

Subject to Suspicion

FEMINISM AND ANTISTATISM IN BRITAIN

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Only state intervention and welfare reforms can put an end to women's economic dependency, and thereby free women from men's control, that doughty feminist reformer Eleanor Rathbone argued just over eighty years ago.¹ How her old statist rhetoric betrays her. Women's economic dependency and welfare reforms are currently on everyone's minds, but in an ambience generating thoughts only of purging most of those receiving any benefits at all.

Today in Britain, in the long shadow of the United States, the political usage of the term *economic dependency* is being definitively transformed. The notion of welfare benefit no longer promises the hard-fought-for amelioration, but rather the definitive symptom, of dependency: the erstwhile utopian cure is resignified as the disease. It is some years since Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon traced the genealogical transformation of *dependency* in the United States, noting its conjunction with a flourishing, deceptively feminist-sounding self-help literature on autonomy.² This is why single mothers can be demonized if they *don't* work, even while married women with young children can be demonized if they *do*. Shifting a mother from dependency on the state to reliance on a man for economic support, in this troubling slippage, supposedly removes her from the pathologies of dependency. It is a massive deception.

The continuing offensive against welfare provides perhaps the single most general threat to Western women's interests at present—at least for those many women who are not wealthy and who still take the major responsibility for caring work in the home. As feminists in the 1970s made so clear, and sought so hard to transform, women are most vulnerable to the very worst pathologies of dependency when they are most at the mercy of husbands or male partners, especially during and after pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, midwives in Britain have recently been asked to look for signs of abuse in just such women, following alarming reports from the United States examining the bruised bodies of pregnant women and those who have recently become mothers.³ Similar antitheses exist in relation to needy children. Carolyn Steedman has written eloquently of how the expansion of welfare in the late 1940s gave a particular confidence to working-class children like herself:

I think I would be a different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right exist, was worth something . . . its central benefit being that, unlike my mother, the state asked for nothing in return. Psychic structures are shaped by these huge historical labels: "charity," "philanthropy," "state intervention."⁴

Liz Heron echoes these sentiments, although, like Steedman herself, she was well aware of the limitations of such services: it was their paternalistic, undemocratic delivery that made them vulnerable to subsequent attack. Introducing her anthology of autobiographical writings by girls growing up in Britain in the 1950s, Heron writes: "Along with the orange juice and the cod-liver oil, the malt supplement and the free school milk, we may also have absorbed a certain sense of our own worth and the sense of a future that would get better and better, as if history were on our side."⁵ Not any more! The shedding of public responsibility for the welfare of poorer women threatens to devastate the lives of millions of children in Britain, just as it has already done in the United States over the last two decades.⁶

Increasingly in Britain the new myth of "dependency culture" is used to condemn those receiving any form of state service, marking them out as vulnerable to "welfare dependency." Yet, despite the hassles and indignities they now face, surveys of single mothers have shown that a majority would still prefer dependency on the state to their experience of dependency on a man.⁷ That option is now disappearing. In alliance with Reagan and the American Right, there was no doubting Margaret Thatcher's determination to overturn all traces of the postwar Keynesian economic orthodoxy with its support for spending on welfare—while upholding and abetting warfare spending. What is somewhat less clear is the extent to which the Blair government, like Clinton's "New" Democratic Party, is simply a continuation of the same proscarcity neoliberal policies undermining the public realm while encouraging market forces into every institutional domain.

To date, Blair's self-declared respect for his Tory predecessors, his unlimited admiration for Clinton (despite the latter's capitulation to dismantling welfare), his government's tireless discourse of fiscal "prudence" and obeisance toward the dynamism of unfettered market forces, and his comprehensive ardor for Britain's "special relationship" with the United States have all impeded the production of any distinct or convincing alternative vision to the one he inherited. The legacy of neoliberalism leaves the United Kingdom, in marked contrast to the rest of the European Economic Community (EEC), trailing the United States in its soaring inequality, with poverty in the United States estimated at twice that of any other

European nation, despite having the highest per capita income. (Sweden, with the longest tradition of social democratic organizations, still has the lowest incidence of poverty and inequality).⁸

