supported divorce or not, for example. We always stood up for the right for abortion, even when the Soviet Union changed, but we had to be careful about how we supported these things if we wanted to get anywhere.".⁵⁵⁶

This public agreement had however, been made in strong terms in the years prior to the influence of the women's liberation movement. In the Party's policy document on women, referred to in the previous chapter, the following statement is found under the heading of "The Family":

"Communists believe in the preservation and protection of the family in society, that nothing but the very best is good enough for children and that motherhood should be honoured and protected.

However, women's talents should not be restricted to the sphere of home maker alone. When society makes provision to release women from household duties, they will be able to take their place on a

⁵⁵⁶. Interview with Laurie Aarons, 1990.

much larger scale in the economy of the country.

Only a socialist society consciously plans to release women from their household tasks so that they can take part in production, ending for all time the age-old inequalities which have kept women in a subordinate position."⁵⁵⁷.

However, with the influences of the women's liberation movement, this orthodox Communist position on women was challenged and rejected by women in the Communist Party. In the 1970 draft document Women and Social Liberation Party women identified the issues being taken up in the women's liberation movement and agitated to have these issues firmly placed on the Party's political agenda.

"It is the whole concept of the family unit, as a necessary basic structure of bourgeois society, which must come back into the considerations of revolutionaries and be challenged, not only because it oppresses women but because of its influence on everyone."⁵⁵⁸.

As Joyce Stevens commented when discussing the gender division of labour, there was no political culture in the Party which could enable an adequate Marxist analysis of these issues to

⁵⁵⁷. Communist Party Policy for Women, p.1.

⁵⁵⁸. Women and Social Liberation, 1970, p.9.

be made.⁵⁵⁹ Persistent feminist struggle was essential.

The daily experiences of many Communist women, despite a view that Communists had of themselves as progressive, were no different in many instances to that of their sisters generally.

Joyce Stevens comments further on her own personal experience:

"Nobody ever questioned the division of labor in the family. I can remember that I used to fight with my husband about housework, because I couldn't ever really accept that if we both worked, I had to do all the housework, or, that I had to thank him for anything he did in the house, as if it was all my area of responsibility.

I can remember on occasions when Jim would actually cook tea, that if any of his Party male friends arrived, he would be the butt of jokes, and I remember one of them saying, 'Oh God, you'd never get me doing that.'".⁵⁶⁰

And Barbara Curthoys makes a similar comment about the attitude to domestic work in the Party:

⁵⁵⁹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁵⁶⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

"You needed to fight as a Communist for a better attitude to sharing the domestics, so that women could go to meetings for example. Some men never did share, and some men did. We had this battle in the Party, and I think that there were men who were male chauvinist about it.".⁵⁶¹

The issues being raised here were as threatening to some members of the Communist Party as they were to society generally. Debates on these issues in the Party were sometimes hostile, personal and heated. Attacks on the attitudes of members to issues on 'the family' and domestic life were viewed quite ominously by some in the Party.

"Some Communists are still terrified of discussions on sexual freedom, the oppressive role of monogamy, abortion, prostitution, contraception and sexual role-playing, the understanding of which are fundamental to the real liberation of all human beings.".⁵⁶²

Joyce Stevens recalls that Party women organised several public functions so that there could be discussions on issues with other women in the liberation movement. These discussions were open to men and Joyce remembers that:

⁵⁶¹. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

⁵⁶². Gillett and Fisher, p.43.

"Every time Party men made your blood run cold. I can remember one in particular. We were talking about the division of labour in the family, this male Communist got up and said that his wife, who wasn't at the discussion, was involved in the women's liberation movement and that he spoke on her behalf. He said that she was pleased that she had responsibility for the home, and that she chose to stay at home and for him to go to work and earn more money. Now I was in a CR group with his wife and I knew exactly what she thought about the division of labour at home."⁵⁶³.

By the 1970s, feminists were adamantly stating that women's liberation of necessity, meant challenging the hegemony of the ideology of the family. The Communist Party could not ignore this demand if it was to seriously accept, and be accepted by, the women's liberation movement. The influence of the movement on the Party was cathartic and transmuting. Judy Munday makes the following comment:

"The Party prior to women's liberation, seemed to accept the family and women's place within it. I guess that people thought that they were doing the right thing in trying to improve the position of women in the family. But, of course, unless women broke out of that position nothing was ever going

⁵⁶³. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

to change."⁵⁶⁴.

Communist women persisted and pursued such discussions in the Party. Questions were raised about whether it was possible to maintain and support the ideology of the family and improve women's position within it, or whether it was necessary to demand its abolition and replacement with alternative domestic organisation and relationship arrangements.

In the end, Communist women were successful in their fight to change Party policy. The Party document Women and Social Liberation as adopted in 1979 sets out the Party's policy on 'the family':

"Although the nuclear family is promoted as the sole option for emotional security, there are already in existence, even though not yet completely accepted, other expressions of the search for more satisfying solutions...

Communists should promote debates on these questions while defending the right of all people to express their sexuality and supporting changes in legislation, social services and social values to allow real choices about living arrangements and personal relationships for men, women and

⁵⁶⁴. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

children.". ⁵⁶⁵.

These debates and discussions which took place in the women's liberation movement and in the Party involved a multiplicity of complex issues related to the ideology of the family. As this ideology involves social, economic, psychological and cultural ideas and practices, it has a tentacle-like spread over all aspects of women's lives. The hegemonic constructions at the base of this ideology are sustained and socially encoded from one generation to the next.

Raising debates on the family model meant that other concomitant issues relating to women's sexuality, education, domestic labour, and to children and social reproduction were also raised. Socialist feminists began to identify these issues and to evaluate them in order to more comprehensively understand gender and women's oppression, and to further develop a critique which could inform Marxism. Some of the main issues identified are dealt with below, although this is not an exhaustive or exclusive listing.

The Politics of Housework.

As indicated above, housework and domestic labour had been on the Marxist discussion agenda for some time, although it was not until the women's movement that the issues were seriously debated within the Left. In the 1970s, Communist women

⁵⁶⁵. Women and Social Liberation, 1979, p.12.

demanded that these questions be decisively placed on the Party's political agenda.

One starting point for women in the Party was to comment on the traditional Marxist perspective. As Mavis Robertson commented:

"...the work of Engels while describing what happened in history to explain how women came to their present inferior position, does not sufficiently explain why."⁵⁶⁶

Socialist feminists increasingly realised that a Marxist analysis of the domestic mode of production was essential. However, there were a number of contradictory and complex issues involved in the politics of housework. Barbara Ehrenreich sums up some of the points of debate:

"...some feminists have argued that the women's movement should focus on a demand for economic recognition of domestic work, or 'wages for housework'. Such a demand would recognise the strategic position of women as workers and their productive role in society. On the other hand, it has been argued that state subsidisation of women's domestic labour would (1) reinforce the prevailing notion that this is a uniquely female form of

⁵⁶⁶. Robertson, "Victims of Double Oppression", p.4.

labour, and (2) add nothing to the material well being of the working class..."⁵⁶⁷.

The issue of whether housework should be paid or not was taken up by women in the Communist Party and in addition to the debate on the politics of domestic work itself, such debates necessitated a re-thinking by the Party about its definition of 'wages' which had been traditionally associated with labour power and industrial production.⁵⁶⁸

This debate was raised at the 1972 Sydney District Conference of the Party, where a resolution dealing with ways in which the Party could strive to eliminate sexism from its own thinking and practice, was discussed. The resolution called on the Party to "examine what relationship exists between the exploitation women suffer as workers and as women",⁵⁶⁹ and suggested that a number of actions could be taken by the Party including:

"support for the trade union demand for a minimum wage, provided that this is not tied to the concept of a 'family' living wage which reinforces the concept of a wife's economic dependence on a male

⁵⁶⁷. Ehrenreich, p.12.

⁵⁶⁸. See Mavis Robertson, "Towards Liberation: Which Step Now?", Australian Left Review, (March/April 1974), pp.14-18.

⁵⁶⁹. Resolution from the 1972 Sydney District Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, CPA Records, Box 38, Mitchell Library.

breadwinner and ignores the fact that many female workers have dependents and many male workers do not."⁵⁷⁰.

In preparation for the 24th Party Congress held in 1974, there were a number of pre-Congress discussions on issues to be debated at the Congress, and one such discussion focused on the influence of the women's liberation movement on the traditional ideas of Marxism. A number of facets of this question were to be raised including an examination of the CPA program on women and a discussion of issues such as wages policy, payment for housework and childrearing.⁵⁷¹.

Childcare was an issue which Party women had been involved in for many decades prior to the women's liberation movement. With the advent of that movement however, the issue of childcare was placed very firmly on the Party's political agenda as well as on the Left agenda generally. Joyce Stevens comments that Party women played a big role in community child care, particularly in the war and post-war years.

"Some of the local CPA branches were involved in getting some of the first child care which ever existed in a range of places - mostly family day care which was partly government subsidised. Ruth

⁵⁷⁰. Ibid.

⁵⁷¹. Letter by Mavis Robertson to Party members re preparation for the 24th Party Congress, dated 29th November, 1973, CPA Records, Box 18, Mitchell Library.

Crow played a very prominent part in the whole community child care movement and that goes back quite a long time."⁵⁷².

With the influence of the women's movement, childcare became an essential and necessary element in the debate on the family and gender politics. Issues which may have previously received attention in the Party on an individual basis or within the framework of 'the woman question' were now being debated within a socialist feminist critique of women's domestic position, and within the general political framework of social reproduction. Mavis Robertson commented:

"A total view is needed. While child care is crucial, policy on social services, hours of work, employment opportunities, holidays, etc. are all connected... Thousands of years of tradition cannot be eroded quickly, but the point is to take those steps which begin to replace 'women's work' and not to seek solutions which will maintain it, albeit in more comfortable surroundings."⁵⁷³.

The issues of abortion and contraception were some of the first issues taken up by the women's liberation movement. Mavis Robertson recalls that when she was a member of the Eureka Youth League, there were often discussions about

⁵⁷². Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁵⁷³. Robertson, "Towards Liberation: Which Step Now?", p.18.

contraception . Mavis remembers "a very good radical doctor talking to us and telling us that we oughtn't to promote birth control because it was like teaching thieves not to be caught."⁵⁷⁴ And although the public view of the Party was to oppose abortion, "the Communist Party helped all sorts of women have abortions."⁵⁷⁵ Mavis comments further that the period when abortions were illegal was horrific and people forget how horrible it was.⁵⁷⁶

Joyce Stevens recalls that abortion became a big issue because at the time that the women's liberation movement was starting in Sydney, the Heather Brae clinic was raided by police, and the clinic doctors were on trial for performing abortions. Joyce adds that "in terms of something like abortion, it wasn't difficult to convince people that those sorts of campaigns were O.K. within the Party."⁵⁷⁷

By 1972 the Party had a public policy of support for both abortion and contraception. In a reply to a letter from the Ausventure Wilderness Association which had asked the Party what its policy on population control was and if it believed in legalised abortion and free sterilisation clinics, Laurie Aarons had replied on behalf of the Party:

⁵⁷⁴. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

⁵⁷⁵. Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶. Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

"The policy of the CPA supports population control. We believe in the provision of free contraceptives and certainly stand for the abolition of the 'luxury' tax on the contraceptive pill. We also favour free dissemination of information on contraception - to everyone including children. We are in favour not only of legalised abortion, but of abortion on request, and we are also in favour of free birth control clinics, including facilities for sterilisation."⁵⁷⁸

Issues of sex and sexuality were also major topics for debate and discussion, and as a result of a feminist demand that both women's sexuality, and homosexuality were major factors to be considered in relation to women's oppression, socialist feminists examined these issues within the social and political framework of the family and gender.

Within the Communist Party such discussions took place, and Communist women were also involved in direct action to ensure that these issues were high-lighted in the community. Judy Munday was questioned by police when she was handing out the leaflet "What Every Woman Should Know" at Kogarah Girls High School.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁸. Letter from Laurie Aarons, General Secretary of the CPA, in reply to the Ausventure Wilderness Association, dated 19th July, 1972, CPA Records, Box 19, Mitchell Library.

⁵⁷⁹. Judy Munday, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 69, Mitchell Library.

In her 1973 report to the August National Committee meeting, Mavis Robertson stated that the Party needed to develop a meaningful policy on gay liberation.⁵⁸⁰ Such a policy was developed and as with all of the issues mentioned so far, is contained in the 1979 Party document Women and Social Liberation. On the question of lesbianism the document states:

"We will work to change the view that heterosexuality is the only desirable sexuality and that lesbianism is deviant or unnatural. We strive to end all social discrimination against lesbians..."⁵⁸¹.

Divorce was another controversial issue which was raised in relation to women's domestic and social position. Divorce laws and the economic position of women who were deserted and left with children became a subject of discussion, particularly within the legislative environment in the early 1970s. In 1972 the Party made a written submission to the Senate Standing Committee on the Legal and Constitutional question in respect to Divorce Laws and Reform. In developing this submission the Party's National Executive considered the following points:

"1. The concept of guilty parties be ended along with lengthy delays in divorce proceedings.

⁵⁸⁰. Robertson, Report, p.6.

⁵⁸¹. Women and Social Liberation, 1979, p.10.

2. Stress that divorce cannot be considered outside the concept of marriage and the family in our society, including the economic dependence of the wife.

3. Many divorce wrangles concern property.

4. We should argue that women must be accorded equality in social life."⁵⁸².

Many issues about the family, gender politics and women's sexuality were taken up by Party women who insisted that a socialist critique of these questions was essential. Communist women were successful in placing these issues on the Party's agenda and in the development of Party policy on these matters. Whilst the debates within the Party on these issues were often heated, Party women asserted, as did women in the liberation movement, that women's personal lives were an essential element of political theory and practice.

⁵⁸². Letter from Mavis Robertson to National Committee members dated 4th May, 1972, CPA Records, Box 25, Mitchell Library.

Women's liberation has also sought to change conceptions and experience of what it is to be a woman and a man. So throughout the political discourse there are other dialogues, psychological, spiritual, existential. The implications of such explorations and rebellion are uncharted and sometimes emotionally painful in their consequences. There is no knowing where they might lead.

Sheila Rowbotham, The Past is Before Us.

CHAPTER 7: THE PARALLAX VIEW.

The "the personal is political" became one of the most famous, and infamous, of the women's liberation's slogans. It demanded that the theoretical divide between the public and the private be repudiated. It demanded that the homologous outcomes of this divide be razed to the ground. It confronted and defied a number of prevailing maxims about women's political and personal lives. It represents one of the foundation stones of the women's liberation movement which has had an enduring influence on women and their political organisation.

The demand arose out of the empirical experiences of consciousness raising, where the personal aspects of women's lives became the basis of political activities, agendas and polemics. Women peremptorily asked that there be an acknowledgment that the personal relationships between people, especially between men and women, be valid areas for political debate and struggle. Rowbotham notes that the consciousness-raising group had its origins in popular religious movements and was a feature of the Black movement in the United States in the 1960s. ⁵⁸³.

"The organisational form proved to be well suited as a means of conveying the dissatisfaction expressed in the first stages of women's

⁵⁸³. Rowbotham, The Past, p.6.

liberation.".⁵⁸⁴

Consciousness raising assisted women to understand that there are social roots to their oppression. The "personal is political" provided an analysis which stated that problems which had been previously defined as 'personal' have roots in the political system which oppresses women.

"Consciousness raising is the permanent struggle against an ever impinging bourgeois ideology that attacks us not only in the form of political doctrine but also as fears, ambitions, resentments, feelings: the stuff of everyday political practice."⁵⁸⁵

The "personal is political" in the early days of the women's liberation movement, raised a political equation which called for a political solution via struggle and liberation. In this context, the demand was a radical one. It challenged the status quo definitions of gendered space. It audaciously dismantled the definition of acceptable and nonacceptable behaviour and mores for women as political activists. It was however, to be the Sturm und Drang of the movement.

The status quo view of the public and private spheres of women's and men's activities, whilst based on chauvinistic

⁵⁸⁴. Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵. Feminist Revolution, p.199.

assumptions, was unquestioningly adopted and accepted by the 1960s New Left.

"...the emphasis in revolutionary culture was thwarted just as it awakened, because the culture which was presented as 'revolutionary' was so blatantly phallic...The revolutionaries of '68 tore off the respect and stripped the authorities. Street-fighting man - the cult of the loudest - went around with naked genitals."⁵⁸⁶

These experiences provided the material conditions in which women would begin to question aspects of their personal lives, and question the male definition of 'politics' which had rendered women's political contributions invisible.

The private sphere, if recognised within the traditional political arena, was defined as an appendage of the political economy.

"As the American historian Eli Zaretsky has argued, it was not until the rebirth of a feminist movement in the last ten years that issues related to private life were projected out of the realm of theory and into the arena of political

⁵⁸⁶. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness p.24.

struggle."⁵⁸⁷

The "personal is political" was not simply a demand about women's private lives; not simply an exercise in raising a complexity of psychological issues. It was also a political strategy which feminists have continually understood to be mandatory to any political organising.

"The feminist insight that inter-group antagonisms and systems of domination are expressed not only in political-economic structures, but at the level of individual interactions, is a lesson which political movements can ignore only at their own risk. The emerging feminist movement of the late sixties demanded that political ideals be matched with high standards of interpersonal conduct and mutual respect."⁵⁸⁸

For the Communist Party of Australia, the demand that personal politics be placed on the political agenda created contradictory dilemmas. As previously stated, Party women had been encouraged to be activists both within the Party and for the Party in the public arena. So the divide, in political terms, between the public and private for women comrades, was a little less clearly defined than within society generally.

⁵⁸⁷. Ehrenreich, "Contemporary Feminism and Socialist Movements", p.11.

⁵⁸⁸. Ibid., p.14.

However, this public arena activity still took place within a traditional social definition which did not recognise the politics of gender. Joyce Stevens, writing of pre-women's liberation movement days, notes that the prevailing social view was that "activities inside the family and in personal relationships were private matters and beyond the arena of politics".⁵⁸⁹

The Communist Party view of women as comrades was a parallax view. In the Party, Communist women were perceived from an observation point which was obscured by sexist and chauvinist definitions. This parallax view displaced women's political activities, and this displacement was to form the basis of Party women's anger, frustration and militancy, when they became involved in the women's liberation movement.

The parallax view allowed Party women to be active within the public political arena, although the view was firmly predicated on the old double standard. The Party also, through its Control Commission, demanded a say in the personal and moral lives of Party members.⁵⁹⁰

"Party leaders did not encourage women activists to have children, and on occasions actively discouraged it, but in their own lives many of these men considered that a wife's dedication to

⁵⁸⁹. Stevens, Taking, p.100.

⁵⁹⁰. Ibid.

her husband and family's needs was a political contribution to the work of the party. Like other men in intellectually stimulating work, they therefore often found that the women they worked with were more 'interesting' than their wives, and set up various sexual alliances."⁵⁹¹

The double standard also provided the context in which women could be chastised and berated, if not expelled, for moral behaviour which was considered unbecoming for a female comrade, or as in the case of Jean Devanney, if a woman demanded that issues of sex and sexuality be taken up in the Party in a way which demanded empirical equality for women.
⁵⁹².

