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George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 – c. 1979'.

Abstract:

This thesis focuses on the voices, activism and experiences of working-class women engaged with the Women's Movement between 1968 and 1979. It explores their interactions with feminism and class politics and places particular emphasis on their role in the Women's Liberation Movement and the productive and reproductive class struggles in the period. This approach defines the WLM as a part of the wider Women's Movement, alongside women's industrial and community conflicts. It argues that contemporary accounts seeking to recover the significance of 'sisterhood' or prioritise alternative identities in the movement often do so at the expense of its working-class participants and underplay the significance of 'class' in the political identities of middle-class liberationists. It asserts therefore that that the integration of working-class women and class politics into the story of the 1970s Women's Movement requires a reconsideration of the existing narratives of the WLM. In developing this perspective, it extricates the tension between the foundational and ideological importance of class and class politics at individual, regional and national levels of the WLM in Britain on the one hand and the intractable problems that class posed within and around the movement on the other. In so doing, it illustrates how both structural and cultural forms of class analysis can offer complementary insights into women's identity construction and political consciousness, with particular validity not only for social and political movements but also for the post-war period more widely.

George Stuart Michael Stevenson

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Durham University

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List of Abbreviations

Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers	AUEW
Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff	ACTSS
Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff	APEX
Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs	ASTMS
Black Women's Movement	BWM
Civil and Public Services Association	CPSA
Civil Service Union	CSU
Cleaners Action Group	CAG
Claimants' Union	CU
Communist Party of Great Britain	CPGB
Community Development Project	CDP
Confederation of Health Service Employees	COHSE
Consciousness-raising	C-R
Equal Pay Act	EPA
Equal Opportunities Commission	EOC
European Economic Community	EEC
General and Municipal Workers' Union	GMWU
General Electric Company	GEC
International Marxist Group	IMG
National Abortion Campaign	NAC
National and Local Government Officers' Association	NALGO
National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights	NJACCWER
National Union of Footwear, Leather and Allied Trades	NUFLAT
National Union of General and Municipal Workers	NUGMW
National Union of Mineworkers	NUM
National Union of Public Employees	NUPE
National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers	NUTGW

National Union of Teachers	NUT
National Union of Vehicle Builders	NUV
New Social Movements	NSMs
Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent	OWAAD
Pay and Incomes Board	PIB
Revolutionary Communist Party	RCP
Salford Electrical Instruments	SEI
Sex Discrimination Act	SDA
Technical and Supervisory Section	TASS
Trades Union Congress	TUC
Transport and General Workers' Union	TGWU
Union of Postal Workers	UPW
Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers	USDAW
Wages for Housework	WFH
Women Against Imperialism	WAI
Women Against Racism and Fascism	WARF
Women's Industrial Union	WIU
Women's Information and Referral Service	WIRES
Women's Liberation Movement	WLM
Working Class Women's Liberation Newsletter	WCWLN
Working Women's Charter	WWC
Working Women's Charter Campaign	WWCC

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Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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Introduction

This thesis will focus on the feminist voices, activism, and experiences of working-class women engaged with the Women's Movement and class politics and the women's liberation movement's engagement with them between 1968 and 1979. This approach will define the WLM as a part of the wider Women's Movement, of which women's industrial and community struggles were also parts. It will argue that contemporary accounts seeking to recover the significance of 'sisterhood' or prioritise alternative identities in the movement often do so at the expense of its working-class participants and underplay the significance of 'class' in the political identities of middle-class liberationists. It will suggest that the integration of working-class women and class politics into the story of the 1970s Women's Movement requires a reconsideration of the existing narratives of the WLM. In so doing, it will illustrate how both structural and cultural forms of class analysis can offer complimentary insights into women's identity construction and political consciousness, with particular validity not only for social and political movements but also for the post-war period more widely.

It is certain that the WLM in Britain, and across Europe and the United States, was one of the most important social movements of the post-war period.[1] Born in the 'synergistic' environment of the late 1960s alongside the other New Social Movements (NSMs) of the period, it was in relation to these that the WLM wished to define itself, rather than as a development of previous or existing feminist movements.[2] It was constructed as an amorphous, structureless movement united by a list of four demands, which were equal pay, equal education and opportunity, twenty-four hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion on demand.[3] This was coupled with more tenuous notions relating to identity and social transformation – 'sisterhood' and 'liberation'.[4]

It is in the legacy of this positioning that the first historiographical controversy arises in terms of the WLM's relationship to other British feminist movements in the twentieth century. On the one hand, the early liberationists sought to differentiate themselves

[1] Drude Dalherup, 'Introduction', in Drude Dahlerup (ed.), *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA* (London, 1986), p. 1.
[2] David S. Meyer, 'Restating the Woman Question – Women's Movements and State Restructuring', in Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith and Dieter Rucht (eds.), *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 289; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 239, 255-60.
[3] Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 151.
[4] Ibid.

from the contemporary feminist politics which they rejected as liberal and reformist, but on the other, this understanding coexisted with a desire to link their activism with that of the Suffrage Movement.[5] This tension has contributed greatly to the dominance of the 'wave' school in the historiography of the British Women's Movement in which the Suffrage Movement, ending in 1918 with the successful winning of the vote, stands as the 'first-wave', before the crashing of the 'second-wave' with the emergence of the WLM in 1968 or 1969.[6]

More recently, however, this narrative has been challenged by a number of historians. Pat Thane and Helen McCarthy, respectively, have argued that feminism was far from defunct after 1918. This was illustrated by persistent strikes by women in the Second World War, women's presence in Parliament, all political parties and in trade unions, and the survival women's organisations, such as the Fawcett Society and Women's Co-operative Guild, through the subsequent fifty years, as well as women winning equal pay in some areas of the public sector in the 1950s and early 1960s.[7] Moreover, the Co-operative Women's Guild, Labour Party women, Six Point Group and Fawcett Society forwarded the idea that domestic work was *work* and vital to society and the economy, pre-dating such arguments within the WLM and demonstrating that this period was not devoid of *ideological* contributions to feminism.[8] Indeed, of the four demands voted on by those attending the first national conference of the WLM at Ruskin College in 1970, only the call for twenty-four hour nurseries was new to British feminism.[9] Indeed, there were occasions where existing organisations worked with the new liberation groups, such as in the winter of 1971/72 when the Women's Lobby, part of the WLM, cooperated with the Fawcett Society over campaigns for workplace equality.[10]

However, while it is important to recognise that the WLM did not materialise from a feminist vacuum and that its ideology and goals shared similarities with existing

