



Women & Class Course

Book Reviews &

Selected Bibliography



Not only a ‘must read’, but a ‘must act on’ script

Women and Class

by Mary Davis

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Review by Liz Payne

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It is 30 years since the publication of the first edition of Mary Davis’s ground-breaking pamphlet, *Women and Class*. Second and third editions came out in 1999 and 2008, respectively. The third edition was, to my knowledge, constantly reprinted in response to unabated demand in Britain and across the world, even while the fourth edition was at the final stages of preparation. It sold out on every bookstall. This testifies to the significance of the so often marginalised and neglected subject matter – “*the relationship of women to class, class struggle and socialism itself*”.

The launch of the fourth edition takes place at a critical time for women and their organised struggle for justice and equality. The economic crisis of capitalism and capitalism’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed women workers to increased super-exploitation and to intensified sex-based oppression. The working women of Britain, already disproportionately disadvantaged after years of disastrous neoliberal attacks, now face the double impact of a spiralling economic crisis and COVID. Both have destroyed women’s livelihoods through pay-cuts, deterioration in working conditions, and an explosion of insecure contracts; exposed them to the virus, often unprotected, in their thousands as they perform essential frontline services in traditional female low-paid roles; double-burdened and overburdened them with unpaid family responsibilities, additionally including nursing sick and vulnerable relatives; and imprisoned many in violent domestic situations from which they are unable to escape.

At the same time, just when a strong, organised and effective mass women’s movement is imperative in order to resist this onslaught and build towards a system free of exploitation and oppression, women’s collective potential is being undermined by those who would narrow the parameters of campaigning solely to challenges to harassment and discrimination on an individual case-by-case basis and who, at the same time, are either conflating sex and gender or veering rapidly towards the replacement of sex by gender in categorising those who are subjected to discriminatory behaviour. This, intentionally or otherwise, challenges the right of women to organise on the basis of biological sex and hence puts the very existence of the women’s movement at risk.

How the women’s movement against oppression might be rejuvenated and built – on the foundation of sound Marxist feminist theory – and its inherent relationship to the class struggle for the overthrow of capitalism are the subjects of this unique tract.

In her introduction, Mary Davis goes straight to the point:

“The super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is a fundamental prerequisite for the operation of capitalism – economically, politically and ideologically”.

Notice that the verb in this quotation is singular; women’s super-exploitation and their oppression are not separately functioning phenomena. They are fundamentally interconnected – existentially bound up with the workings of the capitalist system today and its potential to survive into the future – in what the author describes as “a complex and dynamic relationship.” But super-exploitation and oppression are not the same things and must not, as frequently happens, be used interchangeably. They are “specific and distinct”, and we must be clear on their separateness and interrelationship.

The author makes it plain that, while under capitalism the whole working class is exploited by the ruling class in the process of production, women and black people (who together form the majority of the working class), are super-exploited. Their wages are consistently lower than those

of their white male counterparts, as capitalists maximise the surplus value from their labour and thus increase their rate of profit.

How is this exploitation and super-exploitation of the majority by the capitalist minority possible? It is by means of oppression of the women and black people of all classes, based on their obvious physical characteristics, biological sex and skin colour respectively, fuelled by the potent and universally accepted ruling class ideologies of sexism and racism. This creates and perpetuates the material conditions in which exploitation can take place by dividing, disorientating, and disempowering the working class.

Section 1. The Origins of Women's Oppression: the Marxist View

In the first chapter, readers are introduced to the origins of women's oppression from the Marxist perspective. Davis is clear: it came into being only with the coming of ownership of private property in class antagonistic societies and was not, as many theories insist, aboriginal – men, strong and violent by nature, and women, physically weak and vulnerable. Davis finds no evidence that women were oppressed in primitive societies.