The "personal is political" also pointed to another practice in the Party which Communist women took up. This issue involved the ways in which inner Party debates were conducted and the ways in which women identified their treatment within these debates. Theoretically, of course, such debates are supposed to occur so that differing views on issues can be canvassed and as a result of discussions, decisions made. Such discussions are to be of a non-personal nature. There is no parliamentary privilege. What there was in the Party however, was a patronising paralipsis.

⁵⁹¹. Ibid., p.101.

⁵⁹². See Joyce Stevens' reference to the Party's treatment of Jean Devanney in Taking, pp.101-103.

"Most men and some women find strong combative women hard to take - behaviour that is tolerated in men is a scandal in women. I have found at almost all levels of the party in official cadre discussions that criticism about women's personalities are almost always the first questions raised about them....It is often a way of avoiding a discussion of political differences and of putting down uppity women."⁵⁹³

Mavis Robertson recalls an episode about such debates:

"When I was in the Communist Party leadership I can remember an altercation and one of the Party leaders said to me "We don't mind you having strong opinions. What we mind is that you pursue them so strongly." I said that I didn't know people got respect for pursuing their ideas weakly. I used to answer back but I often felt hurt and bewildered."⁵⁹⁴

By demanding that the "personal is political" and by its deictic influence, the women's liberation movement assisted women to reclaim parts of their lives which would otherwise have been forgotten or never recognised. For many Party women,

⁵⁹³. Joyce Stevens, "National C.P.A. Women's Organiser Reports", Join Hands, (Summer 1981/1982), p.11.

⁵⁹⁴. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

the personal sacrifices and drudgery, although traditionally viewed as Party work and working for the revolution, often went unrecognised or remained invisible.

Again Mavis Robertson remembers some of the sacrifices which were made for the revolution:

"In the 1950s, people went overseas to study and Alec (my husband) went to study in China. It was all secret because at that time it was illegal to travel to China. I stayed at home and had a baby and my baby wasn't seen by my husband until he was about 15 months old, and it was many, many months after the child was born that I even had any acknowledgment that his father knew that he was born. The secrecy was ridiculous because I'm sure that members of the security service knew exactly where Alec was. My father thought that my husband had left me and that was painful - but if you want to go through a hard school of learning to be independent, it's not a bad one.

I did such things because I thought this was the way you sacrificed for the revolution. I resented some of it, but in retrospect, I think that it was useful when young to be forced to stand on your own feet."⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁵. Ibid.

Just as the demand for recognition of the personal had a catalytic effect upon women in the women's movement, it had a similar effect upon Party women. When such issues were raised in the Party there was, as with other women's liberation issues, an initial sexist, response. Paula Rix recalls some of these early days of women's liberation influence:

"One of the first memories that I have was that of taking up and reflecting upon personal issues. These were some of the basic notions of feminism ala 1969. You started to look into the personal practices. At that time women (in the Party) began to see that they had been sold a pup because of their being placed second in the Party, and also because there were disadvantages to being active in the Party. It opened up a big sore."⁵⁹⁶

This influence assisted Party women to address some of the imbalances and discrepancies within Party theory and practice, particularly as they related to women's political activities and to Party agendas. However, from the mid-1970s onwards the differences within the women's movement about how to define and how to develop strategies about women's oppression and liberation became noticeable. These differences stemmed from various views about theories related to gender and sexuality.

⁵⁹⁶. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

Within the history of the women's liberation movement, the trajectory from "personal is political" to "personal is personal" is instructive. It is demonstrative of what can occur when class analysis is displaced. By the mid-1970s, the early women's liberation polemic of placing personal politics within a context of liberation struggle was coming to an end. Socialist feminists would have to fight to maintain a profile under the barrage of developing radical lesbian and cultural feminist argument and attack.

"In respect to ideology, some men and women freely interpret the slogan 'the personal is political' to mean that women seek personal solutions. While some women do seek personal solutions, as do some men, the real meaning of that slogan is that women's condition is not individual, not her own fault, but arises from her situation in society and therefore political solutions have to be found, and it underlines the fact that to be really political, we must understand our own personal oppression. If the concept that the personal is political were grasped, not only by women, but by men, socialist consciousness would take a leap forward."⁵⁹⁷

Over the next decade, a number of factors would coalesce to prevent the "leap forward" from taking place. From the mid-1970s onwards, with the ascent of economic recession,

⁵⁹⁷. Robertson, Report, p.3.

pressures would be placed on the women's movement about the funding of various initiatives which feminists had earlier been able to hail as triumphs, particularly in relation to women's health, to issues of domestic violence and women's employment.

During the first decade of the women's movement Communist women contributed in very empirical ways to linking issues raised in the movement with practical application in the community. This was especially the case in areas such as women's services and in trade unions.

However, from the late 1970s onwards, there would be increasing difficulty in developing a praxis based on these experiences. In an editorial article in Scarlet Woman, the editors pondered the future directions of the journal.⁵⁹⁸ The problems were not simply practical problems about the aims of the journal, they also included questions about issues and ways in which debate could be stimulated.

"Perhaps a partial answer to these questions lies in the limitations that have emerged around socialist feminism itself. One aspect of this is that generally speaking, there are only a few Western socialist feminist writers who have come up with very much which builds on and develops further

⁵⁹⁸. Editorial article, "New Directions for Scarlet Woman", Scarlet Woman, Issue 21, (Autumn 1986), p.2.

our ideas and theories."⁵⁹⁹

In Australia in mid-1973, the Festival of Light was launched, and in Chile, the Allende regime was brutally crushed. In 1975 the Fraser coup took place. Right wing ideology was once again on the rise. The Australian right, supported by well-funded think-tanks and the finances of corporate capitalism, made serpentine moves from the wet to the dry.

For socialists, socialist feminists and the Communist Party there were a multiplicity of daily battles which would slowly drain accumulated collective energies. The candle of socialist prospects appeared to be burning lower and lower.

"...does the socialist movement have practical solutions to offer? Can it provide answers in a language ordinary people can understand? What does it have to say about the many concerns raised by new movements for change? Can socialism be made an inspiring alternative to the disappointments of the Labor Government's 'economic rationalism' and the menace of the New Right?".⁶⁰⁰

Such economic pressures would not only enable state cooption and incorporation of activities and enterprises previously

⁵⁹⁹. Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰. Socialist Renewal: Where to Now?, Main resolution of the 29th CPA National Congress, held in June 1987, p.1.

thought of as radical and revolutionary, some feminists would accept resolutions to these pressures which were based on individual solutions rather than on the collectivism of the early movement.

Language itself was coopted. One heard surfers refer to 'radical' waves. The more insidious expression of 'radical right' indicated that the battle lines had been drawn. The left floundered in response. It acknowledged itself to be in a state of crisis.⁶⁰¹ One view of this situation is provided by David Goodman, reviewing Alex Callinicos's book Against Postmodernism, A Marxist Critique:

"The aestheticism and apocalypticism of post-modernist social thought suits the mood of a generation of left intellectuals forever marked by their early experience of defeat in 1968 and now controlled by an 'aspiration to a consumption oriented lifestyle'.".⁶⁰²

In addition such individual solutions and economic pressures arose at a time when two other contexts were impinging upon the Communist Party of Australia. The first of these was the acceptance of discourse politics, particularly the theories

⁶⁰¹. See Stuart Hall, The Hard Road to Renewal, (London, 1988), for a discussion of Thatcherism and the crisis of the Left in Britain.

⁶⁰². David Goodman, reviewing Alex Callinicos, "Against Postmodernism - A Marxist Critique", Arena, No. 96, (1991), p.167.

of French philosophers which were only analysed by a number of Western communist parties with a pusillanimous effort, and the second, running parallel with the first, was the undertaking in 1984 of a socialist renewal within the CPA.⁶⁰³ The outcome of these two political contexts would serve to disengage the Party from being able to posit an adequate response to the growing anti-class analysis occurring within the women's movement, as it was also occurring within the left itself.

The differences within the women's movement were occurring over developing feminist theories of consciousness, oppression and gender. Socialist feminists had acknowledged the importance of recognising the necessity of psychological issues for women.

"Their [men's] revolution has a symbolism for the outer shape of things and the inner world goes along on the old tracks. But this is an incomplete picture; we know, not as an abstract idea, but from our experience of our specific material situation, that our consciousness as women is inseparable from our relation to the encounters of our anatomy. This is true of childbirth, and of sexuality."⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³. See Australian Socialism: a Proposal for Renewal, Resolution of the 28th CPA National Congress held in November 1984.

⁶⁰⁴. Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, p.36.

Such views about the essentialness of consciousness, particularly in relation to sexuality, as well as to other areas of womens' lives had come from the early discussions and consciousness raising groups which had been the hallmark of the second wave of feminism.

At the women's commission held in 1973 in the Teachers Auditorium women spoke of their experiences, some for the first time speaking in public. They spoke about physical and sexual assaults; about "rape, pack rape, unfulfilled sexuality and unfulfilled lives" and lesbians also spoke out about their discrimination and lack of acceptance.⁶⁰⁵

But over the next few years the debate in the women's movement was to shift from one where a collective consciousness about women's oppression would be raised and solutions sought around this, to one where oppression became emphasised within a context of sexuality. This context rejected the centrality of oppression as defined within a class analysis, as class politics were discarded on the basis that class and sexuality were incompatible and bore no relation to one another.

The ongoing debate "revolved around arguments for and against the notion that lesbianism was the only real political and sexual choice for women. This was because it was considered by some to be impossible to have anything but oppressive

⁶⁰⁵. Stevens, A History, p.41.

personal or sexual relationships with men."⁶⁰⁶

For some in the movement, the emphasis was starting to be placed on the politics of oppression, on individual oppressions, depending upon one's race, sex and sexuality. If the oppressions were to be listed singularly, then the solutions were also of a singular nature. This situation developed with swiftness particularly once a central analysis and political process by which to make links between the different oppressions was considered irrelevant.

"The idea of oppression is both vague and rather static. It fixes people in their role as victim rather than pointing to the contradictory aspects of relationships which force the emergence of new forms of consciousness."⁶⁰⁷

By 1979 the Communist Party had recognised that a diversity of opinion and theory existed within the women's movement on the question of oppression.

"Diverse views are expressed in the women's movement about the nature and source of women's oppression. The various trends express themselves in the differing emphasis and priority given to particular campaigns and in methods of campaigning,

⁶⁰⁶. Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷. Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, p.31.

but the movement is widely united in its view that the oppression of women exists in all human relationships and institutions in capitalist society."⁶⁰⁸

From the mid-1970s onwards the nascent 1970s battle between the radical and the socialist feminists was developing full-scale in Australia, as well as in other Western capitalist countries.⁶⁰⁹ It is not intended to discuss this situation extensively here. It is referred to whilst discussing the politics of the "personal is political" because it provides one important framework in which to examine the results of theoretical development which can occur when class analysis is no longer viewed as relevant.

Additionally, it will be argued here that socialists themselves, particularly from the late 1970s onwards, defended class analysis with increasing reluctance. The view that class politics were too reminiscent of stalinism and fundamentalism would prevail.

Within some sections of the women's movement, the personal now became equated with the "woman-identified-woman".

"The woman-centred perspective drew, in the first

⁶⁰⁸. Women and Social Liberation, 1979, p.2.

⁶⁰⁹. Coote and Campbell discuss some of the differences in Sweet Freedom, pp.26-33.

instance, upon the theoretical writings of lesbian feminism in the early 1970s. If women as a group were oppressed, then surely among the most oppressed of women were lesbians, whose very invisibility as a group was testimony to the taboo status of their identity."⁶¹⁰

In the early days of women's liberation, there had been major criticism of the male emphasis on politics as an objective process. Feminists demanded that more emphasis be placed on the subjective elements involved within political processes. "Personal is political" challenged scientific Marxism and the notion of objective facts and conditions by demanding that one's political development is based on experience and that what happens in one's personal life can be political in itself.

Communist women saw the necessity of re-defining material circumstances so that subjective circumstances could be allowed. But there was always the danger that the pendulum would swing too far one way. It did when radical feminists demanded that the subjective be given primary, if not singular, emphasis and importance. Personal politics were becoming linked with a political and personal strategy of separatism. For some years this would be a dominant perspective within the women's movement.

⁶¹⁰. Eisenstein, Contemporary, p.48.

"By the mid-1970s, Gerda Lerner, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, and other feminist writers were referring to the concept of a woman-centred analysis or perspective, that is, the view that female experience ought to be the major focus of study and the source of dominant values for the culture as a whole."⁶¹¹

Socialist feminists would continue to counter such a theory and practice, although with decreasing success, particularly as the development of women's studies became more and more the domain of academe, and as Communist parties began an historically rapid and painful demise.

But as Joyce Stevens noted one response to the developments within the women's movement was the establishment of socialist feminist study groups, particularly in Sydney.

"If seen as an integral part of the women's movement and connected with discussion of concrete problems, not simply exercises in academia, they could play an important part in further elaborating feminist and socialist theory and practice."⁶¹²

In addition to the establishment of such groups, socialist

⁶¹¹. Ibid., p.47

⁶¹². Joyce Stevens, "Some questions on the Future of the Women's Movement", Scarlet Woman, No. 5, (March 1977), p.4.

feminists initiated the creation of socialist feminist journals and the organisation of conferences at which the theoretical issues being raised in the women's movement could be analysed. Communist women assisted in setting up the journal Scarlet Woman, "as a genuine socialist feminist journal in the women's movement."⁶¹³

The role of Scarlet Woman in investigating issues and developing analyses central to the development of socialist feminism and a Marxist critique, will be examined in a later chapter.

From the perspective of 1990 hindsight, one can see a theoretical continuum within the views espoused by the radical feminists in the women's movement. The 'woman-identified-woman' became the basis of cultural feminism which in itself became the theory underpinning a lifestyle politics.⁶¹⁴ This political context has over the years emphasised a celebration of woman; the necessity of personal empowerment within a polemic of affirmation politics, to the more current theories of the celebration of difference and the theories of the eco-feminists.⁶¹⁵

Arguments in the early days of women's liberation about

⁶¹³. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁶¹⁴. See Brooke, "The Retreat to Cultural Feminism" in Feminist Revolution, pp.79-83.

⁶¹⁵. See Eisenstein, Contemporary, Part II, "Developing a Woman-centred Analysis", pp.45-101.

desire, sexual intimacy and sado-masochism have now been strongly influenced by discourse and Althusserian concepts of power and struggle. Some feminists now celebrate femaleness and affirm the differences based on gender as acknowledging women's power.

"The idea of female difference now informs much feminist organising, especially around issues such as militarisation, ecology, and pornography. Eco-feminists and feminist pacifists have argued that women by virtue of their closeness to nature are in a unique position to avert ecological ruin or nuclear annihilation."⁶¹⁶

This continuum has developed at the same time that discourse politics has by cerebral pullulation knocked class analysis on the head. This discourse theory has proved to be enduringly attractive to many in the women's movement. This has been primarily because of a dogged acceptance, sometimes by socialist feminists themselves, of the definition of Marxism as economist and therefore of marginal relevance to women.

"Women, it is argued, cannot be primarily defined by their relationship to production, so to abandon the theoretical centrality of this concept simultaneously liberates women from a Marxism which

⁶¹⁶. Alice Echols, Daring to be Bad, (Minneapolis, 1989), p.288.

is both chauvinist and anti-democratic."⁶¹⁷

One now refers to the "social conditions of existence".⁶¹⁸. The struggle to maintain a continuing and historical re-definition of class politics has been subsumed underneath a barrage of discussion and theory which has not only made the struggle difficult, but in its very essence has been essentially anti-socialist.

"The most distinctive feature of this current is the autonomization of ideology and politics from any social basis, and more specifically, from any class foundation."⁶¹⁹

The issues raised by the 1970s cultural feminists indicated many of the arenas for future debate. The individual personal solutions being posited by those who supported personal empowerment and affirmation as the basis of both the theory and practice for women's liberation, became the essentials for those feminists who accepted the growing conservatism of the 1980s.

Within the accumulating economic and political conservatism which marked the 1980s, socialist feminists, as did socialists in general, found the task of defending socialism and

⁶¹⁷. Fine, et.al., p.36.

⁶¹⁸. Ibid.

⁶¹⁹. Wood, The Retreat, p.2.

socialist solutions difficult to maintain. Within a number of Western Communist parties the debates centred around a socialist renewal, part of which process attempted to explain the consistent and virulent introduction of conservative solutions, from Thatcher in Britain to the Labor Party in Australia.

In 1983, the National Committee of the Communist Party of Australia identified the need to examine the "prospects for growth of the socialist movement" in Australia, and "the difficulties of Left advancement since the post 1974 economic downturn." The National Committee indicated that pre-Congress discussions (a Special Congress was held in 1984) would examine amongst others:

"the role, functions, priorities and organisation of the CPA, given its size, composition and influence;

the relationship of left parties and movements to each other and the possibility for greater unity and interaction;

the problems arising from the identification of the CPA with a bureaucratic and undemocratic model of socialism including the name of the CPA, and the experiences of other socialist organisations that have changed their name;

the problems and future development of socialist theory."⁶²⁰

At the same time, the feminist debate had also moved to the right. "By arguing that women are more nurturant, less belligerent, and less sexually driven than men, cultural feminists have simply revalued dominant cultural assumptions about women."⁶²¹

Echols continues by pointing to the parallel constructions which exist between the cultural feminists and the French counterpart, neo-feminite. Both posit "an ideal bound up through symmetrical opposition in the very ideological system feminists want to destroy."⁶²².

Women's culture and cultural studies have replaced demands that a social, economic and political revolution is essential for women's liberation. Post-Marxism now informs much of the polemics which takes place within the women's movement. The issues of gender and class are passe.

"Feminism owes its existence to the universality of misogyny, gynophobia, androcentrism, and heterosexism. Feminism exists because women are,

⁶²⁰. "Congress resolution on Prospects for Socialist Growth in Australia", Praxis, (February 1983), pl.

⁶²¹. Echols, Daring, p.9.

⁶²². Ibid.

and have been, everywhere oppressed at every level of exchange from the simplest social intercourse to the most elaborate discourse. Whatever the origins of this oppression - biological, economic, psychological, linguistic, ontological, political, or some combination of these - a polarity of opposites based on sexual analogy organises our language and through it directs our manner of perceiving the world."⁶²³

If class politics is now considered by many in the women's movement as irrelevant to women's struggle, one cannot help but ponder the relevance of discourse, with its emphasis on language as constructing consciousness, for those women who, living below the poverty line, are struggling to maintain day to day existence.

The irrelevance of the latter may also assist to explain "a tendency in 1980s academic feminism for theory to exist almost in isolation from a consideration of material (notably class) questions."⁶²⁴.