[5] Caine, *English Feminism*, pp. 239, 260.
[6] Lynne Segal and Elisabeth Wilson, as examples, have both argued for the late 1960s as a 'rebirth' through the politicising experiences of the period: Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today: feminist impacts and transformations in the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 153-4; Elisabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain, 1945-1968* (London, 1980), p. 185.
[7] Pat Thane, 'Towards Equal Opportunities? Women in Britain since 1945', in T. Gourvish and A. O'Day (eds.), *Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 185, 199; Helen McCarthy, 'Gender equality', in Pat Thane (ed.), *Unequal Britain* (London, 2010), pp. 107-109.
[8] Pat Thane, 'Women and the 1970s: towards liberation?', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing the 1970s* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 168-171.
[9] Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 257.
[10] Elisabeth M. Meehan, *Women's Rights at Work: Campaigns and Policy in Britain and the United States* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 47.

women's organisations, it is equally vital to emphasise that it did stand as a new and distinct stage of struggle for women in the twentieth century. There was a clear upturn in the prominence of the Women's Movement from 1968 and a surge of women's liberation groups to the extent that there were seventy in London alone and many more across the country by 1969, something which both Thane and McCarthy accept.[11] In addition, 1968 was marked by a number of equal pay strikes by women workers, such as the famous strike at the Ford factory in Dagenham, but also complemented by others at Vauxhall and Rolls-Royce, which symbolised the growing militancy of women in the labour movement against sexual inequality.[12] The proliferation of both the WLM groups and industrial militancy by working-class women throughout the 1970s serves to underline the significance of 1968 as a turning point in the nature of the British Women's Movement and the arrival of, if not a new 'wave', then a more aggressive stage of the struggle for liberation and equality.

This thesis' choice of 1968 as the start date for the new Women's Movement is equally important as it is tied to the differing origin narratives attributed to the movement in this period which are in turn linked to whether the birth of the WLM was the result of the coalescence of differing working- and middle-class women's experiences and struggles or whether it was born solely out of the latter's. The distinction between these narratives has rarely been made but it is significant because of its implications for the role working-class women played in the formation of the WLM. Indeed, there has often been a tendency in historiographical accounts to emphasise only the circumstances of middle-class women as the underlying causes and catalysts for the WLM's development.

Wendy Webster has argued, for example, that a generation of women in the 1960s faced the 'transition from an educated and career-oriented identity to the role of full-time and servantless housewife on the birth of their first child', and offers this as a key factor in the creation of the WLM.[13] Leonore Davidoff provided a similar perspective, arguing:

> It is possible that some of the impetus for the modern Women's Movement was fuelled by the servantless young middle-class housewife of the late 1960s and early 1970s confronted with taking on not just the increase in

[11] Thane, 'Women and the 1970s', p.177; McCarthy, 'Gender', pp. 110-111.
[12] Meehan, *Women's Rights*, p. 38; Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London, 1980), p. 279; Bruley, *Women*, pp. 148-9; Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (London, 1999), p. 349.
[13] Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (London, 1998), p. 149.

> physical tasks of food preparation, washing dishes and round-the-clock care of small children, but the additional unrelenting dependence of all family members on her for emotional attendance to the detriment of her own interests and identity.[14]

The final point concerning the interests and identity of the individual middle-class woman being harmed by social expectations of their domesticity was a problem which pre-dated the WLM, having been made by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein in their influential work, *Women's Two Roles*, originally published in 1956.[15] The narrative of domesticity dashing the broader aspirations of middle-class women was often repeated in the memoirs of middle-class participants, such as the life histories in Liz Heron's *Truth, Dare or Promise* and Michelene Wandor's *Once a Feminist*.[16]

Interestingly, this narrative was also asserted by those associated with socialist politics as a means of detaching working-class women's actions and struggles from the WLM. The latter could therefore be more easily defined as a middle-class movement and consequently contrasted unfavourably with the behaviour of the Left towards working-class women, whose struggles they felt were more appropriately positioned under a purely 'class' umbrella. David Bouchier's study of the WLM, for example, suggested that the WLM was formed out of the clash of young, educated, middle-class women's expectations with the domestic idyll.[17] This was contrasted with the women's sections of the International Marxist Group (IMG) and other socialist groups who were allegedly united by a common focus on working-class women's issues.[18] Kate Marshall, who was a leading member of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in the 1970s, unsurprisingly took a more dismissive tone towards a movement which deviated from a universalising class analysis of oppression. She offered this description of the WLM's development:

> The modern Women's Movement is a product of the 'sixties… Beginning in the USA, the most prosperous of capitalist countries, middle class women

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[14] Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 12.
[15] Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (London, 1968), p. xvi.
[16] Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (Abingdon, 2005), p. 211; Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985); Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990).
[17] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA* (London, 1983), pp. 40, 56.
[18] Ibid., p. 58.

> became aware that material comforts only exacerbated the feeling of powerlessness that stemmed from social inferiority. Women perceived their oppression as a barrier to the fulfilment of individual aspirations; issues relating to economic inequality remained secondary… The fact that individuals were members of a society stratified into classes was not considered important at a time when these individuals enjoyed high living standards.[19]

The early women's liberationists were also described as mostly 'petit-bourgeois youth' and concerned with rejecting a material basis of struggle in favour of the fulfilment of individual needs.[20] This was a particularly stringent interpretation and was not reflected in even Bouchier's analysis, which asserted that the WLM was essentially a socialist movement until 1975, let alone in the reality of the influence of socialist ideas on those involved, an ideology which was one of the dominant tendencies throughout the 1970s and counted such prominent figures as Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Catherine Hall among its ranks.[21]

Indeed, many women who came to be involved with the WLM had arrived there from the broader politics of the Left and it was a desire to no longer be treated as secretaries and sex objects by male comrades that acted as a far stronger catalyst than a rejection of class analysis in its entirety.[22] Often excluded from the ideological and practical discussions within 'progressive' environments like the History Workshop, socialist women had little choice but to confront and challenge their gendered oppression with the development of a new Women's Movement.[23]

More significantly though, claims of solely middle-class origins for the WLM, whether they come from middle-class participants, subsequent historiography, or as the basis of socialist critiques, are patronising towards the many working-class women who were engaged in the Women's Movement from the very beginning and were crucial in its creation and the form it took. As the activist-historian accounts of Sheila Rowbotham,

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[19] Kate Marshall, *Real Freedom: Women's Liberation and Socialism* (London, 1982), p. 102.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Bouchier, *Feminist Challenge*, pp. 122-3; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985), p. 210; Interview with Lynne Segal by Margaretta Jolly, 25 August 2011, 'Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', British Library, London.
[22] Bruley, *Women*, pp. 148-9; Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Wilson, *Paradise*, p. 185.
[23] Elisabeth Bird, 'Women's studies and the Women's Movement in Britain: origins and evolution, 1970-2000', *Women's History Review*, 12, 2 (2003), p. 265.