The author provides an introductory summary of Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), the first work on women's oppression from a Marxist stance, in which Engels explains how women came to be subjugated in the patriarchal family for the purpose of passing on private wealth through the male line. It is no accident, he argued, that class exploitation and women's oppression appeared in the same juncture. They had a common source – the historical debut of private property. Clara Zetkin showed that oppression affected all women and pointed to its differing impact on them according to their class. For working women, oppressed by their dual role in the workplace and the family, the goals lay in ending the capitalist system, responsible for their situation, and replacing it with socialism. Lenin too was an advocate of women's equality. He stressed the need to understand the real material circumstances of their situation and showed the importance of the socialisation of domestic work to free women from domestic drudgery and bring them into political struggle, together with the need for education to challenge the patriarchal attitudes of male comrades.

Section 2. Rival Theories

In chapters 2 and 3, the author examines rival theories and the Marxist response. She sums up the former, showing how they have led and continue to lead to dead ends, both in the development of thought and in practice. According to *biological determinism*, the roles of the sexes were determined by nature and were therefore immutable. *Liberal feminism* sought to find equality within the capitalist system; every woman could smash through the glass ceiling if only she gave her mind to it. *Radical feminism* held, and continues to hold, that the enemy of women is men; it has always been and will always be so. *Socialist feminism* accepted the link between women's oppression and class society but also saw men as the problem; it held that socialist societies had been unable to liberate women and therefore class exploitation could not be the ultimate cause of their predicament. *Diversity theory* has sought to make a capitalist business case for managing diversity, often on an individual by individual basis; while *post feminism* has held that feminism is redundant, its goals having already been achieved. The theory of *intersectionality* holds that we all have a set of identity components – sex, race, age, sexual orientation, nationality, etc – and that class is just one of these rather than the underlying cause of inequality and discrimination.

Section 3. The Marxist Response

In a new section, Davis delivers a robust repudiation of the most recent manifestation of identity politics. This deals with sex, gender and identity, and the promotion of gender self-identity. This sows the seeds of confusion for many and mitigates against the development of an understanding of the material base of women's situation. More significantly, it risks undermining the women's struggle entirely by questioning the very legitimacy of defining women's struggle on the basis of biological sex and indeed the very existence of biological sex at all.

The nine pages of the third chapter, 'The Marxist response', are pivotal, containing the author's original ground-breaking development of Marxist feminist theory. Davis considers oppression, the universalised ruling class ideologies of oppression that perpetuate it, the relationship between the oppressed groups – women and black people – to the class structure, and women's role in the family and domestic labour. She emphasises that a class theory of women's oppression "will not *of itself* [my italics –LP] supply the political strategy to achieve liberation" but, she argues, it can provide "the framework for the much needed political and historical analysis" [on which it depends].

Section 4. Women, Class, Capitalism & the Labour Movement: History

In chapter 4, Davis moves to an historical and political overview of women workers, the women's movement and working-class women and the labour movement during the 19th and 20th centuries. Here we learn of the consequences for women workers of the industrial revolution – separation of paid work in factories, and drudgery at home. Unequal pay and job segregation, which persist today, are examined as features of female employment under industrial capitalism. Despite some effective separate actions challenging the situation of women in the 19th century, there was no cohesion around a single issue until campaigning on the right to vote united women in a mass movement – elements of which, around Sylvia Pankhurst, identified the link between class exploitation, the oppression of women and the struggle for socialism.

In the final part of this chapter, the author examines the historical development of women's involvement in the labour and trade union movement, including the remarkable contribution of Eleanor Marx to the organisation of unskilled and lower paid workers in the late 19th century and the landmark collective struggles of women workers, from the victorious strike of the east London match workers in 1888 to those of the women at Ford Dagenham in 1968 (for regrading) and Trico in 1976 (for equal pay).

Section 5. Women, Class, Capitalism & the Labour Movement: Today

The fifth chapter concentrates on the same themes as chapter 4, bringing the reader up to date by looking at the past two decades and 'women's place' today. Women constitute approximately 70% of the workforce, and their contribution is essential to production, but they constitute two thirds of Britain's low paid, and many are trapped in a cycle of deprivation that will extend, due to poverty pensions, into their retirement years. They make up more than half Britain's trade union membership (54.6%), but they are twice as likely as men to be poor in what is referred to as the "feminisation of poverty". This is hardly surprising when, 50 years after the Equal Pay Act, the gap in wages between part-time women and full-time male workers stands at 41%. For black women, the situation is even worse; they experience higher rates of unemployment and receive even lower pay than white women. Davis concludes with the exhortation that "women need a movement of their own as much as they have ever done", a new and revived women's liberation movement with the *Charter for Women* (pp 66-67) at its heart.