As difficult as it may be, it is mandatory for socialist feminists to ubiquitously reiterate the centrality of class politics to both the theory and practice of women's oppression and liberation.

⁶²³. Marks and de Courtivron, p.5.

⁶²⁴. "Editorial", Hecate, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1991), p.5.

"Struggle to alter your personal way of life was limited to the extent that it was a product of and carried out in a relationship to a political movement of women, thereby posing a challenge to a society where male power and privilege were not simply personal but systematic and social."⁶²⁵

There is of course, a strong link between the demise of the strength of socialist feminism in the women's movement and the demise of Communist parties. Such parties were able to provide a political structure in which debates on individual issues could be linked within the context of a Marxist analysis and perspective.

"Socialist feminism has been fatally weakened by what might be called this second wave of post-Marxist feminism that has emerged in the newer left. In arguing that there need be no necessary relationship between women's oppression and class oppression, it has increasingly laid itself open to absorption into social democratic structures which dilute and traduce its aims."⁶²⁶

Over the last decade the "tensions between critical theory and

⁶²⁵. Fine, et.al., p.37.

⁶²⁶. Ibid.

post structuralist approaches in feminism"⁶²⁷ have been played out within a context which has developed an apolitical analysis of gender. But the debate is not yet over. In a recent edition of Hecate the issues have once again been canvassed.

In an article entitled "Beyond Category Politics", Helen Meekosha and Jan Pettman investigate the current emphasis on category politics and the necessity for moving beyond this politics and "by gendering other struggles, work for a more inclusive sisterhood".⁶²⁸ The task is to "embrace a wider struggle against oppression in which we negotiate the meaning and practice of difference."⁶²⁹

The problems which they identify are mainly to do with the politics of difference or identity politics which have arisen because of discontent with class politics. The article raises a number of important questions about the problems of organising around difference and categories. Both theoretical and practical problems have arisen within the context of category politics, particularly when "identity lines or membership lines can result in some individuals whose identity goes across categories."⁶³⁰

⁶²⁷. Ann Curthoys, "Feminism and the State", Arena, No. 93, (Summer 1990), p.153.

⁶²⁸. Helen Meekosha and Jan Pettman, "Beyond Category Politics", Hecate, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1991), p.90.

⁶²⁹. Ibid.

⁶³⁰. Ibid, p.79.

Whilst the questions posed are of significance, one cannot help feeling let down by the identification of the task ahead. In a reply, Sandra Bloodwood identifies the necessity of applying a class analysis to the politics of women's liberation. The reply rejects the attempts of many feminists to engage in the politics of grafting.

Sandra Bloodwood outlines the impact of post-modernist ideas on women's oppression where the emphasis has been on "women as victims".⁶³¹ Bloodwood reasserts that a "fundamental unifying concept is needed"⁶³². and that class analysis provides such a concept. "Class exploitation is the unifying link that their [Meekosha and Pettman] critique misses."⁶³³

Bloodwood identifies the necessity of an historical analysis which emphasises that throughout history there have been struggles which have made gains for workers and that these gains have not been achieved in theoretical abstractions, but "by the practice of the struggle."⁶³⁴ The current problems for socialist feminists are related to identifying this history and "the lessons which can be learnt from it."⁶³⁵.

⁶³¹. Sandra Bloodwood, "Reply to Meekosha and Pettman", Hecate, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1991), p.95.

⁶³². Ibid.

⁶³³. Ibid., p.98.

⁶³⁴. Ibid.

⁶³⁵. Ibid

The task for socialist feminists is to struggle to maintain a Marxist perspective within a political environment in which the West, has deified the demise of Communism in the East, and within an economic environment in which individual achievements and successes are regarded as the absolute salutes to the success of capitalism.

The political project requires that socialist feminists continue to re-define and re-articulate a class analysis which can rescue a politics which theoretically emphasises categories and difference, but in reality represents a number of individual constructions which float in apolitical space.

The task, although exigent, is marked by polarised polemics. The Communist Party's project of socialist renewal was marked by differences to a number of essential theoretical and ideological issues: the relationship between class, gender and race; the relationship between the women's struggle and class struggle and what kind of broad alliances could be developed between the Party and the new social movements.⁶³⁶.

It is not intended here to investigate these debates further. This exercise will hopefully, though, be undertaken in the near future. The aim here has been to endeavour to locate the historical basis of these debates, particularly within the political context of the relationship of the women's

⁶³⁶. These debates were published in a number of issues of Praxis, an inner Party discussion journal, during the 1980s.

liberation movement and the Communist Party of Australia.

Perestroika is an urgent necessity arising from the profound processes of development in our socialist society. This society is ripe for change. It has long been yearning for it. Any delay in beginning perestroika could have led to an exacerbated internal situation in the near future, which, to put it bluntly, would have been fraught with serious social, economic and political crises.

Mikhail Gorbachev, Perestroika.

CHAPTER 8: FROM THE VERTICAL TO THE HORIZONTAL.

In chapter 2, Crossroads and Cracked Pathways, the changes which the Communist Party was making in the 1960s to its revolutionary praxis are detailed. These were not simply alterations to the theory and practice of Marxism, but also included fundamental changes to the Party itself as a political structure. The Constitution of the Party, the processes involving the election of Party officials, and the roles and functions of its various decision making bodies came under intense scrutiny.

Revolutionary organisation received much attention within Communist parties. Whilst a necessary exercise, discussions about the development of appropriate organisation has produced tensions and disagreements within such parties, including the Australian party. The issues of how to organise and structure a political party and a party bureaucracy which enables its members to undertake revolutionary work, but at the same time, work out differences of opinion about the theory and practice of that work have remained problematic.

In theory it is accepted that such party organisation should not be dominated by a view that it is the party's decision-making bodies which are the main elements of revolutionary organisation. Rather such political structures should enable and assist in an organic process in which theory and practice are linked into revolutionary praxis. In this way the party

leadership and membership should develop a relationship as equal partners and the party's political programs, policies and activities developed from debates and discussions based on this equality.

In practice, the ways in which revolutionary organisation have developed, particularly within the International Communist and Stalinist models, have knocked this theory over. From its beginnings the Party in Australia recognised the political importance of the Russian Revolution. It also recognised its theoretical and practical inheritance:

"Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, two of the greatest thinkers in human history, identified themselves with the struggles of the working class. Their great contribution was to give a scientific explanation of social development and change, showing the causes which lie beneath the division of society into classes...

Lenin, the great thinker and leader of the working class, developed Marxist theory in the new situation created by the growth of monopoly, the epoch of imperialism and imperialist wars, and explained the significance of this new stage of capitalism."⁶³⁷.

⁶³⁷. Aarons, Party, pp.17-18.

Davidson outlines the history of the "bolshevization" of the Australian party:

"When Kavanagh came to power he could no longer ignore the discrepancies between Comintern directions and the party constitution: therefore, in 1927 he introduced a new democratic centralist constitution.".⁶³⁸

From this date revolutionary organisation was developed within democratic centralism. Davidson describes how this form of organisation was practiced in the Soviet Union. He maintains that the Russian party operated upon military lines. Decisions were made by a central body and then carried out by the rank and file. Any disputation about the issue had to precede the decision made, and once the decision was made, the debate had to cease.

"This made the Central Committee of the party effectively stronger than the rank and file, which usually could not attend discussions of policy.".⁶³⁹

One of the conditions for Communist parties such as the Australian Party to join the Comintern was the acceptance of

⁶³⁸. Davidson, The CPA, p.38.

⁶³⁹. Ibid., p.15.

a number of conditions including democratic centralism.⁶⁴⁰.

These principles provided the praxis for revolutionary organisation within the ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism - "the world outlook of the working class".⁶⁴¹

Marxism-Leninism defined the basic principles of a Party which was based on scientific socialism. Lenin had developed this theoretical perspective from the struggles of the Russian working class.

"Marxist-Leninist theory regarding a serious Party of scientific socialism emphasises that:

A Party is invincible if it is able to link itself with, to keep in close touch with, and to a certain extent if you like, to merge with the broadest masses of toilers - primarily with the proletariat, but also with the non-proletarian masses.".⁶⁴²

The ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism, and its attending revolutionary organisation, provided the model for international Communist parties, including the Australian

⁶⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁶⁴¹. Aarons, Party, p.16.

⁶⁴². Brown, The Communist Movement, pp.27-8.

Party. Within this model the Communist Party, regarding itself as the vanguard Party, saw itself as distinctly different from other political parties, especially the 'democratic socialist parties' such as the Australian Labor Party. This difference was perceived to lie in the aims, methods of work and principles of organisation adopted from the earliest years by the Communist Party.

"It is of course true that the organisational principles of the Communist Party differ from those of other parties. That is because the aims and policy of the Party are different, above all because the Communist Party works for a Socialist Australia. Organisational principles arise from and serve the political aims, and a genuine party of socialism must be so organised as to enable it to carry on the struggle for its aims."⁶⁴³

In this way the Communist Party saw itself as the only legitimate revolutionary party of the working class. A fundamental tenet of Communism was that the working class had most to gain from the ending of capitalism and of class itself. The role of the Communist Party was fundamental to the organising and provision of political support for the socialist revolution which the working class struggled to win. Unity of and inspiration for the working class could only be provided by the Party. In order to reach its final goal,

⁶⁴³. Aarons, Party, p.3.

socialist society, the working class needed leadership.

"The Communist Party is such a leadership. Only the Communist Party believes that the working class can lead the struggle for Socialism.

Only the Communist Party seeks to prepare itself for the task, taking part in every struggle of the working class, studying past history and analysing present-day Australian reality, basing itself on the glorious militant traditions of the Australian working class and learning from the experience of the workers of all countries."⁶⁴⁴

This leadership role of the Party vis a vis the working class was also based on the organisational principles of democratic centralism. This method of organisation demanded that the Communist Party be founded on unity and discipline.

"Democratic centralism combines two essential principles in working class organisation - the widest democracy and firm organisation. Democratic centralism is "democracy under centralised leadership, and centralised leadership on the basis of democracy."⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴⁴. Ibid., p.10.

⁶⁴⁵. Ibid., p.22.

There were, theoretically, roles and functions for the leadership and for the members. Such roles were supported by a hierarchical structure and the principle of majority rule.

"Communist principles of organisation reject bureaucratic methods of work by leaders, refusal to learn from the membership, or separation from the life and experience of the working class."⁶⁴⁶

The way in which democracy was ensured was by the process of collective leadership.⁶⁴⁷ This process was supposed to guarantee that all decisions would be made by the Party branches or committees, after rigorous debate had taken place. Once there had been full discussion and a decision made, the majority rule was binding.

"Democratic centralism calls for unqualified acceptance of majority rule, prohibits backstairs manoeuvring and factionalism, and lays down the method of conducting the conflict of ideas."⁶⁴⁸

At its Congresses held in 1967 and 1970 however, the Party was seriously analysing the political and organisational consequences of democratic centralism as the organisational principle on which to base its political formation and work.

⁶⁴⁶. Ibid., p.24.

⁶⁴⁷. Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸. Ibid., p.29.

The adoption of the Charter for Democratic Rights, the Coalition of the Left (discussed in chapter 2) and the changes made to the Party Constitution, demonstrated the desire of the Party leadership to break with the theory and practice of democratic centralism as it had been developed within Leninism and Stalinism.

There were a number of factors which contributed to this desire for change. One of these was the legacy of the ways in which the Party had traditionally dealt with members who differed from the decisions of the Party. In 1956, a number of people were expelled or left the Party after the revelations of Krushchev regarding the Stalin period.

"The Australian Communist Party does its utmost to keep the twentieth Congress report from its members, expelling Jimmy Staples, the schoolteacher, who has dared to publish and distribute it."⁶⁴⁹

In 1963 a serious split in the Communist Party over the Chinese model for socialism resulted in more expulsions. Ted Hill and seven other members were expelled for "violation of Party rules."⁶⁵⁰ . Sedy maintains that Hill and his supporters were not prepared to accept decisions of the

⁶⁴⁹. Hewett, p.233.

⁶⁵⁰. Sedy, Comrades, p.135.

Central Committee. ⁶⁵¹. Sendy maintains that within Hill's views "there were serious distortions of Party policy on peaceful co-existence, the peace movement, national liberation struggles, transition to socialism and the ALP." ⁶⁵²

Such a split had major implications for Party membership, and when Hill established the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), for the development of socialism in Australia. It indicated that there were serious divisions within the Communist movement in Australia.

Another factor for change was the perceived need for the Party to become more attractive to young Australians. The Party saw the potential of increased Party membership if it could present itself as a viable political option to the students and youth who were engaged in direct action over the Vietnam war. The Party recognised that it would not be attractive to this group if it was perceived to be a Party which supported bureaucratic and undemocratic methods and organisation.

Eric Aarons noted in 1970:

"...a changed attitude on intellectual freedom and democracy in the party and in the future socialist society was a basic precondition for breaking out of the old conceptions and practices, which in

⁶⁵¹. Ibid., p.128.

⁶⁵². Ibid., p.129.

their totality were actually 'stalinism'." ⁶⁵³

By 1970 the desire for change had become mandatory when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and the Party in Australia had to dissociate itself from this action. It was imperative that the Australia Party reject totalitarian and undemocratic socialism, and develop a more democratic socialism.

Eric Aarons summed up the position by indicating that by 1970 a number of issues came under Party scrutiny, including the role of Party leadership, the view of the bolshevik experience as the basic model and Party organisation. ⁶⁵⁴

Such examinations were the basis of discussions and debate at the Party's 21st Congress held in 1967. The main document which the Congress considered posed problems "in a rather new way." ⁶⁵⁵ The Party attempted to create a new face for socialism in Australia. It was "breaking away from the hide-bound conservative habits which had inhibited the development of the Party in Australia." ⁶⁵⁶

From 1967 onwards, the Party, through its National Congress, made a number of substantial rule changes to its Constitution. Such changes reflected a desire by the Party, particularly its

⁶⁵³. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", pp.71-72.

⁶⁵⁴. Ibid., p.71.

⁶⁵⁵. Sendy, Comrades, p.163.

⁶⁵⁶. Ibid.

leadership, to embark on a new way forward, one marked by democratic changes to both political practice and revolutionary organisation.

Election of National Bodies:

Prior to 1967, the National Committee, then called the Central Committee, was elected by Congress. In 1972, the 23rd Congress endorsed a rule change which provided "that State Conferences, and the Sydney, Newcastle and South Coast District Conferences, shall each elect directly one member of the National Committee. The remainder of National Committee members will be elected by Congress."⁶⁵⁷

Joyce Stevens noted in an article in Tribune that the two most controversial debates which occurred at the Congress dealt with the composition of the National Congress and how the National Committee should be elected.⁶⁵⁸

Prior to the 24th Party Congress held in 1974, the National Executive was elected collegiately by the National Committee. The 24th and 25th Congresses debated and amended this rule to enable the National Congress to elect the National Executive.

⁶⁵⁷. Praxis, n.d. p.10. It published the main decisions of the National Committee meeting held August 20th-22nd 1971. This meeting decided to convene the 23rd National Congress for March 31st to April 3rd, 1972.

⁶⁵⁸. Joyce Stevens, "Congress Debates on the CPA Constitution", Tribune, April 11th-17th, 1972, p.11.

Tenure of Office:

The 25th Party Congress held in 1976 debated whether a "limited tenure of elected office should be prescribed in the Rules, applying at this stage to a limited number of positions."⁶⁵⁹

The Party Constitution as adopted at the 26th National Congress of June 1979 contains Rule 20. which refers to tenure of office in the following terms:

"(a) The following offices in the Party are designated as offices of limited tenure:

- (i) National Secretary or Secretaries
- (ii) National President
- (iii) Such other office or offices as the National Congress shall from time to time determine...".⁶⁶⁰

The term of the tenure varies from three to six years depending on the office concerned.⁶⁶¹

Nominations:

⁶⁵⁹. Praxis, (August 1975), p.10.

⁶⁶⁰. Communist Party of Australia, Constitution and Rules as adopted at the 26th National Congress, CPA, June 1979, pp.28-29.

⁶⁶¹. Ibid., p.29.

In 1967 those nominating for the National Committee had to have "at least four years continuous membership."⁶⁶². By 1979 this rule had been amended so that:

"Any financial member of the party is eligible to be nominated for and elected to any position on the National Committee, or on any other party committee covering the state, district, area or branch covering such financial member."⁶⁶³

Party Branches:

During the 1970s, the Party emphasised the importance of the basic unit of Party structure, the branch, (whether industrial or locality). Changes were also made to the Party's Constitution to emphasis activism in its branches."The CPA should be a PARTY OF ACTIVISTS, working for socialist consciousness at grass roots level, primarily among the working class."⁶⁶⁴

This changed emphasis on the branch was reflected within the Party's changing Constitution. Members in branches were now encouraged to participate in the development of Party policy,

⁶⁶². Draft Rules and Constitution, discussed at the 21st Communist Party Congress held in 1967, Rule 8(e), p.5.

⁶⁶³. Communist Party of Australia Constitution and Rules, as adopted by the 26th National Congress, CPA, June 1979, Rule 9 (b) (viii), p.12.

⁶⁶⁴. Strategy for Socialism, p.51.

and not just carry out policy decisions which had been made by the Party's main decision-making bodies. Stress was being placed on Party branches where steps were taken in 1972 "to make Party branches into real centres of initiative and action, rather than the ritualistic, dry business meetings which many branches degenerated into over the previous decade or two."⁶⁶⁵.

At the 21st Congress, members discussed the following rule pertaining to the Party Branch:

"Rule 4.

(a) Members shall as far as practicable be attached to Party Branches organised in factories, workplaces, occupations, suburban areas, towns or as decided by the appropriate Party committee...

(c) The members of the Party Branch shall:

(i) Carry on activity in support of the political, economic social and cultural needs of the people, helping to build and strengthen trade union, farmer, professional or other organisations having as their aim the people's requirements.

⁶⁶⁵. Brian Aarons, "Organisation and the Constitution", Praxis, No. 6, (March 1972), p.11.

(ii) Carry on publicity and organisational work in order to win support for the Party's program and policy.".⁶⁶⁶

The similar rule adopted by the 26th Party Congress, 1979, reflects the ways in which the Party had changed its emphasis away from the organisational and administrative restrictions of previous years, to a position which supported more democratic organisational processes. The party branch was now regarded as the fundamental unit within this democracy.

"Rule 12. Party Branch

(a) Party branches shall seek to develop as self-acting units to

(i) Carry on activity to win support for the party's objectives and policies, sell and distribute party publications, develop publicity, recruit new members, raise finance for the party and collect membership dues.

(ii) Work for the political, economic, social and cultural needs of the working

⁶⁶⁶. Draft Rules and Constitution of the Communist Party of Australia, discussed at the 21st Congress, 1967.

people, helping to build and strengthen these movements, campaigns and organisations which support those needs.

(iii) Act in international solidarity with the working people and all other fighters against oppression in other countries...