Lynne Segal and Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote have made clear, the industrial action by working-class women at Dagenham and elsewhere in 1968 was hugely influential on how the WLM developed and placed the importance of 'cross-class alliances' at the forefront.[24] It was the coalescence of working-class women's industrial struggles and battles for equality with the domestic and political frustrations of middle-class women that was the crucible of the WLM's formation. This coalescence was symbolically formalised in the creation of the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights (NJACCWER) in 1969, which had been developed in the aftermath of the Dagenham strike in the previous year and saw the direct link between working-class trade unionists and middle-class liberationists.[25] This relationship was then figuratively ratified at the first national WLM conference at Ruskin College in 1970, featuring as it did delegations of female trade unionists, some of whom were invited to speak.[26]

Among the speakers was Audrey Wise, a working-class trade union official and a self-defined member of the WLM, who shared this thesis' desire to emphasise the significance of working-class women's role in the formation of the WLM. Wise argued that rather than starting at the Ruskin conference at Oxford in 1970, 'feminist stirrings' had begun in 1968 with the wave of female workplace radicalism over equal pay.[27] She also challenged definitively the belief, which she saw as widely held within the WLM, that the women's liberation demonstration in London in 1971 was the first large demonstration of its kind since the Suffrage Movement rather than that organised by NJACCWER, asserting: 'It just isn't true. It's quite important that it isn't true, because it's got to do with this idea that only middle-class women are interested in feminism.'[28] This also underlines the fact that the Women's Movement was bigger than the WLM alone and influenced the latter's formation.

Indeed, class and cross-class alliances were crucial in the formation of the WLM and much historiography has agreed that it was this factor which distinguished the British

[24] Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Segal, 'Jam Today', pp. 153-4; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 9-10.
[25] Holloway, *Women*, pp. 210-11; Rowbotham, *Century*, p. 347; Coote and Campbell, *Freedom*, pp. 10-12; Thane, 'Women', p. 171.
[26] Coote and Campbell, *Freedom*, p. 13.
[27] 'Audrey Wise Interview', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 201.
[28] Ibid., p. 204.

WLM from its American counterpart.[29] As Arthur Marwick has noted, the involvement of working-class women was at 'the very heart of what was truly significant in the changes in consciousness brought about by sixties' developments: action not just by gilded youth, but by ordinary, under-privileged working-class women.'[30] As a result, while the framing of the origin of women's liberation in 1969 – as Eve Setch's otherwise excellent study of metropolitan feminism in the period posits – rather than 1968 may seem trivial, it is in fact an expression of a reading of the past which privileges middle-class interpretations.[31] In such a reading, this new stage of the Women's Movement is only said to exist once middle-class women had authenticated it while the formative actions of working-class women strikers in sparking its development is disregarded.

Until recently, the choice of 1979 for the conclusion of a study of the British WLM would have provoked little of the controversy of its origins. From as early as the publication of *Beyond the Fragments* in 1981, written by three prominent women's liberationists, the prevailing narrative of the WLM has been that internal divisions and external economic pressures had caused such fundamental fissures that it could no longer be understood as a single movement by 1979.[32] This was reiterated in Bouchier's study two years later, which argued that the WLM 'had fallen into the doldrums' at this point and the narrative has been repeated on a number of occasions in subsequent decades to the extent it has become near gospel.[33] Indeed, even in the current century, the recent theses on the WLM by Eve Setch and Sarah Browne have chosen 1979 as their end dates.[34] The justifications for the narrative focus around the events of the final national WLM conference in Birmingham in 1978, which involved heated disagreements seen to symbolise the explosion of fractures over class, race, structure and particularly sexuality

[29] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain – Second Edition* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 318; Coote and Campbell, *Freedom*, p. 23.
[30] Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958 – c. 1974* (Oxford, 1998), p. 689.
[31] Eve Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1966-79, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 2 (2002), p. 171.
[32] Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright (eds.), *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London, 1981); Dennis L. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the new left and the origins of cultural studies* (Duke University Press, 1997), p. 252.
[33] Bouchier, *Feminist*, p. 147; Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, 'Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising', in Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, *Contemporary Feminist Theories* (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 6; Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class* (London, 1987), pp. 122-24, 135; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 267; Pugh, *Women's Movement*, p. 331.
[34] Eve Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79: Organisation, Creativity and Debate' (Unpublished Thesis: Royal Holloway, 2000); Sarah Browne, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland, c. 1968 – c. 1979' (Unpublished Thesis: Dundee, 2009).

and were so virulent that no further national conferences were attempted.[35] The fragmentation of the movement was exemplified by the disappearance of the "introductory" leaflet to the WLM – produced by liberationists – by 1977 due to the impossibility of creating a comprehensive document.[36] One of its authors, Zoe Fairbairns recalled:

> And the WLM was by now so bitterly divided over issues including race, class and sexuality that the women who had produced the earlier versions of the leaflet no longer felt that we could, in a single document, do justice to all the competing views and provide an introduction to the WLM that would be fair, accurate and above all useful to outsiders.[37]

Coupled with the external pressures of repeated economic crises, austerity measures and a change to a monetarist paradigm and Conservative government by the end of the decade, the WLM was forced to retreat from the transformative tones of 'liberation' to a defence of gains made.[38]

However, using 1979 as a defensible end point for the WLM has been problematised in the work of Nathalie Thomlinson and in the aforementioned thesis of Sarah Browne, who, in spite of choosing 1979 herself, wished to use the Scottish context to assert that the movement actually continued to develop in the 1980s north of the border.[39] Nonetheless, Browne concurs that the movement broke into single issue groups and diffused ideas or women's liberation into wider society, rather than the recognisable movement of the 1970s surviving.[40] For Thomlinson, the existence of various anti-racist and anti-fascist groups linked to the WLM, such as Women Against Racism and Fascism (WARF) and Women Against Imperialism (WAI), which developed at the end of the decade suggested that the movement was still expanding into new directions at the

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[35] Bouchier, *Feminist*, p. 147; Jackson and Jones, 'Thinking', p. 6; Phillips, *Divided*, pp. 122-24; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 267; Pugh, *Women's Movement*, p. 331.
[36] Zoe Fairbairns, 'Saying What We Want: Women's Liberation and the Seven Demands', in Helen Graham, Ann Kaloski, Ali Neilson and Emma Robertson (eds), *The Feminist Seventies* (York, 2003), p. 100.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Bruley, *Women*, p. 153; Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 170; Segal, 'Jam Today', p. 162; Thane, 'Women', p. 182; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 271.
[39] Nathalie Thomlinson, 'The Colour of Feminism: White Feminists and Race in the Women's Liberation Movement', *History*, 97, 327 (July, 2012), p. 456; Browne, 'Women's Liberation in Scotland', p. 25.
[40] Ibid., p. 27.

point it has been traditionally perceived as dissolved.[41] Similarly to Browne, though, she also accepts the idea of a 'lull' in those types of activities in the early 1980s, and describes this period as a 'point of departure' where white feminists began to question their own racism rather than the external sites of it – an explicit retreat from the types of activism which defined the WLM.[42] Thus, while both draw attention to the problems of considering the 1980s as an end of feminism, it is reasonable to assert that its 'liberationist' form had become so disparate to be unrecognisable as a single movement by 1979.