Section 6. Women & the Role of the Communist Party: Policy & Perspectives

The final chapter looks at the hitherto substantially hidden history of women in the Communist Party from its foundation a century ago to the present – their organisation, campaigns and projects both in the Party and the wider labour and women's movements. Readers are introduced to comrades Dora Montefiore and Helen Crawford (featured in the Party's centenary publication, *Red Lives*) and their enormous contributions at the beginning of the Party's history. We learn of the part played by women comrades in organising the landmark 'march of the women' on International Women's Day 1928, and in the struggles against unemployment and fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. Lillian Tring and Maud Brown were famous in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In 1943, the Party set up a National Advisory Women's Council with Tamara Rust as secretary. Communist women played a major role in establishing the National Assembly of Women (NAW) in 1952 and in its ongoing work ever since. The role of a number of Party women's organisers is highlighted, as well as the publications *Red Rag* and *Link*.

With the re-establishment of the Party as the CPB in 1988 a Marxist feminist theory of women's oppression began to take shape [initiated and developed by Mary Davis]. This was reflected not only

in the first edition of *Women and Class* but practically in the campaigning priorities set out in the *Charter for Women*, widely adopted by trade unions and recently relaunched and under the auspices of the NAW.

In a major step forward, at its November 2018 Congress the Party became the first to adopt a Marxist, class-based position on women, sex and gender, and gender self-identification, the text of which is included in the book (p 61). It essentially focuses on “the need to distinguish between discrimination of trans people and oppression of women” and that the latter is inextricably linked with class exploitation. Without this understanding, Davis warns, we are unable to advance in the struggle to achieve socialism.

Finally, the author looks to the tasks ahead:

- Communist women must work to build a broad-based women’s organisation capable of challenging male supremacist ideas and practices
- Communists (women and men) have to ensure that the labour movement itself takes up the issues raised by women, not as an optional extra but as an integral aspect of every agenda.

Women and Class exhorts Communists and the left more generally to understand, develop and disseminate Marxist feminist theory, in order to challenge the powerful ruling class ideology of women’s oppression and to provide a framework for struggle against that oppression and the exploitative capitalist system which it serves. It is not only a ‘must read’, but a ‘must act on’ script. The well-organised, engaging, and accessible text lends itself to collective as well as individual study. It is for women and men, for those who are new to the subject matter, as well as seasoned cadres and campaigners. Not to be studied once and set aside, each reading will reward with new insights.

Women and Class

Sonya Andermahr writing in the Morning Star

IN LIGHT of the economic and political crisis facing the working class in Britain and the capitalist world, in which attacks on women's rights are a prominent feature, the fourth edition of Mary Davis's book **Women and Class**, containing many new sections, including one on identity politics and an updated Charter for Women as an addendum, is more than welcome.

Since its first appearance in 1990, this slim volume has been invaluable to generations of socialist readers seeking elucidation of the intransigent political and theoretical question of women and class.

Davis's starting point is the historical confusion in the Communist Party and the wider left over the relationship of women to class, class struggle and socialism itself. In the introduction, she sets out the problem succinctly.

The oppression of women has been consistently underplayed by the state and quite erroneously relegated to a secondary position by the left. Over past decades, there has been a move away from class politics more generally, even on the left, to an individualist politics which threatens the very concept of women's collective rights.

In this context, she argues, the left requires a systematic analysis of what progressives have long called "the woman question" which "recognises that female oppression is indissolubly linked to the operation and maintenance of the capitalist system" and that the fight to end it is an intrinsic and essential aspect of the struggle for social transformation.

As Davis points out, the oppression of women and black people is not incidental to class society but constitutive of it – the ideologies of racism and sexism serve to divide the working class and thus perpetuate capitalist society. "The key to understanding the situation of women under capitalism lies in the complex and dynamic relationship between exploitation and oppression," she writes.