Searching for a third way between the interventionist market constraints of welfare states and the turbulence of neoliberalism, Blair—like Clinton—has moved toward what has been labeled the “new paternalism.”⁹ This third way fully endorses the earlier neoliberal “modernizing” crusade on restraining public spending while insisting that market economics must reign supreme. Its characteristic paternalism (better seen as a new managerialism, in that women are as likely as men to implement its objectives) aims to tackle the escalating poverty, inequality, crime, and social disintegration through closer supervision of the poor: rectifying what is seen as their personal inadequacies or fecklessness. Demanding an end to the “poverty of ambition,” social deprivation and welfare are to be reduced and managed through welfare-to-work regimes, with strong encouragement of private-sector backing for training and resources in the public sector: from the teaching of parenting skills or job application techniques to finance and pension management.¹⁰ However, there is scant evidence that workfare serves as a springboard to real jobs (initial studies of the program’s success in New York reveal that only 29 percent of workfare participants forced off the welfare rolls were able to find even casual work).¹¹ Meanwhile, although in acute tension with its aim of creating the fullest possible employment of poor and needy people (many of whom are women caring for children or other dependents), recent attempts to roll back welfare have also strongly encouraged the promotion of traditional, patriarchal family ideology.

In stark contrast with the repeated avowal of the “pathologies” of welfare dependency is the steadfast disavowal of knowledge of the actual casualties when women and children are most financially dependent on familial male authority. Such denial has been strenuously cultivated by the growing strength of “family values” campaigners over the last two decades. The “profamily” movements that arose in the 1970s were part of an explicit New Right backlash against feminism and sexual liberation, soon to be underwritten by Reagan and Thatcher. However, two decades later such rhetoric seems ubiquitous across the political spectrum. Meanwhile, the knowledge that the traditional heterosexual marriage can create a living hell of cruelty, neglect, and abuse is beaten back by what American sociologist Judith Stacey calls the “virtual social science” of distorted data about the perils of “fatherless,” “divorced,” or “lone” parent families constantly disseminated by the media.¹² This not only encourages the continuing denial of lesbian and gay rights but also dismisses the often invaluable role of friendships, community resources, and wider structures

of social support, which may be all that many individuals have to rely on to keep them sane.

From Britain, looking anxiously at trends across the Atlantic, one can observe that the once explicit, but now more often disguised or denied, antifeminist and antigay sentiments expressed in family values crusades are all of a piece with a sweeping antistatist rhetoric—increasingly as prevalent on the Left as on the Right. I was dismayingly alerted to further political reversals that may lie ahead for antiquated socialist feminists such as myself by recent thoughts about the state expressed by that once enduringly hopeful and combative feminist radical (and old friend of mine) Barbara Ehrenreich. In her “Confessions of a Recovering Statist,” she publicly renounces any hopes for progressive social reforms in the United States, whether around child care or parental leave (or environmental reform). “For the time being,” she declares, “we’re not going to get anywhere with a progressive agenda consisting of . . . government initiatives. *Believe me, I have tried.*”¹³ And she certainly has.

Ehrenreich contrasts the situation in the United States with the kinds of universal state provision she assumes is taken for granted in Western Europe. She argues that there is now no combating the Right’s antistate propaganda in the United States: that is, after two decades of radical conservative pressure, and after Clinton’s welfare “reform,” which removed federal responsibility for assisting children in poverty while at the same time authorizing millions of dollars to be spent not on sex education, contraception, or to prevent violence against women, but rather on a puritanical morality that consigns single mothers to courses in “abstinence education” (Clinton’s way of having sex, perhaps). Other feminist political scientists based in the United States, such as Zillah Eisenstein and Anna Marie Smith, also express their increasing suspicions of the costs of what they call the “insider strategy.” They believe that feminist support for Clinton facilitated his successful presentation of “feminine” and “feminist” signifiers, making women’s votes decisive in his reelection in 1996 (with the largest gender gap in the history of U.S. presidential voting), but ultimately helping to neutralize opposition to his welfare cuts.¹⁴ Even some of the most sophisticated theoretical works, like Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury*—which skillfully exposes both the logic of victimhood and the theoretical incoherence in feminist rhetoric like Catharine MacKinnon’s demand for legal protection from “pornographic” imagery—retain a near exclusive focus on “the state as a negative domain for democratic political transformation,” stressing the “perils” attending *all* feminist appeals to it for gender justice.¹⁵ Without wanting to deny the oppressive role of the modern state (not only in its official policing and militaristic role but also in its protection of already dominant groups via normative regimes regu-

lating access to welfare and social resources), it seems to me that those seeking a better world for all women can hardly afford to abandon struggles “in and against” it.