'Difference' and the Historiography of the WLM

The problematizing of the chronology and dissolution of the WLM in newer historiography is also part of a wider revisionist school which has sought to challenge traditional, and often participator accounts, of the inherently essentialist and divisive nature of the WLM. As mentioned above, it has been argued from the very beginning of the 1980s by many women engaged in the movement that the WLM's form left it unable to effectively consider and incorporate the problems of class, race or sexuality.[43] This has been characterised by a series of critiques of the "essentialist" nature of second-wave feminism. In this context, Anne Phillips has outlined four distinct meanings of "essentialism" that are relevant to the WLM:

1. The attribution of characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category.
2. The attribution of those characteristics to the category.
3. The invocation of a collectivity as the subject or object of a political action – the "working class", "women", etc.
4. The policing of the collective category.[44]

Critiques of the WLM following these definitions have been widespread. Rowbotham, for example, discussed how working-class women's experiences had been predominantly excluded by the middle-class 'strata' of the WLM throughout its existence, later adding in *Women in Movement* that the isolating focus on gender

[41] Thomlinson, 'Colour', p. 456.
[42] Ibid., pp. 472-4.
[43] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*.
[44] Anne Phillips, *Gender and Culture* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 71.

oppression 'started to gobble up all other relations.'[45] Similarly, Segal noted the problem of structurelessness as one that made it difficult for working-class women to know how to get involved and added recently that once the divisions around sexuality, class and race were brought into the open by women who felt oppressed in the WLM they 'destroyed any notion of women's cosy unity.'[46]

Black liberationists meanwhile expressed their own frustrations. Hazel Carby asserted that the white women who dominated the WLM and united under the banner of 'sisterhood' were only able to do so by acting as if black women's liberation did not exist, consequently failing to consider the boundaries of their sisterhood.[47] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar agreed, arguing that the premise of sisterhood resulted in a universalized understanding of women's oppression which was unable to take account of difference.[48] The issue of race has been taken on by a number of historians of the WLM and there is a consensus that black women's marginalisation within the WLM forced them to form separate organisations.[49]

Indeed, in the respect of such internal conflicts and tensions, Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall have advanced the view that the WLM, like the milieu of social movements it was part of, exhibited similar tendencies as the traditional movements they sought to replace.[50] More broadly, this approach sits within a 'progress narrative' of twentieth century feminism in which the WLM is defined as an essentialist and divided stage which has now been overcome by more sophisticated theories and practices.[51]

However, other perspectives have emerged which question the simplicity of this developmental narrative. The earliest of these was Jill Radford's assertion that a consideration of the local and grass-roots activities of the WLM, rather than the academic participator accounts, reveals a more complex relationship with 'difference',

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[45] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*, pp. 45-46; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: feminism and social action* (London, 1992), p. 285.
[46] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*, p. 197; Segal, 'Jam Today', p. 160.
[47] Hazel V. Carby, 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London, 1997), p. 49.
[48] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', in H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London, 1997), p. 54.
[49] Thane, 'Women', p. 182; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 268; Holloway, *Women*, p. 207; Bruley, *Women*, p. 152; Webster, *Imagining*, p. 149; Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford, 1993), p. 4.
[50] Ibid., p. 13.
[51] Clare Hemmings and Josephine Brain, 'Imagining the Feminist Seventies', in Helen Graham, Ann Kaloski, Ali Neilson and Emma Robertson (eds.), *The Feminist Seventies* (York, 2003), pp. 14-15.

where tensions over race, class and sexuality were discussed, debated and recognised.[52] Setch has reiterated and developed this argument in her research, adding that the focus on difference in the traditional historiography owes much to an analysis of the major texts of the movement, which privilege prominent individuals as well as following a form which encourage a distinctive theoretical outline.[53] Moreover, she contends that, 'Far from destroying the movement, [disagreements and divisions] were indicative of organisations which could accommodate many different positions.'[54]

To illustrate this point, Helen Graham has considered WLM magazine *Shrew*'s policy statement, which desired to 'take seriously individual voices without being individualistic while evoking collectivity between all women without assuming sameness.'[55] From this statement Graham concluded that the movement had been deeply concerned from its outset with emphasising similarity without alienating difference so that the 'we' of the WLM could reach out to the 'anyone else' of society.[56] This approach is echoed in Thomlinson's re-evaluation of the relationship between white and black feminists in the 1970s, in which she argued that the 'commonplace' view that white feminists were racist ignored the many attempts they made to address 'race', such as with WARF and WAI.[57]

Moreover, much contemporary historiography has suggested that it has been the narratives of socialist-feminists, inclined towards emphasising the importance of class at the expense of other areas, which, far from being neglected, have dominated the academic discourse surrounding the WLM. Browne and Jeska Rees, respectively, have argued that the contributions of socialist feminists to the historiography have resulted in the neglect of radical and revolutionary feminisms.[58] On the latter point, it is undoubtedly necessary to expand the range of voices of women's liberation in the movement's historiography, and they are correct to state that the existing holistic

[52] Jill Radford, 'History of Women's Liberation Movements in Britain: A Reflective Personal History', in Gabriele Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai and Sasha Roseneil (eds.), *Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism* (London, 1994), p. 43.
[53] Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16.
[54] Eve Setch, 'Women's Liberation Anti-Violence Organisation', in Helen Graham, Ann Kaloski, Ali Neilson and Emma Robertson (eds.), *The Feminist Seventies* (York, 2003), p. 66.
[55] Helen Graham, 'New' 1970: 'I', 'We', and 'anyone else', in Helen Graham, Ann Kaloski, Ali Neilson and Emma Robertson (eds.), *The Feminist Seventies* (York, 2003), pp. 160.
[56] Ibid., p. 163.
[57] Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4. See also Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London, 1992), pp. 18-19.
[58] Browne, 'Women's Liberation', (unpublished thesis), p. 15; Jeska Rees, 'All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England, 1977-1983' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007).

accounts have been written by socialist feminists, such as Rowbotham and Coote and Campbell.