In the opening chapter, Davis presents the Marxist view of the origins of women's oppression with commendable clarity. In contrast to radical feminist accounts that locate it in sexual antagonism between men and women, Marxists see it first and foremost as a product of class society.

Early human societies were necessarily co-operative and egalitarian and the sexual division of labour was not therefore antagonistic. It was only with a change in the productive forces that a qualitative shift took place in relations between the sexes.

In this respect, the work of Friedrich Engels is pioneering. In **The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State**, Engels argues that it was the emergence of property relations based on the production of surplus wealth and the development of patrilineal descent systems for its transmission that led to, in his evocative if slightly misleading phrase, "the world historic defeat of the female sex."

Yet, as Davis makes clear, while Marx and Engels made crucial links between the workings of capitalism and women's oppression in their writings, this did not amount to a systematic analysis. There are still many questions that remain unanswered by Marxism-Leninism, not least why women's oppression persists in socialist societies.

Davis goes on to examine the rival theories that have been advanced to explain women's oppression. Biological determinism, which maintains that male and female roles are determined by nature, is rooted in religious dogma and social Darwinism and became the dominant ideology of capitalism.

In contrast, liberal feminism challenges its underlying sex-role stereotypes and focuses on women's political and economic equality within capitalism through legal reform. As Davis argues, this emphasis on legal rights often ignores the specific situation of working-class and black women to the detriment of the women's movement.

Radical feminism grew in reaction to the limited goals of liberal feminism and picked up on those aspects of sexual politics frequently ignored by the left. Problematically, though, it identifies the conflict between men and women as preceding and transcending class and race conflict.

In claiming to go beyond Marxist analysis, it becomes ahistorical and paradoxically risks affirming the very biological determinism it set out to challenge. Almost the opposite is true of the new gender identity ideology: in advancing a theory of individual choice based on feelings, this ideology substitutes what amounts to sex-role stereotypes for the material reality of sex.

In the former case, women's class exploitation is downplayed in the interests of sisterhood, while in the latter women's sexed bodies, the very basis of their oppression in class society, is ignored in the interests of individual rights. Both positions work to alienate the vast majority of women, whose subordination stems from their exploitation and oppression in capitalist society.

Davis advances a Marxist-feminist analysis of the relationship between oppression and super-exploitation within capitalism. While a class theory of women's oppression cannot itself supply the necessary political strategy, it can provide the framework for much-needed historical and political analysis and thus point the way forward for women.

"The struggle for equal pay for equal work, for subsidised childcare and for the socialisation of other aspects of domestic work, and for other issues of importance to women, such as reproductive and full legal rights, points ultimately to socialism," Davis stresses. "It is around issues such as these that most women are likely to be mobilised."

She provides a historical survey of women workers and the women's movement over two centuries, focusing on the role of working-class women in the labour movement.

The strength of this section is the depiction of working women as agents of history, taking a significant role in the labour and trades union movement, from the female Charter associations of the 1830s and the Bryant & May matchwomen strikers of 1888 to the women machinists at Ford in Dagenham in 1968.

She brings the story up to date, looking at women workers and women's rights today, concluding that, despite some gains, there is still much to fight against. In particular, the feminisation of poverty is growing apace and exacerbating the super-exploitation of working-class and black women. She calls for a reinvigorated trade union movement to tackle sexism and racism head on and take up the struggle for wage equality.

In conclusion, Davis turns her attention to women and the Communist Party, focusing on history, policy and perspectives. She includes the text of the historic resolution on women and gender, passed by the 55th Congress of the CPB in London in November 2018, which commits party members to defend and promote women's sex-based rights and develop a branch education programme to disseminate understanding of the relationship between oppression and exploitation in Britain and around the world.

A superb book, it is to be hoped that it will form the basis for political education across the labour movement as well as bringing new women members – like myself – to the party. It concludes with the Charter for Women, which identifies broad-based campaign goals in three sectors – society, work and the labour movement.

The aim is to “ensure that by these means women’s collective demands are not only heard but acted upon.”

The strength of this work is in surveying and critiquing both the theory and history of women and class and in identifying what still needs to be done by way of analysis and practice in clear and accessible terms.

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