(c) The branch has the duty to:

(i) Attempt to raise the political understanding of each of its members by means of involvement in activity, political discussion, individual and group study and by the analysis of the experiences of the working class and of progressive organisations in Australia and other countries.

(ii) Contribute to the formulation of main policies of the party by conveying the views and opinions of the working people to higher party committees, by formulating its own views, by regular consideration of reports of the policy decisions of higher committees and by reporting to those committees its

opinions of the decisions and the results of their practical applications.

(d) Because it has these functions the branch is the basic organisation of the party."⁶⁶⁷

Members were also encouraged to participate in the Party discussion which formulated Party policy. This participation occurred through the establishment of policy commissions where the main work was the discussion and presentation of ideas on policies, to encourage Party wide discussion so that a final decision could be made by the National Committee or Congress.⁶⁶⁸

Although the Party was making substantial changes to its Constitution so that the spirit of democratic freedom could be supported and maintained, there were some tensions remaining about how to deal with differences on political and ideological issues. Changes were made to the length of pre-Congress discussion from two months in 1967.⁶⁶⁹ to "at least four months" in 1979.⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁷. Communist Party of Australia, Constitution and Rules, as adopted by the 26th National Congress, June 1979, pp.17-18.

⁶⁶⁸. Sendy, "The Real Issues", p.6.

⁶⁶⁹. Draft Rules and Constitution of the Communist Party of Australia, discussed at the Party's 21st Congress, 1967, Rule 7 (b).

⁶⁷⁰. Communist Party of Australia Constitution and Rules as adopted at the 26th National Congress, June 1979, Rule 13 (c).

There was a major difference in the Party in the mid 1970s over "Left Tendency" which will not be discussed here in detail. This was a debate about the 'right of tendency' and about ways in which ideological differences and minority views could be debated and decided upon within the political and organisational framework of the Party. On June 15, 1975 the National Committee set Guidelines for Party Debate. These guidelines pointed out "that the CPA Constitution and Rules does not provide for right of organised tendency."⁶⁷¹

This decision indicated, however, that there were limits to be established about how differences would be dealt with. Although the changed Party Constitution indicated a desire to democratise methods of Party work, the outcome of the decision on tendency was within the parameters of democratic centralism. More time was allowed for debate on issues prior to Congress, but once the decisions were made, members had to abide by these decisions and not pursue differences.

This issue raises some fundamental questions about revolutionary party organisation which were not resolved in the Communist Party. These are questions about how a party can be structured and organised so that its political programs can be developed and pursued within a party organisation which enables different theoretical strands to co-exist. A main question which has not been resolved is whether it is possible

⁶⁷¹. "Guidelines for Party Debate", Praxis, (August 1975), p.24.

to develop a relationship within party organisation, between Marxist theory and pluralism.

The processes of changing the Constitution to reflect the Party's new attitudes to democracy had begun in 1964:

"The Communist Party shows its seriousness of purpose by openly and frankly discussing its mistakes and shortcomings and by, at all times, inviting criticism from the people to help eliminate weakness and give better service to the people...

Dogmatism and sectarianism, another major opportunist distortion, must also be fought unrelentingly, as the history of the Australian and international working class has frequently shown.".⁶⁷²

This change in attitude however, cannot be separated from the historical context of the split with Hill in 1963.

"It took a major upheaval in the party's ranks, resulting in the breakaway of a minority to form a pro-Chinese movement in 1962, to administer a shock severe enough to set in motion changes in the

⁶⁷². Australia's Way Forward, pp.75-76.

party's temper.".⁶⁷³

By 1970 the history of the ways in which the Party had dealt with dissent from 1956-1963 were a legacy. The 1970 Congress addressed this issue and pursued a democratic path with vigour. The Party recognised an urgent need to renew itself within the context of Australian politics. "We had the theory and we thought that we were infallible, and then we started to find out that we weren't.".⁶⁷⁴

"Our Party's history (nationally and internationally) shows that its very organisational structure tended to encourage and foster bureaucracy, elitism, opportunism, male chauvinism, paternalism, conservativeness and dogmatism.".⁶⁷⁵

Not all members agreed with the views expressed above. There were two major splits in the Communist Party in the years 1960-1970. The splits were about a number of issues, including the question of what kind of model the Party should accept for its political organisation as a revolutionary Party. The splits represented discussions, debates and altercations which occurred in the Party about the development of a model for

⁶⁷³. Mortimer, p.47.

⁶⁷⁴. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

⁶⁷⁵. Judy Gillett, "Structure - Problems for a Revolutionary Party", Praxis, No. 6, March 1972, p.16.

socialism which was suitable to the material conditions within Australian society. Both the Chinese and the Soviet models were rejected with the inner Party splits.

"The split between the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the reappraisal of the Soviet Union after 1956 and especially after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 made it clear that the CPA, although it was founded in response to the Russian Revolution and was identified with existing socialism, should not follow or give uncritical allegiance to any overseas party, political centre or dogma." ⁶⁷⁶

A more complete discussion of these issues occurs in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The Party, during the late 1960s and during the 1970s acknowledged that Stalinist democratic centralism and following both the Comintern and the Cominform, had led to many mistakes in both theory and practice, and had also led to some major defeats. In addition, this Party history had led to "authoritarian and undemocratic methods of work which, among other things, led to distrust and hostility towards intellectuals and the development of theory." ⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁶. Towards Socialism in Australia, Program of the Communist Party of Australia, adopted by the 26th National Congress, 1979, p.37.

⁶⁷⁷. Ibid., p.36.

Dogmatism was regarded as a major problem. It had prevented a more realistic assessment and definition of socialism in Australia and had, at times, made the Party conservative, impatient and irrelevant.⁶⁷⁸

The role of the membership was also examined. In the 1959 publication Party of the Working Class, it was emphasised that:

"Each member has a responsibility to the Party to work for the interests of the working class, to uphold its policy and tactics, to put forward its views and defend it from all attacks, to help decide its policy and present views gained from work among the people, and to build up the Party's press sales, membership and organisation."⁶⁷⁹

This role however was established within a Party view of itself as the vanguard party and within practices where Party caucuses were held which determined the Party line on an issue.

By 1979 the Party had softened its views on this role, emphasising the need to reject and avoid "elitist, sectarian or adventurist tactics as a substitute for action by the

⁶⁷⁸. Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹. Aarons, Party, p.21.

working class and in its name."⁶⁸⁰. Such tactics were recognised as assisting in the alienation of the Party from those they sought to win.⁶⁸¹

The emphasis was now on communists who "do not seek to impose preformed ideas but learn from as well as advise working people while actively promoting their views."⁶⁸²

The emphasis was also on working in coalition and alliance with other left forces. Not only was this a departure from pre-1967 Party attitudes to other parties and organisations on the left, it represented a radical departure from old methods of work. "In pursuit of its aims the CPA does not expect or seek to be the only party with correct policies and opinions. It works for a democratic diversity and unity in action of all forces in the labor and progressive movements."⁶⁸³

This coalition work was to be undertaken within different political and organisational parameters to the united front work, which again relied on Communist parties as vanguard parties in which its members would carry the Party line to the various organisations in which its members were politically active.

⁶⁸⁰. Towards Socialism in Australia, p.65.

⁶⁸¹. Ibid.

⁶⁸². Ibid.

⁶⁸³. Ibid., p.66.

Within the framework of the 'Coalition of the Left', the Party not only changed its attitude to political organisation, it also advocated different political methods. The aim was now to take "the working class along the road from being a ruled class to becoming a ruling class".⁶⁸⁴ This strategy stressed:

"* Mass involvement and action.

* Building of a consensus of ideas and values in opposition to the consensus which upholds the existing system.

* Development of independent mass organisations and institutions of grass roots democracy.

* Linking of the various social movements and class forces around common interests."⁶⁸⁵

Eric Aarons commented in 1970 that in 1966 when he had discussions with a number of academic philosophers about Marxist philosophy, he had to "confront the question of defining (or re-defining) for myself what Marxist philosophy actually was".⁶⁸⁶ This re-thinking continued during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and included a study of Lenin's works

⁶⁸⁴. Towards Socialism in Australia, p.47.

⁶⁸⁵. Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶. Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", p.70.

for the centenary of his birth.⁶⁸⁷

When discussing the 'Revolutionary Party' in Lenin's Theories on Revolution,⁶⁸⁸ Aarons states that whilst Lenin supported a strongly organised "democratic centralist" party,⁶⁸⁹ it was a centralism "different from what it has come to be presented as, and practised by, most Communist Parties in the mistaken belief they were following the Leninist tradition."⁶⁹⁰ Aarons continued by stating that Lenin's views on Party organisation changed as the situation changed.⁶⁹¹

The Communist Party of Australia itself, during this period was attempting to change because it recognised that the material conditions in which the Party was operating had themselves changed. Aarons noted that whilst some may conclude that one way of changing would be to abandon organisation altogether, a more appropriate process would be to find:

"the forms of organisation most suitable to the given circumstances, developing the organisation's intellectual life, its democratic practices, and

⁶⁸⁷. Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸. Eric Aarons, Lenin's Theories on Revolution, (Sydney, 1970).

⁶⁸⁹. Ibid., p.37.

⁶⁹⁰. Ibid.

⁶⁹¹. Ibid.

its contact with other ideas and other groups, with the aim of having a body in which every member is active in both formulating and carrying out the policy.".⁶⁹²

The emphasis had always been placed in the industrial branches and this emphasis had also prioritised issues for Party agendas. Sheila Rowbotham makes a general statement about left organisations with which many in the Communist Party in Australia, especially women members, concurred.

"Left organisations, particularly since the Bolsheviks, have assumed a kind of pyramid of levels of activity. Near the top are struggles for political power and conflict at the workplace. Community struggles follow, traditionally seen mainly as the housing question and tenants movements. After them education, welfare and cultural issues may be considered with an optional cluster of sexual politics, 'personal' politics, ecology and what not under a rather dusty heading of 'quality of life'.".⁶⁹³

Women Communists began the process of attempting to change the emphasis on Party work and agendas by insisting that 'industrial' and 'wage' issues were not the only important and

⁶⁹². Ibid., p.44.

⁶⁹³. Rowbotham, The Women's Movement, p.24.

central issues which the Party needed to examine and discuss.

This demand was linked to the influence of the women's liberation movement on the Party. This influence not only impacted on the theory and practice of 'liberation' and 'revolutionary praxis' in the Party, it also had an effect on the Party as a political organisation. The influence of the movement came at a time when the Party had already begun to make changes to its organisation, structure and methods of work. The two processes meshed together in a positive way.

The emergence of the women's liberation movement came at a time when the Communist Party was endeavouring to develop a new praxis. The movement offered new ways of organising which relied on collectivism and not on hierarchical structures which seemed to fit into the new methods being adopted by the Party.

One of the main issues which the movement insisted that organisations such as the Communist Party examine was that of democracy. This, as outlined above and in Chapter 3, was a burning issue with the Party during the late 1960s.⁶⁹⁴.

The women's movement was advocating and adopting "new methods of work" including collectivism and new ways of organising and

⁶⁹⁴. See the Communist Party of Australia document The Left Challenge for the '70s, adopted by the 1972 Congress, as well as the documents adopted by the previous Congress in 1970 and discussed in length in Chapter 3.

running meetings.⁶⁹⁵ The movement supported and assisted in creating a part of society in which there are no forms of domination.⁶⁹⁶

Rowbotham continues by noting that the women's liberation movement inherited views on democracy from the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s "which does not simply recognise certain formal requirements of procedure."⁶⁹⁷ In addition these movements pointed to inequalities which existed within Leninist organisations. Such inequalities were reproductions of those which exist within society, and were inherited unquestioningly by Leninist parties.

"They [those in the movements] have argued that it is not enough to declare that people should not be 'prejudiced'. The socialist organisation has to create forms of associating and relating which actively seek to overcome the sexism and racism within it."⁶⁹⁸

Joyce Stevens put similar views to those expressed above when commenting on the influence of the women's movement. Joyce noted that the movement challenged traditional forms of organisation and "the way they reflect the unequal division

⁶⁹⁵. Interview with Sally Bowen, September 1987.

⁶⁹⁶. Rowbotham, The Women's Movement, p.10.

⁶⁹⁷. Ibid., p.17.

⁶⁹⁸. Ibid., p.20.

of power in society at large".⁶⁹⁹ Joyce stated that "organisation is political",⁷⁰⁰ a view that Party women upheld when examining the organisation of the Party. Mavis Robertson commented that "all organisation is determined by politics, not the reverse."⁷⁰¹

The women's movement supported very strong views about organisational autonomy. There were, in the early days of the movement, discussions about the relationship between the smaller, scattered women's liberation groups and the organisation of the movement as a whole, especially as organised by general meetings.⁷⁰²

In 1971 the first Women's Liberation Conference was held in Sydney. This Conference agreed that autonomous groups could each develop its own programme, activities and projects and be financially independent. The general meetings would act as a centre of cohesion.⁷⁰³ Although this was an agreed structure thought appropriate for the movement, it was not without its difficulties, particularly in relation to

⁶⁹⁹. Joyce Stevens, "From There to Where?", Scarlet Woman, No. 3, (February, 1976), p.10.

⁷⁰⁰. Ibid.

⁷⁰¹. Mavis Robertson, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁰². Marg Hosfal, et.al., "Ten Scarlet Years", Scarlet Woman, No. 19, (Spring 1984), p.19.

⁷⁰³. Ibid.

decision-making.⁷⁰⁴

However, the general view of the women's movement as an autonomous movement was endorsed by women in the Communist Party who demanded within the Party, that Communist women be active in the movement independently from the Party. In the article on women's liberation and the Communist Party which had appeared in the May 25th 1977 edition of Tribune, those contributing to the article had stated in answer to the question "Why don't we necessarily identify ourselves as CPA members in women's movement meetings?:"

"The only point in identifying oneself as a member of a particular party is to win the women's movement to the program of that party, rather than to participate in the movement developing its own politics.

While communists will obviously bring to bear on this their general political concepts, we believe that it is a much more complicated interaction than simply winning women to our political position."⁷⁰⁵

The article continued by stating that Communist women believed

⁷⁰⁴. Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵. "Women's Liberation and the Communist Party", Tribune, (May 25th 1977), p.7.

in working creatively with other women in the women's movement so that the politics of the movement itself could be developed.⁷⁰⁶

The influence of the movement on Party women and on political organisation was summarised by Kath Olive in 1981:

"Those of us who participated in bringing about the new Marxist attitude of the Communist Party to the position of women, will recall that one of the most enjoyable aspects of those heady days was the freedom, flexibility and mobility of the new movement after the previously bureaucratically maintained dogmatic Party attitude. There was the ability to do your own thing, room for all sorts of activities, ideas and people, linked closely or loosely on some common ground."⁷⁰⁷

The effects of women's liberation movement views on political organisation enabled women in the Communist Party to propose that different ways of organising and different methods of work be considered in the Party.

"The Party is slowly accepting the challenge which many women inside and outside it, have issued, that

⁷⁰⁶. Ibid.

⁷⁰⁷. Kath Olive, "A Quick Trip Around the Party Program", Praxis, No. 23, (1981), p.12.

of paternalism and not a little male chauvinism. This struggle has only just commenced and is intrinsic to our whole concept of the organisation of a revolutionary party.".⁷⁰⁸

During the 1970s, when the Party was making radical changes to its Constitution and to its theory and practice of organisation, Party women contributed to that debate by raising the issues of women and political organisation which had been debated within the women's movement. In addition to participating in these debates, Communist women had also experienced the more negative applications of Leninism in the Party in Australia.

"Why can't we have NOT a pyramid (about to be altered to a dome if the proposed rules and Constitution are adopted by Congress, with just as mountainous an over-burden, only we don't call it Stalinist any more) but a multi-layered organisation, the strength of which would lie in its very adaptability.".⁷⁰⁹

Party women not only contributed to the broader discussions in the Party about political organisation and the revolutionary party, they also raised major issues about the

⁷⁰⁸. Gillett, "Structure - Problems for a Revolutionary Party", p.17.

⁷⁰⁹. Betty Fisher, "Democratic Centralism - A Sacred Bovine", Praxis, No. 6, (March 1972), p.6.

organisation of women themselves in the Party, and made proposals about women and Party structure, which though finally endorsed by the Party, created more scenes of altercation. Three such proposals will be examined, although this is not to suggest in any way that there were not other inner Party organisational issues raised by Communist women.

The issue of proportional representation was raised in the Party in the early 1970s. This issue created a bitter debate within the Party. It involved points about election on 'merit' on the one hand, and points about the systemic inequality which existed for women in the Party in relation to leadership positions on the other.

"The 1972 Congress itself was notable for a sharp struggle around the representation of women by women in Party committees, a product of the rapid rise of the movement for the liberation of women in the preceding period."⁷¹⁰

The issue of proportional representation will be discussed at length in the following Chapter.

A second issue involved 'work among women' which had traditionally been carried out by Party women through women's organisation in the Party. Such organisation was always led

⁷¹⁰. Alec Robertson, "Unfinished Contribution", CPA Records, Box 4, Mitchell Library.

by a male comrade.⁷¹¹ During the 1970s, Party women began to demand that there be separate women's organisation within the Party. This demand was proposed within the framework of the women's liberation slogan of 'Separate to Integrate'.

Joyce Stevens comments that Party women decided to put their energies into "setting up a women's collective, finding out about how women in the Party felt about issues, and then to participate in discussions with men within the normal work of the Party where these questions came up."⁷¹²

The previous organisation of women in the Party, the women's committees, had involved women undertaking political work around decisions which were made somewhere else in the Party, not necessarily involving women comrades. Women's political organisation had also reflected the traditional international Communist view of women's roles and functions within the Party, inherited from the CPSU. Communist women moved to change this.

"The women's collectives of the Party should help build the confidence of women so that we can make this contribution, so that we can cease being "stand-in" men in the general movement. Women's collectives should encourage theoretical work, the application and development of policy, and act

⁷¹¹. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

⁷¹². Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

against sexism in the Party. They should not be seen primarily as committees designed to organise women to carry out policy decided elsewhere, or committees under the direction of men. If we can't be trusted to make our own mistakes, say so, and we will know where we are."⁷¹³

In September 1970, the Sydney District Committee of the Party discussed a resolution regarding the election of the Sydney women's committee. The discussion centred around the way women's committees were organised. The resolution recommended:

"That the Sydney women's committee be an elected one of 12 members. All previous women's committees were appointed, and the decision to elect a women's committee is in line with the Party Congress decision of re-structuring Party organisation with the aim of greater democracy within the Party."⁷¹⁴

There was not a unanimous view amongst women members about the proposals. One oppositional view was put forward within the political context that such collectives would lead to an isolation of women's politics in the Party and would continue the marginalisation of such politics, which had been the

⁷¹³. Robertson, Report, p.5.

⁷¹⁴. Resolution discussed at the meeting of the Sydney District Committee of the Communist Party of Australia, held 27th September, 1970, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

outcome of previous women's organisation.