On the one hand, this thesis will develop the revisionist approach by questioning whether the WLM's predominantly middle-class social composition, emphasis on the primacy of gender oppression, and critiques of class as a concept and form of politics, should necessarily lead us to see the British WLM as a rejection of class politics. It will argue instead that far from discarding class, the WLM and its activists were almost as concerned by its meaning and political expression as they were by gender. Many feminists' political identities were constructed with gender *and* class as central components – seemingly regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds – and their demands and activism were consistently linked to the struggles of working-class women.

However, this must be understood against the undeniable economic, cultural and social barriers that class erected between women. The thesis will argue that whilst many women's liberationists were committed to class politics inside and outside of the workplace, class remained a structural and discursive barrier between the WLM and working-class women, whether they were engaged in political struggle or not. Thus, revisions in WLM historiography which ignore class differences in experiences of workplace conflict, poverty and perceptions of feminism fall victim to the same fallacy of traditional class analysis: namely, that to posit the existence of anti-racist organisations or of mixed class WL groups as evidence of how 'difference' was consistently and fundamentally tackled by the WLM is as equally superficial as perceiving the words of prominent feminists and literature as representative of the overall movement. Racism could still have been prevalent in anti-racist WLM organisations, just as classism could have been present in mixed class WLM groups.

Moreover, the thesis will dispute whether the 'new' voices arguing against the traditional participator-accounts of Rowbotham et al. are any more reflective of the experiences of working-class and black women than the latter. It has been recognised in the historiography of the Women's Movement that the narratives and records of the WLM inevitably privilege certain groups over others, particularly when much of the history has been written by its socialist feminist participants.[59] Nonetheless, while voices from alternative theoretical schools within the WLM are important additions;

[59] Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 263; Browne, 'Women's Liberation' (Unpublished thesis), p. 15.

they are fundamentally additions to an already large collection of middle-class voices. They offer no more than an alternative insight into how white, middle-class feminists perceived the movement. While there was a link between an individual's class identity and their political affiliation to one branch of feminism or another, which this thesis will explore, it was certainly not the case that the accounts of socialist feminists can be considered as speaking for working-class women in the movement, just as anti-racist feminists cannot be said to have spoken for black women, although it is significant that liberationists attempted to speak *to* the former

There is also an important and often overlooked point in the existing discussions, and one which this thesis will seek to address throughout: the conflation of divisions over race and class. In the case of the former, it is noteworthy that while black liberationists felt strongly in the period that their voices went unheard and their existence was rendered invisible by the essentialising nature of white sisterhood, they have subsequently found the means of expressing their frustrations in various publications. As early as 1985, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe produced *The Heart of the Race*, an exploration of black women's experiences of 1970s society and the Women's Movement, intended as a rejoinder to the white-dominated narratives of the period.[60] This has been joined latterly by collections of black feminist thought, such as *Black British Feminism*, *Charting the Journey*, *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers*, *Other Kinds of Dreams*, as well as Amrit Wilson's work on Asian women, *Finding a Voice* and *Dreams, Questions, Struggles*.[61]

Conversely, working-class women involved in, associated with or working alongside the WLM in the broader Women's Movement of the period have received no such opportunities. Instead, it has been left to middle-class socialist feminists like Rowbotham and Segal to draw attention to class inequalities and oppressions on their behalf or for their voices only to be found in life history collections edited by, and

[60] Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London, 1985).
[61] H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London, 1997); Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliana Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar (eds.), *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London, 1988); Rahila Gupta (ed.), *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters* (London, 2003); Julia Sudbury, *'Other Kinds of Dreams': Black Women's Organisation and the Politics of Transformation* (London, 1998); Amrit Wilson, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (London, 1978); Amrit Wilson, *Dreams, Questions, Struggles: Asian Women in Britain* (London, 2006).

numerically dominated by, middle-class women's recollections.[62] Indeed, as Liz Heron draws attention to in her introduction to *Truth, Dare or Promise*, the 'subjective experience of class has been given scant attention by the Women's Movement' in favour of a predominantly 'narrowly middle-class outlook'.[63] The propensity for existing historiography, be it by participants or by younger academics, to ignore working-class women's particular experiences is to commit what Beverley Skeggs has described as 'symbolic violence', and links to her broader argument that working-class women have increasingly disappeared from feminist cultural studies.[64] Furthermore, as Rosemary Hennessy has noted, the invisibility of class in feminism does not only pose problems for historiography but for the ability of academia to challenge the dominant economic interests in our society, a point that can be extended to the ability to contest dominant historiographical narratives.[65]

In addressing this problem, this thesis will attempt to follow the reconstructive mode of "history from below" and early feminist historiography, such as Rowbotham's *Hidden from History*, to recover some of the lost and ignored working-class women's voices of the WLM.[66] In so doing, it will privilege the accounts of working-class women and consider them as powerful historical agents, equivalent to middle-class women within the WLM, and to men in the labour movement. In addition, through an analysis of class in women's interactions within the movement, it will provide a "history from within".[67] This will take account of the subjective constructions of class by both socio-economically working- and middle-class liberationists. This is, however, not to argue that *only* working-class women's experiences and struggles during the period were significant. Phillips has humorously asserted on this point that: 'Let no one dare tell us that middle-class women had no problems of their own!', and, as was argued above, the Women's

[62] See for example the preponderance of middle-class accounts in Heron, *Truth*; Wandor, *Once*; Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (Bridport, 1988) and among the sixty interviewees for the recent *Sisterhood and After Oral History Project*.
[63] Liz Heron, 'Introduction', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1993), pp. 8-9.
[64] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London, 1998), pp. 2, 168.
[65] Rosemary Hennessy, 'Class', in Mary Eagleton (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 67-68.
[66] The term 'history from below' was first coined by E. P. Thompson in 1966 to refer to history which focused on 'ordinary people' and the working class: Edward Palmer Thompson, 'History from Below', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, pp. 279-80. For feminist developments of this approach see for example, Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History* (London, 1973). For an overview of the relationship between 'history from below' and its feminist descendant, see Dennis Dworkin, *Class Struggles* (Harlow, 2007), pp. 139-40.
[67] Peter Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing: Protest, parish relations, and the state of the public mind in 1830', *International Review of Social History*, 54:3 (2009), p. 429.