Meanwhile, although terminally pessimistic about feminists having any progressive alignment with mainstream politics in the United States, Ehrenreich herself is perhaps too optimistic about Europe. Here too, welfare “reform” is underway. Some feminists in Britain are watching the New Labor government with their initial rising hopes moving toward despairing resignation, and wondering how long Anglo-American contrasts will hold.¹⁶ There has been some progress, with support for child care for single mothers to encourage (or will it mean force?) them into jobs. But Blair’s new Britain, as we have seen, still sanctifies the Thatcherite and old American way, with its litany for limiting public spending. As Mary McIntosh comments on the production of new terminology for the redefining of social needs: “Typical of the new lexicon is the “Benefit Integrity Project,” in which thousands of people who had previously been deemed severely disabled were deprived of their Disability Living Allowance.”¹⁷

Such shifts in the vernacular of needs and entitlement indicate that it is the notion of universal welfare rights (as opposed to meager provision for the poor) that is being eliminated. This serves to undermine the whole heritage and rationale of the British welfare state: one that relied on progressive taxation to deliver a comprehensive social insurance system, giving those in need of benefit a sense of entitlement. Using the defense that the “deserving” poor—those who are absolutely unable to work for wages or have no crumb of private resources—can only be adequately assisted by removing benefits from the more “affluent,” progressive legislation involving general entitlements to child benefits, disability, or old-age pensions is now under threat in Britain. Increasingly more people will have increasingly less reason to support a national insurance system from which they will, in principle, be excluded, feeding the destructively antisocial, antigovernment feelings now so dominant in the United States: the sense that people get nothing in return for the taxes they pay, since they must take out private insurance for everything anyway. It has also been shown that welfare programs regularly deteriorate once they assist only the most disadvantaged, and once they no longer cater for more powerful, middle-class interest groups.¹⁸ Comparing the failure of U.S. rationing with the success of austerity measures in Britain during World War II, Harvey Levenstein concludes that the British, unlike the Americans, still had “faith in their government.”¹⁹ In this age of socially regulated austerity, that faith in government and the social infrastructure of the public sector is being deliberately undermined.

With incentives to work as the prime focus of welfare reform, the hardship faced by significant numbers of women looks here to stay. These are the women trapped between the Scylla of longer hours at work and the Charybdis of increasing demands from children and other needy people at home, for which they are still held, and often feel, uniquely responsible. No amount of hollow familial ideology, contradictory workfare incentives, or redefining of equality as “social inclusion” solves the problems faced by so many working women today. As Suzanne Franks concludes, “It seems unlikely the new millennium will bring a new balance of working and sharing—more likely a society that exacerbates the all or nothing divisions. Work will mean either the all-consuming 60-hour week or the insecure temporary life. Caring and everything else will have to fit in between.”²⁰

As I see it, feminist concerns cannot be separated from struggles for an alternative vision and politics to those now so dismissive of any progressive possibilities of state intervention. Child-care provision, expanding social services, state regulation of minimum wages and maximum working hours, recognition of household diversity, and strong incentives for the full sharing of caring in the home would all form part of that vision—not unlike the socialist feminist agenda of a recent proscribed era. Accepting its elimination, Toril Moi has commented that “‘socialist feminism’ is not really a meaningful term in the 1990s”; curiously, though, she does want to know “what kind of feminist a socialist feminist could be today.” The creature is dead, but her specter survives her.²¹ The decline and disparagement of feminist calls on the state are everywhere encouraged by the liberal promotion of the dubious doctrine that nation-states are today necessarily powerless in the face of market globalization.²² Yet the market dictatorship that has fostered the crisis of public finance, allowing the wealthy worldwide to contribute less and less to the financing of public expenditure, is still dominated by Anglo-American capital and ideological convictions. There are continuing, large differences in state expenditures on welfare, with—contrary to most globalization rhetoric—no consistent effect on growth rates.²³ Moreover, the global economy always displays strong national elements. While transnational corporations currently operate in the context of volatile world financial markets, both the production and consumption of most goods and services occurs at national levels: only 15 percent of commodities derive from lower-wage countries.²⁴ Progressives have every reason to combat rather than accede to simplistic assertions about the disappearance of the state in some forms of globalization theory. It is this thinking that abets the collapse of democratic politics, as participation in the market substitutes for participation in politics.

Only a decade ago, feminists still hoped to transform the relations between employment and family lives. Today, Blair's new Britain installs an old and punishing "work" ethic that, despite three decades of feminist attention to the "labors of love," remains incapable of questioning any of the old terms—whether that of *labor* or *love*. A decade ago, there was still a debate in the British and American media on the future of the nuclear family. Today the superiority of that family structure over all possible alternatives is once again everywhere trumpeted, even as its prevalence continues to decline. In the most technologically innovative of times, as some feminists write of women's particular affinity with the supposed freedoms of cyberspace (despite men's dominance of 90 percent of its highways),²⁵ many women face a future where we are leading the most comprehensively conservative of lives: less politically engaged, less utopian in vision, less time, even, for friends and family.