"It is fundamental to a revolutionary concept that women as people be not differentiated against on the basis of sex - or any other basis. To channel women off, at a top level, into women's committees, is to deny the total acceptance of women's ability to play a role equal to men in achieving revolutionary change. It is looking backward over the political shoulder, seeking solutions from the past as answers to today's needs for women's and men's liberation.".⁷¹⁵

Joyce Stevens, taking these comments on board, notes that there was a major fight in the Party to have women only meetings but that "I still don't believe that we could have gone any other way to have established the strength of women's politics in the Party but to have set up women's collectives.".⁷¹⁶

Whilst some of the opposition to the establishment of women's committees came from women in the Party, most of the opposition came from a conservative outlook which said that such committees went "against the spirit of the Party. Men and women are equals; we should meet as equals; we should meet as

⁷¹⁵. Gillett and Fisher, "Paternalism and the CPA", p.42.

⁷¹⁶. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

comrades.".⁷¹⁷

A third issue for women in the Party came in later years when there was discussion about the establishment of a women's organiser. The Sydney women's collective in December 1980 endorsed the appointment of a national women's organiser and Joyce Stevens took up this position in the following June.⁷¹⁸

In a report published in Join Hands Joyce outlined what some of her activities in this position had been and also commented on the nature of the inner Party debate which had taken place about the position. "I think most comrades know that the position of women's organiser was debated at the National Committee in a somewhat heated and confrontationist manner."⁷¹⁹ Joyce continued to say that it was difficult to see what the issues in this debate were about, but that one of the problems was "due to the fact that the inner-Party debate itself, and the ways of conducting it, are themselves the subject of disagreement in the Party".⁷²⁰ Some of the old problems would not go away.

In 1972 at its 23rd Congress, the Communist Party identified some of the tasks ahead, tasks which it had been prioritising

⁷¹⁷. Ibid.

⁷¹⁸. Resolution of the Sydney Women's Collective meeting, 13th December, 1980, CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

⁷¹⁹. Stevens, "National CPA Women's Organiser Reports", p.10.

⁷²⁰. Ibid.

and pursuing since the mid-1960s:

"It therefore believes that an urgent task is to strengthen and revitalise the CPA organisation and activity, to develop the CPA as an effective revolutionary structure encompassing the widest diversity of marxist views and the fullest comradely unity in action, closely connected with all anti-capitalist movements, capable of engendering socialist consciousness in these. Major requirements in this process are: greater theoretical depth in the struggle of ideas; expansion of party membership, especially of young people; restructuring the party's organisation to correspond to the needs and possibilities of revolutionary activism; developing inner-party democracy in order to strengthen the party's activism and effectiveness."⁷²¹

The issue of inner-Party democracy was one which has haunted a number of Communist Parties. The above quotation indicates that the Party in Australia drew a link between 'developing inner-Party democracy', 'encompassing the widest diversity of marxist views' and 'the fullest comradely unity in action'. And yet there appeared to be a constant tension between these aspirations and the requirement that:

⁷²¹. The Left Challenge for the '70s, pp.38-39.

"In every organisation of the party, decisions are made subject to the existence of a quorum, by majority vote of those present and entitled by these Rules to participate in the work of such organisation. Such a decision when so made is binding upon the minority unless and until it is reversed by a later decision of such organisation or by the decision of a higher organisation...".⁷²²

The desire, particularly by the leadership, to democratise the Party was consistent with a number of material conditions in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. The problem for some members was to discard a practice which they may have recognised in theory as Stalinist, but which was imbued by years of Party membership, training, education and ideology. The real conflict for some was the translation into practice of a new socialist democracy.

Rex Mortimer wrote in 1967:

"The obstacles the party faces are formidable. Among younger members, impatience with the pace of change and what they regard as opportunist compromises by the leadership often lead to withdrawal, partial or outright. Many older

⁷²². "Draft for new Party Constitution and Rules", debated by the 25th National Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, 1976, Praxis, (August 1975), p.13.

members, on the other hand, inured to a fortress existence, resist any changes and long for the seeming certainty and security of bygone days. Sensitivity about party unity, about policies and actions of the past, about the claims of authority, set up tensions inhibiting rigorous analysis and renovation.".⁷²³

Sheila Rowbotham comments in general about democracy and difference:

"There is always the temptation to attack the people in the same boat as you as this takes the least effort and involves the least risk. The argument is about how to overcome this. We need a form of organisation which can at once allow for the open expression of conflict between different groups and develop the particular understandings which all these differences bring to socialism.".⁷²⁴

There exists to this day, a difference of opinion about the ways in which the splits in the Party, especially the 1970 split, were handled. In 1974, the 24th Congress reaffirmed the decisions made and actions taken against "a group which sought

⁷²³. Mortimer, p.48.

⁷²⁴. Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement", p.22.

to impose upon it (the Party) the hegemony of the CPSU".⁷²⁵ Congress reaffirmed that the leaders of this group deliberately split the Party.⁷²⁶ Recognition was given to the fact "that some mistakes were made in the struggle to defend the Party against disruption and outside interference", but that "this defence was necessary and correct."⁷²⁷

The differing interpretations about historical events depend, of course, upon whom one raises the issues with. The leadership of the Communist Party continued to defend the necessity of the split as indicated above. Those who were the recipients of Party discipline during the split have a, naturally, different point of view.

"I think that they decided to go on a new track and they had to get rid of everyone who wasn't going to come on that track with them. They used old methods to do what they were saying was going to be new. They used old methods to get rid of anyone who believed in the old party."⁷²⁸

The Communist Party admitted that there were political costs to such splits. The Party was weakened; it lost a number of positions of mass influence and "some good people [were]

⁷²⁵. Strategy for Socialism, p.51.

⁷²⁶. Ibid.

⁷²⁷. Ibid.

⁷²⁸. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

misled by their leaders and influenced by past loyalties. This was reflected in a fall in membership, Tribune sales and income." ⁷²⁹

But there were also personal costs to such political differences. Friendships which had been close for decades were swiftly torn apart. ⁷³⁰. Paula Rix outlines her view of how this could happen:

"My experience of the Communist Party in Sydney is that it was like a big family. You can have your own culture within that family. This culture is really at odds with what's going on in the rest of Australian society, but you can still sustain yourself within that Party culture, and people did. People maintained certain practices to uphold the culture, despite everything.

Around 1968 was a time of change that flushed out issues. But the Party has had this history of organisation, and one needs to look at organisational theory and what happens in organisations. Although the theory had changed, the personal practices of the major players in the

⁷²⁹. Strategy for Socialism, p.51.

⁷³⁰. John Senny has outlined some of these issues in Chapters 39 and 40 of his Comrades Come Rally.

Party remained the same."⁷³¹

The issues of Leninism, vanguard parties, organisation and democracy, inherited decades before, became major areas of confrontation for a Party which was struggling to develop a new vision for socialism in Australia. Some Party members could not reconcile what they perceived to be the gap between the theory and practice.

"During the split the membership didn't know much about what was going on. It was a view held that some of the discussions which took place on the Central Committee were not to be revealed to the membership. The attitude was that you could have disagreements on the Committee but then the issue was closed. They wanted it to appear that there was a monolithic whole, and that everything was unanimous."⁷³²

From a 1990s perspective, the issue of who is 'right' and 'wrong' is not of major importance. The real issues which need to be thoroughly examined, and which must be at the organisational core of any new socialist party, are issues which deal with organisational structures. These structures must enable power, political and personal differences, and membership democracy to be organised democratically.

⁷³¹. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

⁷³². Interview with Geoff Curthoys, May 1987.

The debates on revolutionary organisation point to the difficulties which the Party had in reconstructing and renewing itself to meet conditions in Australia. Once the old Leninist and Stalinist models were discarded there was increasing confusion about what could replace them. Sendy is correct when he says that "the Twenty-second National Congress in March 1970 adopted the Statement of Aims, in some respects the best Communist policy yet enunciated in Australia.".⁷³³

At the same time O'Lincoln makes an important point:

"The women's liberation movement had a major impact on the CPA in the early seventies, an impact which was largely healthy given the militant and often socialist direction of the movement. From about 1974, however, women's liberation gave way gradually to a 'feminism' which was increasingly hostile to socialist ideas, advocated an 'autonomy' for women's struggles which began to imply hostility to the 'male left' and was increasingly reformist in its political strategies.".⁷³⁴

The problems for the Party as analysed in this thesis have been connected to the dilemmas of developing a theory and practice which rejected Stalinism. These problems became extremely clear with the disputes over revolutionary

⁷³³. Sendy, Comrades, p.186.

⁷³⁴. O'Lincoln, Into the Mainstream, p.179.

organisation. Whilst the women's liberation movement pointed to some positive initiatives in relation to political structure, the Party's response to the movement, as it was to other social movements, was to endeavour to attract members by gradually discarding Marxist theoretical perspectives because they were associated with Stalinism. It developed principles of pluralism which continued to undermine its own socialist programmes.

This thesis argues that there is much that can be learnt from the Communist Party's past. There are lessons related to the Party's past political and ideological dogmatism, its sectarianism and to its bureaucratic organisation. Equally, there is much that can be inherited and learnt from the women's movement, particularly from socialist feminist critiques, but also from the movement's proposals for new and innovative ways for political organisation. "I think the very nature of the democratisation of the women's movement in a destructured situation, was enormously important."⁷³⁵. This thesis argues, however, for the lessons to be placed within a Marxist theoretical analysis.

⁷³⁵. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

1910

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

In agreement with the class-conscious, political and trade union organisations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully.

Clara Zetkin, Kathe Duncker and Comrades, August 27, 1910.

CHAPTER 9: TESTING TIMES.

As indicated in other chapters, there is strong evidence to suggest that once Communist women began to raise women's liberation issues in the Party, that these issues were placed on Party agendas, debated and discussed. The Party moved swiftly, at the leadership level in particular, to endeavour to accommodate new definitions of oppression and to accept new political and social parameters for the 'woman question'. It has also been argued that the Party endeavoured to embrace a new way of thinking about feminism and socialism; that the Party in its attempts to eschew a Stalinist past, was neither parsimonious nor pusillanimous in its support of women's liberation issues, nor in its efforts to embrace a politic that could in a material sense, attract new members to the Party.

And yet, history is not simply about facts on a page.

"To give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it - the poets and the novelists - can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma - a mirage."⁷³⁶

⁷³⁶. Virginia Woolf, Orlando, (London, 1977 ed.), p.120.

One may smile slightly at this poetical exaggeration about history and truth. Surely though, history is about subtle political nuances, bitter altercations, partisan polemics, verbal jousting and continuous compromises. These supply the political and personal spine which supports the words on the page of the document which eventually becomes public property. History is often about attempts made to render political deshabelle into historical respectability.

In this chapter, two incidents will be referred to as a way of demonstrating the political deshabelle which existed within the relationship between the Communist Party and the women's liberation movement. This is not to suggest that a multiplicity of other events could not serve a similar purpose. Some of these incidents have already been referred to in preceding chapters. These two episodes are used however, because they succinctly point to the political turmoil which marked the relationship between the Party and the movement. They are also pointers to the way in which Party women had to rebelliously and militantly fight to close the gap which existed between the Party's theoretical perspective and its chauvinistic practice.

The two situations describe the Party/movement relationship within different social and political environments. The first incident describes the debates that occurred within the Party around the issue of proportional representation. The second, the events which took place in the NSW Builders Labourers

Federation in the early 1970s, where the Party had a major influence on the policies and directions of that union, through its leadership.

A Case of Proving Merit:

From March 3rd-5th 1972, the Sydney District of the Communist Party held its annual conference. At that conference the issue of proportional representation was raised by Party women. This was debated and Conference endorsed the view that proportional representation was one of a number of ways in which the Party could strive to eliminate sexist attitudes from its own thinking and practice:

"Party conferences and committees [should] adequately reflect the percentage of women in the Party. This is to be achieved through representation in all Party committees and conferences at least in proportion to their membership in the Party, and through the development of consciousness throughout the Party and through women's caucuses and women's conference."⁷³⁷

Party women pursued proportional representation as positive discrimination. When the principle is applied for example in

⁷³⁷. Resolution on 'Women and Social Liberation' adopted by the Sydney District Conference of the Communist Party, held 3-5 March 1972, CPA Records, Box 38, Mitchell Library.

the Party, it enables women to be represented on decisions-making bodies in accordance with their percentage of Party membership. This is achieved by enabling women who have stood for election to take up positions on such committees whether they have been successfully elected or not, until the proportion of women on decision-making bodies reflects their membership percentage.

After adopting this principle, Conference then discussed how proportional representation could be applied to the Sydney delegation to the forthcoming 23rd Party Congress to be held in the following April.⁷³⁸ Conference continued by stating that this action was a temporary solution, an administrative solution which was not to be regarded as a full answer to the problem⁷³⁹. but rather:

"Conference declares that it will work for a situation where women participate in the work of the Party, and this participation is recognised to the extent that people can be elected to Party positions on the basis of their political ability and activity and in this situation women would be represented on Party committees as a matter of course rather than by means of special administrative forms."⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁸ . Ibid.

⁷³⁹ . Ibid.

⁷⁴⁰ . Ibid.

When this issue was debated at the 23rd Congress it was narrowly defeated.⁷⁴¹ The resolution from the Sydney District Conference was included in the Party document distributed to Congress delegates, Proposal for Agenda and Session Times, in the following way:

"This [the representation of women on the National Committee and the National Executive] is a very important question which was raised by the Sydney District Conference. This conference adopted the principle of representation of women on the District Committee and Congress delegations in proportion to their membership in the Party. It is established that 25% of Party members are women. This would mean that at least 7 of the 30 members of the National Committee and at least 2 members of the National Executive would be women."⁷⁴²

The debate was sharp and bitter. Alec Robertson referred to it in his "unfinished discussion document" prepared for the 24th Congress in 1974. "The 1972 Congress itself was notable for a sharp struggle around the representation of women by women in Party committees..."⁷⁴³

⁷⁴¹. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

⁷⁴². Proposals for Agenda and Session Times, distributed to Congress delegates attending the 23rd National Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, held 3rd-5th March 1972, CPA Records, Box 3, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁴³. Robertson, Unfinished Contribution, p.4.

Party women had raised the issue of proportional representation because of the fact that women were under-represented in the Party, particularly within the leadership. As noted in Chapter 1. Freda Brown had drawn this to the attention of the Party in the 1960s.⁷⁴⁴ Within the influence of the women's liberation movement, Party women raised it again in the 1970s, but this time they demanded that practical changes be made to Party structures to enable women to achieve proportional representation.

Demands for the equal representation of women within Communist Parties was not new. As Mavis Robertson pointed out this had been an issue throughout the history of such parties, an issue which had remained historically contentious.

"Only a few revolutionaries, Bebel first of all, recognised that special and concrete efforts had to be made by male revolutionaries to redress some of the inequalities. Thus, he supported independent women's organisation within the revolutionary party - an advance on Marx who supported a women's section of the International, and way ahead of the Third International which rejected any separate organisation. Bebel was for proportional representation as a positive discrimination in

⁷⁴⁴. Brown, "Women in the Struggle for Peace and Progress", pp.259-261.

favour of women.".⁷⁴⁵

By 1970, the Communist Party of Australia, whilst supporting the theoretical position that women should be able to hold leadership positions, advocated this principle within a practice which deified industrial work and therefore discriminated against women.

"Before [proportional representation] it was hard to break through. The people elected onto committees reflected what were considered to be the important political issues. So men who were trade unionists or workers on jobs or shop stewards tended to get elected to the positions because the Party saw that work as being really important work.".⁷⁴⁶

Joyce Stevens adds to this by saying that traditionally the women were elected onto national positions because they were in leading positions in youth work or work among women. "This position didn't improve radically until the political struggle for proportional representation.".⁷⁴⁷

During the early years of the women's movement influence on the Party, the issue of the real lack of women's

⁷⁴⁵. Robertson, Report, p.2.

⁷⁴⁶. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁷⁴⁷. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

representation on decision-making bodies in the Party had become a very important issue. The work of Freda Brown in earlier years was a reminder that not much had changed in respect of this issue. Barbara Curthoys comments:

"It was very difficult for women to get onto leading positions of the Party unless you were working in 'work among women'. Some women managed it. Audrey Blake is an example, and Alice Hughes in Queensland. I can remember going to conferences where they would analyse the percentage of women on the Central Committee and it used to be about 3 out of 25, a low percentage. A third of women were in the Party, but on the higher bodies it would be much less than that."⁷⁴⁸.

The statistics described an unequal reality. They also became the weapon with which Communist women could fight for a more equal representation, and they also assisted in the arguments that within the Party, as within Australian society generally, there were systemic reasons for women's inequality.

In 1967, at the Party's National Congress, there were elections for the National Committee and the National Executive. In those elections all 8 members of the Executive were male and 25 out of the 30 National Committee members were male. Additionally, the National Chairperson, Secretary,

⁷⁴⁸. Interview with Barbara Curthoys, May 1987.

President and two Vice Presidents were male.⁷⁴⁹ By 1970 at the 22nd Congress, 33 members of the National Committee elected were male. However, one woman, Mavis Robertson, was elected onto the National Executive.⁷⁵⁰

In an article in Join Hands, Mavis Robertson noted that at the 22nd Congress itself there were 14 women out of 117 delegates, and that this 14 included the 5 outgoing members of the National Committee.⁷⁵¹ Between the 22nd and 23rd Congresses, however, the debate on the issue of proportional representation was to have a major impact on this situation.

"The discussions concerning the means whereby women communists may be more adequately represented in the leadership of the CPA at all levels and which took place prior to the 23rd Congress were at once a reflection of the impact of the mass movement for the liberation of women on the CPA and as recognition that more women should be involved. The latter concept has always been with us. It is usual to make appeals to people to be conscious of the problem but until now the consciousness has not

⁷⁴⁹. Unpublished documents from the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, held June 1967, CPA Records, Box 1, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁵⁰. Unpublished documents from the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, held March 1970, CPA Records, Box 2, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁵¹. Mavis Robertson, "Proportional Representation or Consciousness", Join Hands, (August 1972), p.23.

extended very far."⁷⁵²

The traditional Party leadership view of women's involvement was obscured by "a sophisticated view which is to affirm that people are people".⁷⁵³ This opinion was supported by a belief that if women were good enough then they would make it to leadership positions. Mavis Robertson further elucidated:

"What this means in translation is:

(a) women can succeed only if they are in politics like the men;

(b) if women aren't in the leadership it means that they are not as good as men;

(c) those women in the leadership prove that its upto women and it is not a male concern."⁷⁵⁴

The prevailing arguments which had prevented "consciousness" from not extending very far were predominantly to do with arguments about merit. Mavis Robertson pointed to the cardinal views about proportional representation which were being put forward. There were three basic propositions: firstly, support

⁷⁵². Ibid.