Movement in the 1970s exploded precisely because of the intersecting oppressions experienced by both working- and middle-class women.[68] Instead, it is a corrective to those historiographical narratives that consider only the latter or dismiss the significance of class in pursuit of other perspectives of the movement.

Class Analysis and Gender

In the heyday of class analysis in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, such an approach would have been the cause for little contention.[69] However, 'class' has become an increasingly controversial concept within the academy and its validity as a category of analysis has been strongly questioned in the humanities and social sciences.[70] According to Mike Savage, the paradigm shift can be traced back as far as 1975 and the publication of Martin Bulmer's *Working-Class Images of Society*, a collection of problems and critiques of traditional approaches to class analysis.[71] By 1989, it had seemingly reached its end altogether as the sociologist R. E. Pahl suggested that 'class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology', while seven years later Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters' book, *The Death of Class*, encapsulated the academic trend away from class analysis.[72] The story in the humanities has been the same: Patrick Joyce's 1994 work, *Democratic Subjects*, had originally been entitled 'The Death of Class', pre-dating Pakulski and Malcolm's theme.[73] Joyce served as one of the key critics of the link between socio-economic structure and political agency on the grounds that agents must show a linguistic awareness of economic relationships in their struggles in order for economic or structural definitions of class to be valid.[74] This was a perspective shared by Gareth Stedman Jones who argued in his revisionist work, *Languages of Class*, that the language of individuals involved in struggle must be the starting point for any analysis of their ideology rather than their material position.[75] Though debates have moved on, the now

[68] Phillips, *Sex and Class*, p. 111.
[69] Mike Savage, 'Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Studies', *Sociology*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (December, 2005), p. 929.
[70] Dworkin, *Class*, p. 2.
[71] Savage, 'Working-Class', p. 929; Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Working-class images of society* (London, 1975).
[72] Ray E. Pahl, 'Is the emperor naked? Some questions on the adequacy of sociological theory in urban and regional research', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 13, 4 (December, 1989), p. 710; Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (Sage: London, 1996).
[73] Dworkin, *Class*, p. 125; Patrick Joyce, *Democratic subjects: The self and the social in nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[74] Patrick Joyce, 'Class and the Historians: Introduction', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *Class* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 127.
[75] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English working-class history, 1832-1982* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 7-8, 94, 96-97, *passim*.

multivalent nature of class has seen the sense that the concept is in "crisis" endure in recent intellectual histories, such as Dennis Dworkin's 2007 book, *Class Struggles*.[76]

Besides the "linguistic turn" in historical analysis, consideration of a particular mode of oppression or exploitation over another, such as class, is also fraught with problems and has damaged the credence of class analysis. Indeed, there are almost as many critiques of class analysis as there are approaches to it but due to this thesis' concern with the interaction of class and gender, and a focus on the Women's Movement, feminist and postmodernist/poststructuralist criticisms of class analysis are of particular significance and must be addressed more directly here.

One of the most contentious points is found in the difficulty of applying traditional definitions of class to women. Barry Hindess has argued that to consider a woman's class position as the same as her husband or father, for example, is hugely misleading.[77] Feminists like Christine Delphy and Sylvia Walby have gone further, asserting that such an approach obscures – or 'conceptually eradicates' – the exploitative relationships between male and female family members that cut across class.[78] Expanding on this, Heidi Hartmann has contended that it is not only capitalism which benefits from women's oppression and exploitation but also men of all classes.[79] Thus, working-class men may have different interests to working-class women in spite of their shared class position. This 'conceptual eradication' is tied to a wider problem of determinism in class analysis in which any other kind of oppression, relationship or identity is entirely submerged; the 'woman question' can never have primacy.[80]

Indeed, Joan Scott has written extensively on this problem, noting that even for Marxist-Feminists, there is an understanding that gender is a by-product of class structures and has no independent analytic framework.[81] Women form a distinctive group that can be analysed as a social category in its own right – not an offshoot of class.[82] Furthermore,

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[76] Dworkin, *Class*, p. 2.
[77] Barry Hindess, *Politics and Class Analysis* (Oxford, 1987), p. 74.
[78] Christine Delphy, *Close to Home* (London, 1984), p. 72; Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 10-11, 65.
[79] Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union', in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: A Debate on Class and Patriarchy* (Pluto Press: London, 1986), p. 9.
[80] Catherine MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory', in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: A Debate on Class and Patriarchy* (Pluto Press: London, 1986), pp. 68, 70.
[81] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), p. 37.
[82] Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago, 1986), p. 4.

as Scott contends, an insistence on 'class-struggle' results in the creation of a homogenous 'class' that cannot take account of any diversity of experience within it.[83] In the view of Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, Scott's critiques of class have 'destroyed' the "social" understanding associated with Marxist and particularly Thompsonian approaches.[84]

However, as discussed above, to replace the centrality of class with gender as the primary oppression for women results in a simple inversion of the problem; class homogeneity is substituted for an essentialised understanding of gender.[85] This was recognised by a number of feminist theorists and indeed marked a point of departure for those seeking to go beyond a purely gendered critique of class analysis towards an understanding of the intertwining axes of gender and class oppressions and identities.[86] More recently, there has been the addition of a third axis – race – and a combination of the three categories into the theory of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a theory of both oppression and identity which recognises the 'intersecting' power structures of capitalism, patriarchy and racism in societies.[87] The 'intersection' of different factors problematises the universalism of both traditional class analysis and feminism by asserting that no axis of identity or oppression can be understood in isolation. Scott has summarised this as the problem of 'particularity' and posed the following question: 'How do those marked by multiple differences (black women, or women workers, middle class lesbians, or black lesbian workers) determine the salience of one or another of these identities?'[88] As Mike Savage and Fiona Devine have noted, approaches to class analysis since the 'cultural turn' are rooted in the understanding of class as simply one framework in a 'multiplicity' of intersecting oppressions and identities.[89]

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[83] Scott, *Gender*, p. 72.
[84] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Michigan, 2007), pp. 190-91.
[85] Dworkin, *Class*, p. 213.
[86] See for example, Walby, *Theorizing*, p. 13 and *Gender Transformations* (London, 1997), pp. 13, 18-19; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (California, 1995), p. 2; or more recently, Joan Sangster, 'A Life of Historical Writing, Auto/Biographical Writing, and Accounts of Women Workers in Traditional and Nontraditional Occupations', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter, 2010), p. 295.
[87] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. 2nd Edition* (New York and London, 2000), p.18.
[88] Scott, *Gender*, p. 25.
[89] Fiona Devine and Mike Savage, 'The Cultural Turn, Sociology and Class Analysis', in Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott and Rosemary Crompton (eds), *Rethinking Class: Cultures, Identities and Lifestyles* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 15. See also, Floya Anthias, 'Social Stratification and Social

The insights of intersectionality are extremely valuable and the intersection of class, gender and race within the WLM and in its relationships with the labour movement and the Left will be considered throughout this thesis. However, in focusing on the particular importance of class in these relationships and forms of identity construction, it will take note of some of the failings of intersectional approaches and argue that class was able to shape identities, beliefs and values at times more greatly than other social cleavages in the WLM. Furthermore, it asserts that the resurrection of class analysis can be especially pertinent to recent British feminist histories of the WLM and women's history more widely. Women's class positions and class identities are different to men's but this does not diminish its significance to either. Instead, it should only heighten the need to understand *how* they are different, which this thesis will explore.