Writing of the unexpected decline of leisure in the United States, Juliet Schor points out that for the last three decades there has been a steady increase in the number of hours on the job put in by fully employed workers; the same alarms about expanding working hours are now sounding in the United Kingdom.²⁶ It is primarily women who are still somehow expected to make up for the hours lost from creating loving homes and healthy communities while simultaneously applauded for how far they have come in gaining equality with men. Given the persistent strength of this aspect of traditional gender ideology, it is, as it always has been, the daily lives of women that most directly absorb the shocks and contradictions of these mean yet widely disparate times. What women do, when they do what is most expected of them as women, is not something best organized according to the dictates of profit or capitalist market relations. Therein lies the radical potential of feminism as an oppositional politics: one that dares to fight a culture and a political system which tries to numb us into accepting that it can fulfill our needs and desires through notions of consumer sovereignty alone.

Notes

These arguments can be found developed more fully within the larger project of assessing the place of feminism at the opening of the twenty-first century in my forthcoming book, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* (Columbia University Press).

1. Quoted in Susan Pedersen, "The Failure of Feminism in the Making of the British Welfare State," *Radical History Review* 43 (winter 1989): 86.

2. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of 'Dependency': Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on*

the "Postsocialist" Condition, by Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. "Midwives to Look for Abuse of Women," *Guardian*, 29 December 1997, 8: "There seems to be evidence of violence starting or being exacerbated when a woman is pregnant or postnatally, with the violence directed towards her stomach, breasts, and genitals."

4. Carolyn Steedman, "Landscape for a Good Woman," in *Past Tense: Essays in Writing, Autobiography, and History* (London: Rivers Ocean, 1992), 36.

5. Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare, or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Sixties* (London: Virago, 1985), 6.

6. Manuel Castells, "The End of Patriarchalism," in *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 11 (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997), 235.

7. Mary McIntosh, "Dependency Culture? Welfare, Women, and Work," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 91 (September–October 1998): 5.

8. K. McFate, R. Lawson, and W. J. Wilson, eds., *Poverty, Inequality, and the Future of Social Policy* (New York: Russell Sage, 1995).

9. Lawrence Mead, ed., *The New Paternalism: Supervising Approaches to Poverty* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 1997); Susanne MacGregor, "Welfare, Neoliberalism, and New Paternalism: Three Ways for Social Policy in Late Capitalist Societies," *Capital and Class*, no. 67 (spring 1999): 91–118.

10. Tony Cutler and Barbara Waine, *Managing the Welfare State* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

11. Alan Finder, "Evidence Is Scant That Workfare Leads to Full-Time Jobs," *New York Times*, 12 April 1998, B1, B30.

12. Judith Stacey, "Families against the Family," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 89 (May–June 1998): 1–2; *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), chap. 4.

13. Barbara Ehrenreich, "When Government Gets Mean: Confessions of a Recovering Statist," *Nation*, 17 November 1997, 12; emphasis added.

14. See Anna Marie Smith, "Feminist Activism and Presidential Politics: Theorizing the Costs of the 'Insider Strategy,'" *Radical Philosophy*, no. 83 (May–June 1997): 25–35.

15. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), x. In this essay I do not address the influential strand of antipornography feminism, though I have done so frequently elsewhere, because I believe it has served primarily to reinvigorate the moral Right rather than any progressive leftist politics. See Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh, eds., *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debates* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

16. See, for example, McIntosh, "Dependency Culture?" 2.

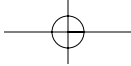
17. *Ibid.*, 3.

18. Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

19. Harvey Levenstein, *Paradoxes of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81.

20. Suzanne Franks, "Vital Statistics," *Guardian*, 11 January 1999, 7; see also Franks, *Having None of It: Women, Men, and the Future of Work* (London: Granta, 1999).

21. Toril Moi, "Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Politics: A Conversation with Juliet Mitchell," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93 (fall 1994): 937.



22. See Paul Hirst and Graham Thompson, *Globalization in Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996); Simon Bromley, "Globalization," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 80 (November–December 1996): 2–5.

23. Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, "Globalization: Ten Frequently Asked Questions and Some Surprising Answers," *Soundings*, no. 4 (fall 1996): 62.

24. Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World* (London: Verso, 1997).

25. For example, Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).

26. Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic, 1991); WFD/Management Today survey, London, published May 1998.