⁷⁵³. Mavis Robertson, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁵⁴. Ibid.

for proportional representation on the basis that positions in the Party should be filled in proportion to the number of women members in the Party; secondly, there was some support for this proposition on the basis that it was a temporary measure until consciousness about the issue was developed, and thirdly, opposition to the proposal because it was inappropriate, unconstitutional or "a distortion of the fact that Communists are equal".⁷⁵⁵

Some time later Mavis further commented on the issue of merit:

"Communists and trade unionists have generally met such proposals [about proportion representation] with 'positions should be filled by merit', and women, inevitably reflecting male values, have opposed such a proposal on the grounds that 'this is not equality but favouritism'. I am not here trying to debate proportional representation, since it is not a panacea, but I make the point that if merit were the criterion, many positions in the CPA, the unions, and society at large would not be filled by those who now hold them, and more importantly, by ignoring the fact that women are disadvantaged, lack experience, confidence and opportunity, the Party deprives us of the possibility of showing merit, let alone having it

⁷⁵⁵. Robertson, "Proportional Representation or Consciousness", p.23.

recognised.".⁷⁵⁶

The issue of proportional representation was a critical test for a Party which was strenuously advocating democratic change. The political view, especially of the leadership, was a belief that democratic change was not merely an exercise in theory, but was essential in its political application. The demand for proportional representation was an important litmus test of the Party's change in political direction and organisation. As noted in the previous chapter, Mavis Robertson had made a very important point about organisation being determined by politics and not the other way around.⁷⁵⁷

For some time, however, it was the issue of merit which was the sticking point in the debates about proportional representation. As in other environments where women were endeavouring to achieve equality of representation, those opposed to measures of positive discrimination ignored the structured and socialised barriers to women's equal representation.

Judy Munday comments on the opposition to proportional representation which occurred in the Party. The opposition maintained that:

⁷⁵⁶. Robertson, Report, p.2.

⁷⁵⁷. Robertson, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

"People ought to be elected on the basis of merit. We went over these arguments so often that now it seems funny and ludicrous. Merit was never a test for men. It was assumed that if they were in some trade union position or they were a shop steward that was merit enough. But when it came to women this issue was raised in the terms of 'we need whoever is the best person for the job' and that, by and large in their thinking always happened to be men."⁷⁵⁸

When commenting on this issue Laurie Aarons maintained that having experience both as a rank and filer and as a leader, that too much emphasis can be placed on the issue of people being elected to top positions. "It's not unimportant but I think that it can be exaggerated."⁷⁵⁹. However, the issue is that unless women are represented at top positions in proportion to their membership, that women's issues, political views and methods of work cannot be fully and comprehensively integrated into the political agendas of organisations. The demand for proportional representation for women in the Communist Party was an attempt to deal with the tokenism which marked the years preceding the debate on PR.

The opposition was not only from male comrades. Some women members in the Party did not support the idea of proportional

⁷⁵⁸. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁷⁵⁹. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

representation either. Joyce Stevens comments that it would have been possible to have won a majority of support to have proportional representation put into the Party's Constitution, but that a decision not to do this was made. This was primarily because "we knew that even amongst women there was a strong objection to PR."⁷⁶⁰

One such opponent sent a letter to the Party leadership with a copy for Tribune. Nell Johns from Victoria, in a letter dated 4th April, 1972 maintained:

"How the hell can we explain proportional representation of women on Party committees to the mass of women in the women's liberation movement. I shudder to think but I am sure that they will say 'the Comms are trying to jump on the bandwagon' by providing proportional representation for women on their committees. As far as I am concerned you can stick it up your jumper. I am a geriatric trendy but I am sure that women in the Party will win equality as will women everywhere by struggle alone and not by the provision of PR - a purely mechanical process."⁷⁶¹

Other Communist women saw the issue of proportional

⁷⁶⁰. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

⁷⁶¹. Nell Johns, Letter to the Party leadership and to Tribune, 4th April, 1972, CPA Records, Box 19, Mitchell Library.

representation as an extremely important debate and recognised that to have the debate in itself had assisted in making changes to Party consciousness about women's representation. "[When] proportional representation was introduced, there were big battles over it. Women always saw that this was an important issue to raise and it was put on the agenda in a fairly strident way. A lot of men reacted against it, but it served its purpose."⁷⁶²

Mavis Robertson supports this view by adding that women in the Party only started to come through in a real way once their version of affirmative action was recognised.⁷⁶³

Reg Wilding recalls one incident which indicated that some members in the Party were willing to change their attitude to the issue of women in leadership positions. Reg comments that during the 1972 Congress, where the motion on proportional representation was narrowly defeated, some of the male comrades were having a beer break. Reg was talking to Joe Palmada who had supported the motion. Another male comrade come over to them and said to Joe "You've changed your tack", to which Joe Palmada replied, "I've been doing a bit of reading, and I suggest that you do too!".⁷⁶⁴

Although the motion had been lost, the debate had been

⁷⁶². Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁷⁶³. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

⁷⁶⁴. Interview with Reg Wilding, June 1989.

effective. At the 23rd Congress, held in 1972, "29 out of 110 delegates or an increase to 26% were women", a figure which reflected more closely the percentage of women members of the Party.⁷⁶⁵ In May 1974, the Sydney District held its annual Conference. Delegates endorsed a resolution which supported the principle of proportional representation of women as a minimum, and that it be applied in the elections to take place at Conference for both delegates to the National Congress to be held in the following month, and for the District's representatives onto the National Committee.⁷⁶⁶

The endorsement of this principle meant that when the elections were held one ballot paper was prepared. After voting for 24 places for the National Congress delegation and 12 places for the National Committee, it was agreed that if fewer women than the proportion of women members in the District were not elected, those women with the highest votes would be declared elected, replacing those men who received the lowest votes on the list of 24 and 12 elected respectively.⁷⁶⁷

At the 24th Congress held in 1974, two women were elected onto the National Executive, Mavis Robertson and Joyce Stevens. At

⁷⁶⁵. Robertson, "Proportional Representation or Consciousness", p.23.

⁷⁶⁶. From "Decisions carried by the Sydney District Conference" of the Communist Party of Australia, held 24th-26th May, 1974, CPA Records, Box 38, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁶⁷. Ibid.

the 1979 Women's Conference Aileen Beaver and Vicki Wooton reported that at the Sydney District level of the Party one-third of the District membership were women. 12 of the 28 members of the District Committee were women, and 3 out of the 7 members of the Sydney District Executive were women.⁷⁶⁸

Joyce Stevens commented in 1979 that the struggle for proportional representation had helped to change Party attitudes and the result of this was that a number of women were now able to work on Party committees. Joyce added though that "this is a minimal gain and should not be seen as anything else. These women still have to conduct their political work within the framework of a male dominated Party and among many men comrades who have little understanding of their problems."⁷⁶⁹

One of the major achievements of the debates about women's representation was the election of Judy Munday to the position of Party President in 1979. Laurie Aarons noted that Judy was the first woman to be elected to this position in any political party in Australia.⁷⁷⁰ Judy Munday comments that her election "came as a direct result of the influences of the women's movement on the Party" and was a realisation in the

⁷⁶⁸. Sydney Communist Party Women's Collective, "Economic Crisis and Women", Praxis, No. 23, (July 1981), pp.1-4.

⁷⁶⁹. Joyce Stevens, Unpublished report, CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

⁷⁷⁰. Interview with Laurie Aarons, November 1990.

Party that proportional representation was necessary.⁷⁷¹

In the same year as this election, the Newcastle Women's Collective were commenting on women's representation. The Collective acknowledged that prior to 1979, it had a skeptical view about proportional representation, but that debate on the issue had changed views. In that year the Newcastle District Conference had supported proportional representation and had carried this through in the elections which took place at that Conference.⁷⁷²

The issue of proportional representation tested the political strength of Communist women. It raised many tensions within the Party. One can acknowledge that, in many ways by accepting affirmative action, the Communist Party was ahead of other political parties in Australia. At the same time, a delving into the background behind the issue of proportional representation demonstrates a complexity of historical truth.

Mavis Robertson sums up the issue:

"I think that one of the latter day achievements of the Communist Party was to come to grips with affirmative action. It hurt lots of people and

⁷⁷¹. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁷⁷². Newcastle Communist Party Women's Collective, Newcastle Collective, an internal Party bulletin distributed in the Newcastle District, (n.d.), CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

produced differences, but eventually you got around about the number of women in the Party reflected into all areas of the Party's leadership.".⁷⁷³

Building Revolutions?

At its 22nd Congress held in 1970, the Communist Party adopted a document entitled Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement.⁷⁷⁴ This document was a radical departure from other similar publications which the Party had previously published on trade unions. It supported the view that whilst the working class itself was being transformed, particularly with the introduction of technology, the industrial organisations of the working class, the trade unions, must also undergo radical re-structuring.

This document emphasised the need for change in an area which the Party had long regarded as a major industrial and political environment for Party work, the unions. Party women, influenced by the women's liberation movement, began to point to the sexism which prevailed in trade unions, and also to the ways in which Party work in some unions reflected a chauvinistic view of class issues. Some of these unions where the Party had political strength, such as those which covered the miners, the seamen and wharfies, also had superstitious

⁷⁷³. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July, 1990.

⁷⁷⁴. Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement, adopted by the CPA 22nd National Congress, 1970, in CPA Documents of the Seventies, pp.17-24.

views about women which strongly barred women from employment in those areas.

During the early 1970s, however, one trade union, the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF), which was heavily influenced by the Communist Party, attempted to put into place many of the industrial and political agendas which were supported by the Party and incorporated into Party documents.

"The influence of Party thinking on the male leadership of the BLF cannot be over emphasised. Michelle Fraser, new recruit to both the CPA and BLF in 1974, recalled that it was obvious to her that policies concerning women came through the building branch of the CPA and were a direct result of the struggle that the CPA women had encountered with their own left-wing males."⁷⁷⁵

In some respects the BLF leadership was endeavouring to represent libertarian Marxism. It is possible to examine Party documents and events which occurred in the BLF in the 1970s, and view the chasm which existed between the theory and practice of Communism and feminism. The context in which this chasm is identified is a political and industrial environment inspired and motivated by the Communist Party. In pursuing

⁷⁷⁵. Meredith Burgmann, "Revolution and Machismo: Women in the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation, 1961-1975", in Windshuttle, p.460.

this example, attention is predominantly placed on the administrative office of the union. It is within the context of the relationship between the union leadership and the administrative staff that the example will be developed, because it is this context which provides the example of the juxtaposition of the Party's views about feminism and socialism.

Paula Rix has studied the events of the BLF and the administrative office in her thesis entitled Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Can Marxism Provide a Theory of Patriarchy.⁷⁷⁶ Paula comments that she undertook this study because:

"At that time [the period of the 1970s] the BLF reflected the advance guard of the Party's practice and philosophy. I think they did some great things, so I looked at the union and its employment of female office staff and its relationship to the office staff at that time. I thought that you could see that it was a microcosm of the intersection of Communist Party policy and the theory of the women's movement.".⁷⁷⁷

Other aspects of the BLF, for example the history of women

⁷⁷⁶. Paula Rix, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Can Marxism Provide a Theory of Patriarchy?, B.A. Hons. Thesis, University of New South Wales, (1978).

⁷⁷⁷. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

working in the building industry will not be dealt with.⁷⁷⁸

In the Party's document Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement, reference was made to workers' control, democratic control and union structures and decision making processes vested in the membership.⁷⁷⁹ These early ideas were developed more fully in the Party document entitled The Workers' Movement, adopted in 1974.⁷⁸⁰ This document reinforced notions of worker control and self-management as the fundamental tenets for union organisation, methods of work and decision making.⁷⁸¹

In the 1970 document the Party emphasised that:

"...women workers now comprise one-third of the workforce. They must be encouraged to play their fullest role. We must overcome old attitudes which relegate women to the position of second-class citizens and they must be assisted to participate in every phase of union activity and

⁷⁷⁸. For a detailed study of this issue and of the history of the BLF during this period, see Meredith Burgmann's thesis Perspectives for Revolutionary Unionism: The NSW Builders Labourers' Federation 1961-1975, Ph.D. Thesis, Macquarie University, (1980).

⁷⁷⁹. Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement, p.22.

⁷⁸⁰. The Workers' Movement, adopted by the 24th CPA National Congress in CPA Documents of the Seventies, pp.53-64.

⁷⁸¹. Ibid.

organisation."⁷⁸²

In 1974, the administrative staff in the office of the BLF went on strike. The strike was predominantly about working conditions and the salary agreement.⁷⁸³ The women in the office wanted to manage their own workplace. This included managing their own work and rotating positions such as that of office manager. "We were saying that we want the same rights as on the building jobs."⁷⁸⁴ The women in the office were influenced by the demands that the BLF were making for self-management and worker control. "The men were talking about job control and this filtered through to the women" in the office.⁷⁸⁵

The strike however became extremely bitter, personal and divisive. The women who went on strike were accused by members of the BLF leadership, some of whom were also members of the Party, of working in league with Gallagher, who was trying to oust the leadership of the BLF. The women in the office were accused of stabbing the BLF in the back.⁷⁸⁶ Paula Rix had left working for the BLF by this time but she comments that "the women who were working were really committed to the BLF

⁷⁸². Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement, p.17.

⁷⁸³. Interview with Carol Kalafates, Jenny Healey, Paula Rix, and Robyn Cokkayne by Meredith Burgmann, (January 1978).

⁷⁸⁴. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

⁷⁸⁵. Burgmann interview.

⁷⁸⁶. Ibid.

and comments like that just really hurt."⁷⁸⁷

Interviews with the women who worked in the union office, show that the women themselves perceived that sexism was the basis of the problem. "It's entrenched. Street angels, house devils. When it got confrontationist, the men got dirty. These things exposed sexism in its rawest form."⁷⁸⁸

The Communist Party leadership did endeavour to intervene in the problems which had arisen in the union office. "Robyn Cokkayne went to Dixon Street [the Sydney headquarters of the Party] on numerous occasions to try and get some support and sense. And we did get that."⁷⁸⁹ However the leadership battle which was going on in the BLF between Gallagher and the Munday/Owen/Pringle team over-rode any sensible solutions which may have otherwise prevailed.

The dispute turned from a fight for wages and conditions into a power struggle.⁷⁹⁰ Paula Rix comments that the BLF leadership could not actually credit the women with having the ability to engage in real political analysis and struggle. Once the women were raising issues in the environment in which the men worked, "the men didn't like it because it was

⁷⁸⁷. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

⁷⁸⁸. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991. This issue is also referred to in the Meredith Burgmann interview.

⁷⁸⁹. Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰. Meredith Burgmann interview.

inferred that they weren't up to scratch. They all thought that they were wonderful." ⁷⁹¹. When the women began to raise issues which were important to them, "the men got upset. It really was that thing of women's issues are not political." ⁷⁹²

Union environments often provide a solid context for a gender division of labour, where the males carry out the important work, that is industrial work, and the women do the clerical work which is often defined by industrial staff as both less important and less professional. The BLF was no exception. "The male leadership obviously distinguished very clearly between the female BL and the female office staff. The clerks believed they were considered inferior, not only because they were women but because they were not part of the BLs camaraderie." ⁷⁹³

Judy Munday comments on the influence of the women's movement on the Communist Party by saying that "some people [in the Party] became more conscious of issues more quickly than others. There were a lot of people who had fixed ideas about what was a real political issue and they weren't going to change that overnight." ⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹¹. Interview with Paula Rix, October 1991.

⁷⁹². Ibid.

⁷⁹³. Burgmann, "Revolution and Machismo", p.481.

⁷⁹⁴. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

The example of the BLF provides an interesting paradox in terms of the Party's praxis around feminism and socialism. On the one hand, the BLF leadership found it impossible to break through the entrenched barrier of chauvinism and sexism. On the other it was influenced by Communist women who were active in the women's movement. "I think that it is true that Communist women who were in the women's movement did have an influence on male members of the Communist Party, including working class members. Certainly the BLF is an example of that.".⁷⁹⁵

Judy Munday makes a personal comment on the relationship between the movement, the Party and the BLF. Judy says that although some people maintained that she was elected as the first woman President of the Communist Party because of her husband, Jack Munday, "nobody ever suggested that some of the things that happened in the BLF were because Jack was married to me and I was a feminist." Judy continues by saying that this was clearly the case, because there would be discussions at home where she influenced Jack's thinking on issues.

"He was influenced by those ideas and in turn influenced other members of the executive. I used to have arguments with the other executive members, and you can imagine that we had big arguments about some of the things that they said. Some of those people changed their ideas and were very influenced

⁷⁹⁵. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

by these discussions.".⁷⁹⁶

Meredith Burgmann comments that some of the BLF males now admit that they made many mistakes when dealing with the women in the office. "Joe Owens says, 'When it came to the crunch we acted like bosses.'".⁷⁹⁷

The strike lasted for two weeks and was industrially resolved when the women working in the office received \$10 a week over the clerks' award for 'discomforts'.⁷⁹⁸ The BLF also "cut out the iniquitous junior and senior distinctions."⁷⁹⁹

In discussing the events which occurred in the BLF in the 1970s, it is not being suggested that the CPA was responsible for those 'many mistakes'. The example is used to outline the difficulties which exist in developing a relationship between feminism and socialism. The BLF leadership was endeavouring to develop an industrial, political and social praxis within a Communist Party theoretical perspective.

But as many feminists point out, patriarchy is so entrenched that male comrades are so easily threatened by women's political organisation, and deal with such threats with sexist

⁷⁹⁶. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁷⁹⁷. Burgmann, M., "Revolution and Machismo", in Women, Class and History, p.482.

⁷⁹⁸. Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹. Ibid.

and chauvinist responses. The theory is abandoned. A bellicose and fulminating posture is adopted. An "inability to theoretically comprehend the power of patriarchal ideology"⁸⁰⁰ is succinctly put into practice.

⁸⁰⁰. Rix, Marxism and the Oppression of Women.

Make way for healthy, blossoming children; make way for a vigorous youth that clings to life and to its joys, which is free in its sentiments and in its affections. Such is the watchword of the Communist society. In the name of equality, of liberty, and of love, we call upon the working women and the working men, peasant women and peasants, courageously and with faith to take up the work of the reconstruction of human society with the object of rendering it more perfect, more just, and more capable of assuring to the individual the happiness which he deserves. The red flag of the social revolution which will shelter, after Russia, other countries of the world also, already proclaims to us the approach of the heaven on earth to which humanity has been aspiring for centuries.

Alexandra Kollontai, Communism and the Family.

CHAPTER 10: RED RENAISSANCE.

"Many features of communism during the 1920s in the Soviet Union have since been buried so deeply in the dustbins of history that their rediscovery becomes a major resalvaging work. Not only have there been successive Soviet reinterpretations but the distortions which appeared in the West both before and during the Cold War make the whole process even more difficult."⁸⁰¹

The women's liberation movement encouraged and supported a flourishing of women's cultural and political activities. Women demanded space and more active roles in the theatre, film, and media enterprises. Women's publications increased, particularly with, for example, publishing facilities such as Virago and Women's Press, who published women's works written prior to the 1970s, as well as current material.