Despite this, the significance of class to the British WLM has been neglected in recent histories with the importance of 'sisterhood' – gender identification – and racial difference re-emphasised.[90] While there has been a similar trend in the historiography of American women's studies, the importance of class has begun to be readdressed.[91] Eileen Boris, for example, has suggested class is the 'neglected component of intersectionality' and has tended to be 'evoked and assumed rather than explicated, folded into other identities and processes, and rarely addressed as the central concern'.[92] In short, class has been relegated to a peripheral position.[93] Such criticisms are at least as valid in the British historiographical context, as is the question posed by Sangster: 'has women's history embraced and sustained a class analysis as an integral part of its project?' The answer to which would undoubtedly be "no".

Inequality: Models of Intersectionality and Identity', in Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott and Rosemary Crompton (eds), *Rethinking Class: Cultures, Identities and Lifestyles* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 24-26.

[90] It is not mentioned in Thomlinson, 'Colour' – even as an intersecting oppression – and Rachel Cohen, one of the leaders on the *Sisterhood and After* oral history project, was explicit in noting how a 'careful consideration of race and ethnicity … has been integral to the design', 'Researching difference and diversity within Women's Movements: Sisterhood and after', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35 (2012), p. 138. Similarly, in a paper on men and the WLM, Nicholas Owen mentioned how gender and class could intersect over the issue but elected not to explore this class component further, 'Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2013), p. 805.

[91] For an overview see, Eileen Boris, 'Class Returns', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 2013), pp. 74-87.

[92] Boris, 'Class', p. 74.

[93] Ibid., p. 75.

This is not a new problem. Beverley Skeggs was scathing of the same general trend of British feminist studies' to ignore class inequality amongst women in 1998, suggesting that class 'may not be recognised as a problem for those who have the privilege to ignore it.'[94] Nonetheless, these criticisms have been predominantly ignored in the recent histories of the British WLM. This is a particular analytical flaw when the British WLM was characterized by its engagement with class politics at ideological and activist levels throughout the period whilst class stood alongside gender as a fundamental identity structure.

This thesis will therefore adhere more closely to Boris' and Sangster's approaches to intersectionality, in which, where appropriate, class is offered a central role in women's interpretation of oppression and identity constructions. Alongside this understanding, it will analyse class using two models: the cultural approach of Pierre Bourdieu and British sociologists such as Devine and Savage; and Marxist considerations of the relationship between class structure and class consciousness.

The former are revelatory in illustrating how class oppression is not experienced *solely* in the economic sphere. Instead, Bourdieu has argued that there are in fact four types of 'social powers':

> firstly *economic* capital, in its various kinds; secondly *cultural* capital or better, informational capital, again in its different kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, *social* capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and *symbolic* capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate.[95]

Once combined and experienced in the social reality, these 'capitals' constitute a 'habitus' - patterns of thought and behaviour that empower or dominate agents sharing these dispositions.[96] Thus, class inequality itself is experienced along multiple axes and consequently class analysis need not only be applied to issues resulting from economic inequality or oppression alone. Indeed, this perspective has been influential among

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[94] Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, pp. 2, 6.
[95] Pierre Bourdieu, 'What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32 (1987), p. 4.
[96] Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 100.

many historians and social theorists, as well as being expressed in slightly varying forms.

Following Bourdieu, many cultural interpretations have perceived political consciousness – be it class or otherwise – as a method of tactical differentiation by individuals and groups for strategic benefit.[97] As a result, it is argued that political identities relating to class are not necessarily reflections of an external class structure, or 'position', but 'claims for recognition' in the context of cultural difference between individuals within a group or between groups within society.[98] Class must not only be understood in terms of economic inequality but through the totality of the social experience; class oppression can be perceived and perpetrated as effectively in the *cultural* and *social* spheres as the economic. As Eley and Nield have written, developing Bourdieuean concepts, class should be *discursively* understood as it is at that level that 'a new operational collectivity (class in its actually existing forms) was defined – who got to be included, who formed the boundaries, who set the tone, and who won the recognized voice.'[99] In Bourdieuean terms, symbolic power's ultimate form is the control of 'classification' by individuals within social groups.[100]

These insights will therefore be significant in using class analysis to consider the class tensions in interactions between women in the WLM and the role this played in working-class women's identity construction when involved in varying political struggles. In that context, 'antagonism' was not necessarily caused by conflicting economic interests but by perceptions of symbolic capital or claims for recognition which reflected inequalities in the society.

However, it is important to note, as Joseph Maslen and Mike Savage have respectively, that tensions underlying claims for recognition feed back into the larger dynamic of the social hierarchy and that over-emphasising the discursive construction of identities can lead to the downplaying of the material context in which identities are constructed.[101] Thus, while inequality is experienced qualitatively as much as it is quantitatively

[97] Devine and Savage, 'Cultural Turn', p. 14.
[98] Ibid.; Crompton, *Class*, p. 25.
[99] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, 'Farewell to the working class?', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 57 (Spring, 2000), p. 18.
[100] Bourdieu, 'Social Class', p. 14.
[101] Joseph Maslen, 'History and the "processing" of class in social theory', in Harry F. Dahms and Lawrence Hazelrigg (eds.), *Theorizing the Dynamics of Social Processes* (*Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 27) (Bingley, 2010), p. 115; Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain sine 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12.

through economic deprivation, these qualitative patterns of behaviour and interaction are informed by the past and existing social structures.[102] Indeed, it is vital to recognise that while class is constructed discursively by historical actors, they do not do so in a vacuum. Thus, this understanding of class must be synthesised with an awareness of how structural inequalities inflect, and as will be shown to be case in some instances, dominate, this constructed understanding. It is here that the second model, Marxist class analysis, is extremely pertinent.