A number of journals, magazines and newspapers were also established, such as Mejane, in March 1971, Refractory Girl, in December 1972, Womanspeak in 1973 and Scarlet Woman in 1975.

⁸⁰¹ Rowbotham, "Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Love", The Spokesman, (June and July 1970).

Communist women also became involved in this renaissance. As noted in Chapter 1. of this thesis, in the early 1970s, the Communist Party reprinted Communism and the Family by Alexandra Kollontai. The introduction to the pamphlet contained a small history of the Communist Party's role in publishing pamphlets on the theory and practice of revolution. It noted that by 1921, Andrade's Bookshop "was advertising a series of more than thirty pamphlets".⁸⁰² Among such publications was included Communism and the Family. However, by the 1970s:

"This pamphlet has been unavailable for many years. Until recently, various enquiries to libraries, publishers abroad and privately, failed to turn up either a copy of the Australian edition or any other."⁸⁰³

Mavis Robertson recalls that it was Guido Barrachi who gave her a copy of the original pamphlet.⁸⁰⁴ Barrachi had been present at the foundation conference of the Communist Party in Australia in 1926.⁸⁰⁵ The reprinting of this work "introduced Kollontai to many people."⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰². "About this Pamphlet", Introduction to Communism and the Family, by Alexandra Kollontai, reprinted by the Communist Party of Australia, (Sydney, n.d.).

⁸⁰³. Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

⁸⁰⁵. "About this Pamphlet".

⁸⁰⁶. Interview with Mavis Robertson, October 1990.

The re-publication of Kollontai's work was important because it introduced people to her life and activities, and because it enabled socialist feminists to re-discover her arguments and views about the potential for different sexual relationships within the new Soviet society. Rowbotham discusses Kollontai and her ideas in Women, Resistance and Revolution.⁸⁰⁷ Rowbotham notes that in the early days of the Revolution there were a number of ideological and practical problems which had to be resolved, including women's emancipation and how it could be achieved.⁸⁰⁸

"In the early years of the revolution it was generally assumed that the family would wither along with other institutions which had persisted from capitalist society. The real argument was how long it was going to take, and how much effort you needed to put in to help yourself out of the transitional period."⁸⁰⁹

As previously discussed, issues about sexuality and the family became central questions for socialist feminists in the 1970s. Kollontai began her discussion by asking:

"Will the family be maintained in the Communist State? Will it be just as it is to-day. That is a

⁸⁰⁷. See chapter 6, "If You Like Tobogganing.", pp.134-169.

⁸⁰⁸. Ibid., p.143.

⁸⁰⁹. Ibid., p.145.

question which is tormenting the women of the working class, and which is likewise receiving attention from their comrades, the men.".⁸¹⁰

Kollontai continues by discussing issues such as the family as a unit of production, "workers learn to exist without the family life", ⁸¹¹. housework and "the child and the Communist State"⁸¹²

"She tried always to examine the gap between the official surface of things and the actuality within - and would not rest content with the easy formula that changes in the mode of production and the external structures of work relations under communism would automatically create a new freedom and equality between the sexes.".⁸¹³

It has already been noted that under Stalin the new Soviet laws and decrees relating to marriage and divorce were repealed and the family unit celebrated. For socialist feminists in the 1970s, knowledge about Kollontai and her works provided a significant history about the early days of the Russian Revolution.

⁸¹⁰. Kollontai, Communism and the Family, p.1.

⁸¹¹. Ibid., p.11.

⁸¹². Ibid., p.22.

⁸¹³. Rowbotham, "Afterword", p.223.

The Communist Party had a long tradition of being active in a range of cultural activities in Australia. Over the years such activities were organised through the Party's cultural collectives. This activity was notable in relation to the New Theatre, for example, as well as in the publication of newspapers and journals. Party members were involved in, initiated and established a number of cultural projects. These included the documentary films movement, film societies and festivals, art schools and art movements, Australian folk music and ballet. Party members also influenced Australian fiction writers.⁸¹⁴

But the Party had often taken a contradictory view of these activities, acknowledging the essential role of Tribune and the Communist Review, but less certain and sometimes vitriolic about other activities which could be defined as "bourgeois" or "intellectual". This contradiction had provided a number of tensions in the Party over the decades since its establishment.

"The general attitude of the party bosses was to view this cultural explosion with suspicion and to desperately try and control whatever was perceived to transcend the party line."⁸¹⁵

⁸¹⁴. For a discussion of these issues see Gerry Harrant, "Whose Party Was It?", Arena, 93, (1990), p.38.

⁸¹⁵. Ibid, p.39.

Of significance to Party women in the 1970s, was the historical lack of Party publications which discussed the political position of women in Australia.

"Since 1950 until now, a period of twenty years, not more than 25 articles were written in the Communist Review and more recently in the Australian Left Review, on women and in the period June 1966 until now, only one feature article has been written in the Australian Left Review on the position of women in Australia. This is apart from the few letters and articles in Tribune." ⁸¹⁶

The articles which did appear in Tribune were often written in sexist language, portraying women offensively, with headings such as "White Collars (and Frocks)" ⁸¹⁷, (this was an article about a salary claim by the members of the Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsmen), "Dolls at Doll's Point", ⁸¹⁸ and "Ladies' Days" ⁸¹⁹ about women workers who had taken direct action. ⁸²⁰

The women's movement, with its insistence on acknowledging and

⁸¹⁶. Stella Nord, "Communists and Radical Women's Organisations", report to the week-end school at Minto, July 18th and 19th, 1970, CPA records, Box 68, Mitchell Library.

⁸¹⁷. Tribune, February 25th, 1970, p.3.

⁸¹⁸. Ibid., p.12.

⁸¹⁹. Tribune, July 8th, 1970, p.10.

⁸²⁰. Tribune, March 17th, 1971, p.3.

resurrecting women's history and culture, acted as a catalyst for a red renaissance which took place in the Communist Party in the 1970s. This renaissance did not only revive socialist feminist publications of decades before, it also enabled Communist women to take part in the establishment of a number of printing and publishing enterprises which were important to the development of socialist feminism and which influenced the women's movement itself.

On 26th and 27th April, 1972 the National Executive of the Party proposed that a new journal on women and socialism be published. It was to be produced in a similar manner to Praxis, that is for internal Party information and discussion.⁸²¹ The journal was published as Join Hands, and began its publication in August 1972.

It aimed at developing debate on women, socialism and liberation:

"Primarily it seeks to provide socialist women with a journal where they may express themselves, advance policies, debate and discuss issues. It has no "line" beyond the fact that it is committed to the overthrow of all forms of exploitation and oppression, and, in this context, it does not set out to claim that particular forms of exploitation

⁸²¹. Communist Party of Australia, letter dated 4th May 1972, re the National Executive decision taken at its meeting held April 26th-27th, 1972, CPA Records, Box 18, Mitchell Library.

or oppression are more important than others, or hold greater revolutionary potential. It does, however, focus attention on one of the greatest divisions in society and the working class - sexism." ⁸²²

Over the years the journal published articles on the theory of socialist feminism, but it also provided some historical background to women's activities in the Communist Party, and assisted in developing knowledge about the rich and multiple ways in which Communist women have participated in the struggle for women's liberation. ⁸²³

Join Hands was also important in linking the women's movement and the Party in relation to ideological issues. In the June 1973 issue an article by Isabel Largaia and John Dumoulin, Towards a Science of Women's Liberation, was printed "specifically for CPA males with the intention that they may assist in eliminating existing ideological obstructions towards a more effective, united, revolutionary party." ⁸²⁴

Grant Evans, reviewing the first issue of Join Hands noted that:

⁸²². "Introduction", Join Hands, August 1972.

⁸²³. For example, the Winter/Spring, 1983 issue includes articles by Ruth Crow on childcare during the Second World War and by Kath Thomas who gives a history of her involvement in the Party in "The Lighter Side of Struggle.".

⁸²⁴. Join Hands, June 1973.

"Join Hands is not just another journal; it is unique. It is the first journal produced by women revolutionaries which addressed itself specifically to the problems of women in the revolution.".⁸²⁵

Reference has been made previously to the publication of a women's Tribune, where work on issue No. 1803, May 8th-14th, 1973 was totally undertaken by Party women. In September 1973, Joyce Stevens was noting that Tribune had recently decided to include a woman on the editorial staff of the paper "with the aim of improving the general content of Tribune in respect to the social position of women.".⁸²⁶

In her letter Joyce makes a number of points about why such a step was important. Among these points was included the need for:

"A change in the overall consciousness of Tribune so that general political articles and features are not so male oriented, that is, to talk as though the working class were all men; that all the political priorities are the issues decided on by male dominated political structures etc. Perhaps we can even change our vocabulary so that "mankind"

⁸²⁵. Grant Evans, "Review of Join Hands", Tribune, August 15th-21st, 1972, p.7.

⁸²⁶. Joyce Stevens, Letter to Communist Party of Australia members, 13th September, 1973, CPA Records, Box 78, Mitchell Library.

will become "humankind".⁸²⁷

The renaissance did not only take place in relation to inner-Party publications. Communist women were active in assisting with the establishment and publication of a number of socialist feminist journals, one of which was Scarlet Woman.

In October 1974 the first National Feminism and Socialism Conference in Australia was held in Melbourne. It was at this Conference that the idea for establishing Scarlet Woman materialised.⁸²⁸ Party women were involved in both the ideas for its establishment, and in the processes of its continuing publication. Party women did not aim to develop Scarlet Woman "as a Communist Party journal", but rather as a means by which issues of importance to socialist feminists could be discussed.⁸²⁹

"Feminism and the women's movement are crucial commitments in our lives. We are also committed to the need for a basic change in the economic and social structure of society to one of a democratic, self-managed socialism and believe that the study of both feminist and marxist theory and practice is useful for this purpose.

⁸²⁷. Ibid.

⁸²⁸. Hosfal, Nightingale and Otto, p.5.

⁸²⁹. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

Scarlet Woman will try to present and develop ideas on how these two ideals - feminism and socialism - are related to one another.".⁸³⁰

The major aim was to promote debate within the women's liberation movement.⁸³¹ Over the years, the journal carried articles which discussed both theoretical and practical issues of importance to socialist feminists. Articles covered topics about issues which had arisen in the women's movement, particularly organisational issues, as well as dealing with some of the differences which existed within the movement about the ways to develop a socialist feminist critique.

Scarlet Woman provided political, theoretical and cultural space to and for socialist feminists. It enabled feminists in Australia to gain knowledge about women in other countries by publishing articles on women in Vietnam, in China and the Philippines. It also provided discussion and information about cultural activities occurring in the women's liberation movement. It has significantly contributed to a history of the movement itself.

In 1984, ten years after the first National Women's Conference on Feminism and Socialism, Scarlet Woman provided an historical overview of both the achievements and difficulties experienced by the journal and the women's movement during

⁸³⁰. Editorial, Scarlet Woman, No. 1, (April, 1975).

⁸³¹. Editorial, Scarlet Woman, No. 17, (Spring 1983).

that decade.

..."we have realised that Scarlet Woman can provide a unique historical overview of the WLM since 1974. The magazine documents the changing political and economic situation, and its repercussions for the WLM. It extends a large number of debates that highlight differences between radical feminist and socialist feminist theory and practice. It also indicates some areas of commonality. And the magazine comes back again and again to questions of organisation and structure within the WLM as a whole, and amongst socialist feminists in particular. It is apparent that many of the issues debated are relevant today, indicating the enduring value of the magazine as a means of extending theoretical discussion within the Movement, and of learning from past experience."⁸³²

The existence of such journals not only provided an opportunity for socialist feminist issues to be raised and discussed, it also provided a context in which concerns, thoughts and ideas of importance to women could be expressed, discussed and evaluated. Such journals provided much needed space in which women could pursue theoretical discussion.

The existence of such publications also enabled socialist

⁸³². Hosfal, Nightingale and Otto, p.5.

feminists to continually examine how successfully some recurring issues had been dealt with. Within this parameter, Scarlet Woman provided the opportunity for persistent theoretical analysis.

"While racism has often been linked with class and sex in theoretical discussions in Scarlet Woman, there has been hardly any elaboration of the issue of racism...

No-one has yet been able to provide an analysis that closes the gap between differing positions. Though it is difficult to imagine any basic social change that would liberate women that does not make a many-sided assault on sex, class and race among other contradictions, the exact nature of this assault still eludes us."⁸³³

Women in the Party were involved with other publications which also sought to provide feminists with an opportunity to develop some of the debates taking place in the women's movement. In March 1971 the first issue of Mejane was published. The collective included, among others, Mavis Robertson and Joyce Stevens.⁸³⁴

⁸³³. Joyce Stevens, "Class and Gender, a 'Scarlet Woman' Perspective", Scarlet Woman, No. 20, (Spring 1985), p.12.

⁸³⁴. In first issue of Mejane, March 1971.

Inner Party publications continued to develop. In 1979 the first Communist Party women's newsletter was published.⁸³⁵ This was important in maintaining a link between women members in the Party and the women who were elected onto the National Committee.

More recently, Communist women, some of whom have left the Party, have continued to record and publish autobiographical accounts of their lives and experiences. Such accounts detail histories which would otherwise have remained invisible. Such accounts have contributed to a cultural red renaissance.

There is of course, a paradox here. This cultural renaissance has developed during a time when the Communist Party in Australia, and communism internationally, has entered a period of political and ideological crisis and decline. One of the outcomes of the red renaissance may be to provide histories about communism for a society which believes increasingly that Communism is dead. The literary revival, if it continues, may assist in providing hope for a political revival in the future, by recalling the political and social hopes and aspirations of those who were involved in Communism in the past.

Despite the decline of Communism in the 1990s, this renaissance leaves us with a wealth of historical and political material which can continue to be the basis of any

⁸³⁵. CPA Records, Box 71, Mitchell Library.

future developments of socialist feminism. It remains as a tribute to women's history.

CONCLUSION: PERSEPHONE'S RETURN.

"Why I asked myself is a bird's eye view of a situation only possible in retrospect, why if one is not utterly devoid of historical consciousness, is it so difficult to focus the present, to force all these fragmentary impressions into one significant phrase? Would the uninitiated immediately grasp the meaning of all this brouhaha...?"⁸³⁶

This thesis has examined the implications of the intersection of the women's liberation movement and the Communist Party of Australia during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has argued that the Communist Party's theory and practice were positively influenced by the women's liberation movement, particularly with the development of socialist feminist critiques of class, gender, patriarchy and the gender division of labour. Political organisation for Communist women within the CPA was also positively developed, particularly with the adoption of proportional representation in the 1970s.

The thesis has however, also examined the decline of Communism in the 1990s. Some of the reasons for this reversal are stated and discussed. It is maintained that if a socialist renewal

⁸³⁶. Violet Trefusis, Don't Look Round, (London, 1989 ed.), p.145.

is to re-occur in the future, that one of the places that one can begin to look for indications of what is required is in the history of the interactions which have taken place between the women's movements and Communist parties in Western capitalist countries over the last two decades. Such an analysis indicates that the development of a socialist feminist critique of Marxism in the 1970s was absolutely essential for the intellectual reform and future development of Marxism. The development of socialist feminist critiques on gender and class, and the attempts to construct a unitary socialist feminist theory have been major contributions to the existing body of Marxist theory. The thesis has argued that any future processes of socialist renewal cannot ignore such contributions.

The thesis has noted that in the 1980s the Communist Party undertook a process of socialist renewal. This process resulted in the Communist Party dissolving itself, and its remaining members asked to work towards the establishment of a New Left Party. An appraisal of the intersection of the women's movement and the Communist Party in Australia indicates many of the essential ideological and practical issues which are mandatory for any new Marxist party which may be established in Australia in the future. The thesis has asserted that if one examines the crossroads where the women's movement and the Party met, one can analyse some of the issues, problems, ideas and praxis which would be essential to any such Party.

This thesis has maintained that the effects of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party of Australia were cathartic. The movement not only affected the theory and practice of the Party, but also its structure and organisation, and its view of itself as a political party within Australian political and social contexts.

In studying the implications of the 1970s relationship between the movement and the Party, the thesis draws on a number of recent theoretical discussions on the politics of feminism and class, including works by Ellen Meiksins Wood, Lise Vogel and Sheila Rowbotham. This examination of the period has also been undertaken as a means by which some questions can be asked about the state of socialism in the 1990s, and to make a statement about the theoretical and practical content of any renewed socialist party's organisation and principles.

Post-1969 - a Retrospective.

The Gender Question.

Within the Communist Party of Australia, Communist women active in the women's movement, assisted in the de-stalinising process which had been under way since the 1960s.

Prior to the women's liberation movement, the Party's perceptions of and activities around the development of a de-stalinised party mainly dealt with two major sets of issues.

The first of these was the issue of democracy, where the Party endeavoured to replace the Soviet style model of revolutionary organisation based on democratic centralism with a party organisation based on principles of democratic socialism. This model emphasised the need for less hierarchical decision-making processes.

The second set of issues dealt with the development of a Communist party which could establish political programs and interpret activities and policies within the international Communist arena and in a more independent manner within Australian political and social parameters. This process had been undertaken by other Communist Parties within the Communist International, notably Yugoslavia and China. The moves by China to develop its own road to socialism resulted in a major schism between the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s. In Australia this development included a demand to be able to criticise the Soviet Union on issues with which the Party in Australia disagreed. As chapter 2 has discussed, the Party became critical of the Soviet Union during the 1960s over issues of censorship and the treatment of Jews. Disagreement was also voiced by the Party in Australia at the International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties which met in Moscow in 1969.

With the emergence and influence of the women's liberation movement, these perceptions and criticisms were pushed further. Party women began to analyse and question traditional

Communist interpretations of Marxist theory and practice. They demanded that a re-definition of this praxis, based on gender, be developed.

In particular, these women raised issues about the sexism which existed in the Party and about the static, tunnel vision which the Party had on issues of gender and sexuality. Such issues are now the keystones of socialist feminist critiques.

"Feminists have been urging the need for a form of politics which enables people to experience different relationships. The implications of this go beyond sex-gender relationships, to all relationships of inequality, including those between socialists. Leninist organisations have made piecemeal concessions to the women's movement and the gay movement under pressure."⁸³⁷

Communist women demanded that equality in political relationships, and in relationships within the Party was an imperative and that a non-sexist practice had to be put into place immediately, - after the revolution was simply not acceptable. The demand has been for gender equality within women's personal and political lives; within the home and at the workplace. The struggle to analyse gender inequality in all its forms has been a major contribution to identifying the roots of women's oppression within capitalism. It has also

⁸³⁷. Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright, p.146.

been an imperative exercise within left organisations, including the Communist Party. This demand has enabled a continuing body of socialist feminist theoretical material to be developed.

Revolutionary Organisation.

Within the women's liberation movement there were moves to establish less hierarchical and rigid forms of organisation, primarily on the basis that such non-flexible structures were weighted towards men and negated women's issues and participation. Communist women carried these ideas back to the Party. Some major changes to Party organisation and structure were already under way in the early 1970s, but women comrades demanded that these changes take into account the inequalities which existed within the Party and that there be an acknowledgment of the ways in which Party organisation mitigated against its women members.

"It has required a big argument on the Leninist left to take up even one aspect of 'personal' power relationships - the question of inequality between men and women within socialist organisations themselves. The feminist movement has challenged this reproduction of inequality within the left. After nearly a decade sexism (like racism) is now admitted to exist even within left parties

themselves by most organisations on the left.".⁸³⁸

Concomitant issues dealing with revolutionary organisation were also raised, particularly questions about internal democracy. The Party, by the changes it introduced to its Constitution in the 1970s, demonstrated that in theory at least, a balance between centralism and democracy was possible. A major achievement by Communist women was the acceptance by the Party that proportional representation was essential as a mechanism for women's equal representation throughout all decision-making levels in the Party.

Socialist Feminist Theory.

One major task undertaken by socialist feminists has been to develop a critique of the relationship between Marxism and feminism. The task has been difficult primarily because of the differences of theoretical perspectives which have been formed about the nature and potential nature of this relationship.

Some feminists have described it as an unhappy marriage.⁸³⁹ Others point to the inequalities which continue to exist within this relationship, where although feminism and socialism were to be brought together, it was really on

⁸³⁸. Rowbotham, The Women's Movement, p.25.

⁸³⁹. See, for example, Lydia Sargent (ed.), Women and Revolution, (Boston, 1981), which includes discussions of a number of different views on "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism".

socialist, (read masculine) terms.⁸⁴⁰ To many in the women's movement it appeared that the relationship between feminism and socialism could only ever result in an inevitable situation of irreconcilable differences.

Other socialist feminists, including women in the Communist Party, have attempted to develop a more positive critique of a Marxist theory informed by feminism, and more recently, by anti-racism. "They assert that the key oppressions of sex, class and race are interrelated and that the struggles against them must be coordinated."⁸⁴¹

This process meant examining and redefining 'the woman question'. Communist women undertook this project and pointed to the ways in which women's issues and work in the Party had been undertaken within political parameters based on gender inequalities. These parameters supported and defended the systemic oppression of women which has historically been such a mark of Australian society itself. Communist women raised these issues and assisted in developing a socialist feminist theoretical perspective which could identify ways in which Communist parties had continued to reflect gender blind theories and practices.

"Socialist feminists have subjected the socialist tradition of work on the woman question to critical

⁸⁴⁰. Ibid., p.2.

⁸⁴¹. Vogel, p.6.

examination, seeking the kernels of serious theoretical and practical import stored within it. From this point of view, a major contribution of the socialist-feminist movement has been its insistence that those who use traditional categories of Marxist theory must make their case adequately. ".⁸⁴²

The development of these critiques has been politically and socially difficult. A general view of socialism as redundant developed and accelerated in the West. This process was assisted in the 1990s by the collapse of Communism in the East. Thus the continuing development of socialist feminist theory has also become more demanding.

In addition to these political developments, the thesis has also noted the effects of the development of academic Marxism. As capitalism has supported the development of a more tertiary educated population and as the political and theoretical influence of socialist parties has declined, Marxist theoretical studies have increasingly developed within academic institutions.

"Slowly but perceptibly, the Marxism of the classics assumed the mantle of a new orthodoxy which was to be attacked and subverted as an inadmissible body of work. And the location of the

⁸⁴². Vogel, p.33.

evolving Marxism within the academy opened it to the influence of bourgeois social science...For those who had clung to Marxism through the Cold War or who had come to it after experiencing the inadequacy of bourgeois social science, it could never be an orthodoxy, but in the 1970s a new generation of left intellectuals was effectively moving away from rather than towards Marx."⁸⁴³

If Marxist theoretical studies were to be affected in this way, so too were socialist feminist studies. Additionally, socialist feminist theory has been affected by some women's movement views on intellectual enterprise.

"In the 1970s, for instance, women's liberation was in some forms deliberately anti-intellectual, with radical feminists often seeing theory as inherently masculine, as part of a patriarchal conspiracy. Such charges may help explain a tendency in 1980s academic feminism for theory to exist almost in isolation from a consideration of material (notably class) questions..."⁸⁴⁴.

The above Editorial also points to another problem for socialism and socialist feminist theoretical work - that of poststructuralism. It has been argued in this thesis that the

⁸⁴³. Fine, et.al., p.10.

⁸⁴⁴. "Editorial", Hecate, Vol. 17, No.2, p.5.

development of poststructuralism derives from an anti-class, anti-Marxist perspective. The major problem that this theoretical and intellectual exercise raises is the "apparent turn of feminist theory from the realm of politics to that of language and philosophy."⁸⁴⁵

Positive Outcomes.

It is argued in this thesis that the influence of the women's liberation movement on the Communist Party of Australia had positive outcomes and that after strident struggle by women comrades, the Party accepted many theoretical and practical issues being raised within the women's movement and brought over to the Party by women Communists active in that movement.

"It was only after the advent of the women's movement, a movement that lots of Communist Party members were involved in right from the beginning, that [women's rights] issues started to become more accepted as mainstream political issues. Had there not been really strong women in the Party who were involved in the women's movement, I don't know that the Party would have reacted as it did. Women tended to drag the Party kicking and screaming with it in the development of feminist views. But after the advent of the women's movement, so-called

⁸⁴⁵. Anne Curthoys, "Feminism and the State", Arena, No. 93, (Summer 1990), p.153.

women's issues such as abortion, childcare, discrimination against women in employment, equal pay and the debates about the family, became mainstream political issues."⁸⁴⁶

In this respect, the Communist Party was ahead of other political parties and organisations in Australia. Judy Munday comments on her election as President of the Party in 1979:

"It is significant that the Communist Party was the first political party to elect a woman to such a leading position. We can talk about how the Party should have been more advanced than society generally, but in some ways it was, and this says something about how bad all the other political organisations were. The Party was far in advance of all the rest of them.

The fact ...that I was elected meant that there had to have been quite a lot of support within the Party for my election. The Party deserves credit for that."⁸⁴⁷

Joyce Stevens notes that in relation to issues such as equal pay and child care the Communist Party was "probably more in

⁸⁴⁶. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

⁸⁴⁷. Interview with Judy Munday, October 1991.

advance than most other political movements."⁸⁴⁸

Judy Gillet comments on changes which were made to the Party's organisation, and on the effects of the womens' struggles in the Party:

"It is only in the last twenty years that the struggle to combat sexism in our Party has really been waged in a concerted and organised way.

It has not been an easy struggle. Conditioning, stereotyping and entrenched male forms of organisation are a formidable combination.

However there has been considerable change, and improvement, not only for women in our Party but for other oppressed groups like gays.

This experience of struggle within our own organisation has produced a wide range of structures, attitudes and strategies not known before and rare in other organisations. We have structures which are now less or rarely hierarchical, the removal of executive elites, limited tenure of office for people in leadership roles, collaborative decision making more free of lobbying and haranguing. We have organised child

⁸⁴⁸. Interview with Joyce Stevens, October 1990.

care, we have attitudes which are less stereotyped, more accepting, less conservative and which are more conscious of the needs and rights of women."⁸⁴⁹

Mavis Robertson sums up the political effects of the linking of the women's liberation movement and the Party:

"We made big inroads. Women's liberation was linked up with the movement against the Vietnam war, and gay liberation and there was a general ferment of ideas at that time. The Communist Party was quite well placed to respond to the new social movements but the problem was that the Communist Party was a dying force, and what a pity."⁸⁵⁰

Continuing questions.

This thesis has maintained that a study of the events of the 1970s can provide useful insights into the problems for socialism and the ebb of Communism which are now such a feature of the politics of the 1990s. It has been argued that from the late 1960s onwards, the Communist Party was endeavouring to make changes to its theory and practice which

⁸⁴⁹. Judy Gillett, "Women and Socialist Renewal", Praxis, No. 44, (March 1987), p.43.

⁸⁵⁰. Interview with Mavis Robertson, July 1990.

would prevent it from becoming "a dying force". The documents adopted by the Party at its 22nd and 23rd Congresses provided a positive ideological analysis and political response to the problems facing Australian society.

The thesis has asserted that at the same time as the women's liberation movement was beginning to impact upon the Party, the Party was endeavouring to come to terms with other forces in Australian society which had, it appeared, stolen the revolutionary agenda. The impact of the student and moratorium movements on the Party were also cathartic. Such movements seemed to offer hope for a Party revival at a time when dwindling membership numbers and a continuing loss of Party influence within the industrial and local communities was occurring.

The thesis has maintained that the impact of these movements on the Communist Party raised a number of theoretical and practical dilemmas for some Communists. One such tension was the issue of how to develop alliances with such movements. This raised the question of whether it is possible to maintain a Marxist theoretical perspective, without being dogmatic, as well as constructively building new relationships. This question continues to remain on the current political agenda.

The thesis has also argued that the intersection of the women's liberation movement and the Party points to some continuing problems for Marxism and socialist feminism. Women in the Party successfully raised and changed many aspects of

Party praxis, but this occurred during a period when a number of events ensued which placed severe pressure on the socialist project. In Australia, the brief hopes of the Whitlam era were frustrated by the dismissal; in Great Britain there were a number of major industrial disputes in which the traditional working class was defeated; the Labour Party lost office and the Thatcher era took hold. In Australia, as in Great Britain, the women's movement and the Left, including the Communist Party, the Labor Party and the labour movement have become fragmented and the hegemony of the Right has continued to increase.

Such events have raised tensions and problems for communists and for socialist feminists. These problems are associated with some major theoretical dilemmas not the least of which has been the continuing and indefatigable debate about the centrality of class struggle to the socialist project.

The Socialist Project.

The importance of the women's liberation movement on the socialist project has been politically and theoretically monumental. However, the women's liberation movement also assisted in blurring and confusing the project and in throwing it off-balance. Whilst the following is true, the means by which such oppression could end have relied increasingly upon strategies which refute the essential role of class struggle:

"Diverse views are expressed in the women's movement about the nature and source of women's oppression. The various trends express themselves in the differing emphasis and priority given to particular campaigns and in methods of campaigning, but the movement is widely united in its view that the oppression of women exists in all human relationships and institutions in capitalist society.".⁸⁵¹

Feminists have consistently asked some very difficult questions and raised fundamental inadequacies about the socialist project. These questions still stand in bold letters on the signposts of the current crossroads in socialism.

"The left has been unable to develop a political perspective which enables it to cut through the polarities established in dominant political discourse. For feminists there is the added problem of a lack of faith in existing socialist societies in relation to the position of women. Tied in with this, though not quite the same thing, is the widespread rejection of Marxism as a useful way of understanding the world.".⁸⁵²

⁸⁵¹. Women & Social Liberation, CPA Policy Document, Sydney, 1979.

⁸⁵². Anne Curthoys, What is the Socialism in Socialist Feminism, (n.d.), Photocopy.

The problem for some radicals is not that these questions have been asked, but that too often in attempting to answer them, the positive achievements of the early Soviet state have been ignored, the entire body of Marx, Engels and Lenin (no one much refers to Luxembourgh, Kollontai, or Zetkin) has been defined as irrelevant and a view adopted that post-1969 heralded such a new era that it has been necessary to reject all previous Communist Party activities, theory and practice as Stalinist cultural baggage.

This thesis has asserted that class struggle is central to the project of socialist renewal. This insistence on the necessity of class analysis does not to seek a return to past dogmas. It is an argument which maintains that class analysis is fundamental to an understanding of capitalism in Australia in the 1990s. As Fine states, by making this assertion:

"We run the risk of courting the accusation of class reductionism - that every struggle must be understood and assessed purely in terms of capital and labour as opponents in the simplest economic terms. We reject this charge and its implication of being blind to the women's movement, to the peace movement or to the weaknesses of the trade union movement. We seek to relate, not reduce these movements to the role of classes both in theory as well as in politics."⁸⁵³

⁸⁵³. Fine, et.al., p.7.

An insistence on the centrality of class struggle, it has been argued, is essential for a socialist vision of future society. It has been maintained that not only is a socialist vision an imperative, but that the vision relies on the interplay or praxis between the theory and practice of class politics. As Miliband notes, there was a time when this vision was "invested on the Left with strong salvationist tones."⁸⁵⁴ These tones within orthodox socialism relegated the solutions to 'the woman question' to the post-revolutionary society. This thesis has argued that such a position must be rejected, along with the traditional, labourist definition of class which refers only to blue collar, manual workers; that is, to men. Class struggle must continue to be redefined within a Marxist dialectical framework to mean the struggle that exists between all forms of oppression, and the hegemonic ideologies and practices that are capitalist.

Movement politics.

The effects of movement politics on the Communist Party became an important element in the whole discussion about socialist renewal which the Party began in the 1980s.

"The major issues of our time, and the many progressive and radical movements which have developed in response to them, provide the bases

⁸⁵⁴. Miliband, p.18.

for a renewal and revival of the socialist movement in Australia."⁸⁵⁵

The seeds for such a renewal began with the events of 1968, particularly the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and were further developed with the influences of the women's movement. Such a renewal was a political and ideological necessity. By 1969 the rejection of the Stalinist model and the development of a socialism which could take into account the material conditions of Australian society was mandatory.

As chapter 7 of the thesis has argued however, by the 1980s the Party had not only rejected the negative elements of Stalinism, it was also confusing traditional Marxist analysis with the Stalinist model. Class struggle was no longer seen to be relevant to the politics of the new social movements - it was a millstone around the neck of the Party. It had too many Soviet memories.

Some socialists began to argue that these memory associations are so negative that the words used to describe a particular political philosophy have to be abandoned.

"It may be a great pity that a word and an ideal that should have meant something very different is

⁸⁵⁵. Communist Party of Australia, Australian Socialism. A Proposal for Renewal, n.d. The document is based upon the decisions of the Communist Party's Special Congress held on November 3rd and 4th, 1984.

now strongly associated with repression, bureaucracy and now with economic failure but that is the plain historical fact."⁸⁵⁶.

The words 'Communist Party' have now been replaced by 'New Left party'.

The question of the relationship of Communist parties to the social movements is an extremely important one. The Party quite correctly adopted a principle of working in coalition with the left at its 1967 Congress, but that proposal was put forward when a Communist party existed which still maintained that class struggle was the essential mechanism for transforming capitalism.

This thesis has analysed the effects of one such movement, the women's movement on the Party in Australia. Differences of opinion continued to be expressed about what kind of relationship should and could develop between the Party and movement politics. Both the Communist parties in Britain and in Australia have recently accepted a similar road of working towards a New Left party based on the premise that it is imperative that socialists and members of radical movements who regard themselves as left, join forces.

"All those left activists who are genuinely concerned to develop a more effective socialist

⁸⁵⁶. Brian Aarons, "Farewell to 1917", Australian Left Review, (February, 1990), p.19.

alternative should come together as equals to discuss how to do so..."⁸⁵⁷.

This thesis has maintained that it is difficult to perceive how the socialist project can be achieved and what the socialist vision actually is once the principle of class struggle is no longer the "guiding thread of socialist politics".⁸⁵⁸.

"...it is simply an evasion to say that the terrain of struggle has irrevocably shifted, requiring new visions of social transformation and new agents to achieve it. The structure of power and interest that constitutes capitalism is still in the way, and the class barriers to its destruction are still there. They cannot simply be dissolved in alliances or theorised out of existence."⁸⁵⁹

A Socialist Vision.

In 1979 the Communist Party stated:

"The Communist Party of Australia believes that these great problems require the establishment of a new socialist society based on social need

⁸⁵⁷. Australian Socialism, (1984).

⁸⁵⁸. Wood, The Retreat, p.197.

⁸⁵⁹. Wood, "Marxism Without Class Struggle?", p.269.

instead of private profit, a socialism which is democratic and self-managed, where power is exercised by working people in workplaces and communities. This new society will combat and finally remove oppression of all kinds.

Such a society can come about, we believe, through struggles for democratic transformation of all spheres of life - workplace, community, family, political."⁸⁶⁰

This thesis has argued that one of the effects of the new social movements, including the women's liberation movement, has been a demonstration of the inability of many Marxists to undertake a continual renewal of Marxist theory. It has been easier to abandon the theory as irrelevant. For some Communists, the gender debates have knocked class analysis on the head.

Furthermore, it is maintained that many Communists have been unable to theoretically analyse and reject elements of the Bolshevik model which needed to be rejected, and to simultaneously develop a renewed Marxist theory based upon the current material conditions. The long-term neglect in undertaking this process, indeed the dogmatic ways in which members of the Party were expelled for suggesting such

⁸⁶⁰. Towards Socialism in Australia, Program of the Communist Party of Australia, 1979, p.2.

renewal, (for example over the series of events which occurred in 1956), has carried with it the seeds of long-term decline and eventual demise.

This conclusion has been headed 'Persephone's Return' because although the material conditions do not exist at present which could give rise to a socialist transformation of Australian society, the following view is supported:

"...it is quite realistic to think that these conditions will come into being within the next ten, twenty, or thirty years - a long time in the life of an individual, but a mere moment in historical time. In this perspective, class struggle for the creation of democratic, egalitarian, co-operative, and classless societies, far from coming to an end, has barely begun."⁸⁶¹.

It has also been argued however, that any renewed Marxist party will need to be markedly different from that of pre-1969. As this thesis has tried to explain, the influences of the women's liberation movement and the prolific body of socialist feminist theoretical material which has been developed, demonstrate a relevant and essential praxis which cannot be ignored.

⁸⁶¹. Ralph Miliband, Divided Societies, (Oxford, 1989), p.234.

APPENDIX.

About the Interviews:

As noted in the Introduction to the thesis, interviews provide an important source of primary material for the thesis. The selection of interviewees was therefore a significant task. The following points were taken into account in this selection process:

- to interview across a wide range of age groups;
- to interview women who had been long term members of the Party, as well as those of more recent membership;
- to include people who had remained members of the Party, as well as those who had at one time been members;
- to gain views of members who had been active in the Party leadership and members who had mostly been active as rank and file members of the Party;
- to interview a majority of women members, but also include views of male members;

- to cover members from a number of Party centres, rather than concentrating only on the Sydney centre.

The following were interviewed:

In Sydney:

Laurie Aarons, Ina Jones, Judy Munday, Mavis Robertson, Paula Rix, Joyce Stevens.

In Newcastle:

Jean Bailey, Janet Copley, Barbara Curthoys, Geoff Curthoys, Eileen Dalwood, Jean Davidson.

In Wollongong:

Derek Beechey, Sally Bowen, Winifred Mitchell, Reg Wilding.

In Melbourne:

Joan Goodwin.

The aims as set out above, have been met, with the exception of the last one, where a predominance of interviews has been carried out within the Sydney area.

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Joan Goodwin, June 1987.

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Winifred Mitchell, October 1990.

Judy Munday, October 1991.

Mavis Robertson, July and October 1990.

Paula Rix, October 1991.

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