Marx never directly defined his understanding of class and it is consequently necessary to instead infer a definition from his usages of the term.[103] The simplest definition is that social groups form into 'classes' when shared interests emerge out of their economic situation.[104] Beyond this basic formulation, Marx is consistent in suggesting that 'classes' have a direct relationship to the different economic roles in the capitalist productive process; thus, the owners of the means of the production were the 'bourgeoisie', or 'ruling class'; while the producers, who sold their labour to the bourgeoisie, were the proletariat, or 'working class'.[105]

While Marx discussed the existence of other classes, he theorised that industrial capitalist economic and social relations were causing society to split 'into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat.'[106] The relationship between these two classes was inherently antagonistic owing to their conflicting interests: the workers sought to gain the greatest possible remuneration for their labour while the ruling class attempted to extract the greatest amount of surplus value in the form of profit from the workers' labour.[107] Thus, 'classes' and their interests were structurally determined by the economy, irrespective of whether an individual was conscious of these interests or not.[108] This has been conceptualised as 'class-in-itself'.[109] This stands alongside 'class-for-itself', an expression of when those selling their labour become conscious of their antagonistic relationship with their employers – class consciousness.[110] The relationship between class structure and consciousness was the dominant mode of class analysis between c. 1950 – c. 1975,

[102] Ibid., p. 116.
[103] Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 319.
[104] Ibid., p. 322.
[105] Green and Troup, *Houses of History*, p. 36.
[106] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 2005), p. 8.
[107] John Somerville, *The Philosophy of Marxism: An Exposition* (University of Minnesota, 1999), p. 90.
[108] Ibid., p. 91.
[109] Gerald Allan Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1991), p. 76.
[110] Ibid.

but it has since been critiqued and replaced by the cultural model in 21st century studies of class for many of the reasons outlined in the feminist and intersectional critiques above.[111]

However, this thesis will contend that the antagonistic relationships inherent to the capitalist class structure and economic positions in capitalism played a significant role in shaping how working-class women constructed their political identities and engaged in politics. As a result, it will assert that working-class women's consciousness was 'made' in the same sense, albeit in different forms, as E. P. Thompson's famous study suggested of the English working class.[112]

In moving between these two modes, this thesis will take note of Eley and Nield's point that it is possible to move between the structuralist and poststructuralist registers when analysing society; they need not be conflictual but instead, complementary.[113] Indeed, as both Weberian and Marxist theorists have noted, different approaches to class analysis of this nature yield different results and are consequently able to answer different questions.[114] As an example, different approaches are required to answer Erik Olin Wright's six key questions for class analysis.[115] Of these, three are pertinent to this thesis: firstly, "Distributional Location" – 'How are people objectively located in distributions of material inequality?'[116] Though this is not a primary research question, it is necessary to consider the socio-economic position of individuals within the WLM with other groups and individuals they interacted with in order to analyse the relationship between the two in regards to the second key question: 'What explains how people, individually and collectively, subjectively locate themselves and others within a structure of inequality?'[117] This question is fundamental to this theses' analysis of the WLM and wider Women's Movement in the period as it focuses on the relationship between identity, inequality and political action, specifically around the politics of sex

[111] Savage, 'Working-class', pp. 929-30.
[112] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin: London, 1991), pp, 8, 10; Edward Palmer Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History*, 3, 2 (May, 1978), p. 149; Edward Palmer Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', in Edward Palmer Thompson (ed.), *The Poverty of Theory and other essays* (Merlin Press: London, 1978), p. 85.
[113] Eley and Nield, *Future of Class*, p. 17.
[114] John H. Goldthorpe and Gordon Marshall, 'The Promising Future of Class Analysis: A Response to Recent Critiques', *Sociology*, 26:3, p. 386; Erik Olin Wright, 'Conclusion: If "class" is the answer, what is the question?', in Erik Olin Wright (ed.), *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 180-81, 192.
[115] Ibid., pp. 180-81.
[116] Ibid., p. 180.
[117] Ibid.

and class. Finally, this is tied to the third question: 'What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate oppression and exploitation within capitalist [and patriarchal] societies?'[118] This thesis will argue that the WLM, in its theoretical contributions, its political activism, and attempts to create anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal political collectivities was an emancipatory project and should be understood in such terms. Thus, it is necessary to employ structural and discursive approaches to class analysis in conjunction in order to provide a holistic interpretation of the identity-shaping inequalities for women engaged with the broad range of struggles which took place under the banner of the Women's Movement between 1968 and 1979.

Class is only one formulation of socio-cultural identity which human beings actively construct but an investigation of the socio-economic structure within which this construction is undertaken can help to reveal why one form of identity was emphasised above another.[119] As Rosemary Crompton and John Scott have noted, structural economic and social inequalities continued to exist in the post-war period, and the particular nature of these inequalities are part of the historical context in which class is constructed.[120] Indeed, the British WLM existed in a society and period in which class was perceived to be hugely relevant to political and everyday life, to such an extent that nearly two-thirds of people in the mid-1970s believed there to be 'a class struggle going on this country'.[121] A class analysis of an important social movement in this period therefore meets Boris' criteria for intersectional class analysis as being temporally and geographically valid.[122]

Thus, while standing in isolation within the recent historiography of the Women's Movement, this approach will stand alongside recent more general historiography that has re-emphasised the importance of class for interpreting twentieth century British history, such as Selina Todd's work. Todd has argued across a number of pieces that class has played an 'important and dynamic role' in modern British history; that class significantly shaped young people's life experiences in the mid-twentieth century; and

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[118] Ibid., p. 181.
[119] Andrew August, 'Narrative, Experience and Class: Nineteenth-Century Social History in Light of the Linguistic Turn', *History Compass*, 9, 5 (May, 2011), p. 392.
[120] Rosemary Crompton and John Scott, 'Introduction: the state of class analysis', in Rosemary Crompton, Fiona Devine, Mike Savage and John Scott (eds.), *Renewing Class Analysis* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000), p. 12.
[121] Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the decline of class politics', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 133.
[122] Boris, 'Class', p. 75.

that 'the prevailing emphasis on gender and generational divisions in working-class life in current historical research' should be contested by the importance of class in shaping identity.[123] Similarly, Jon Lawrence has asserted that the majority of British electoral politics has been deeply influenced by class dynamics while James Hinton has illustrated how 'class invades [twentieth century British] culture'.[124] What is interesting, though, is that many reinterpretations of the relationship between class, radicalism and popular politics in Britain have rejected Thompson's Marxist interpretation but followed his chronology. Work on class and popular politics is concentrated in studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whereas more contemporary radicalism has seen class analysis in any form neglected, despite the overt languages of class being far more prevalent.[125] In applying structural and discursive forms of class analysis to a later period of popular political action, it will begin the process of addressing this laxity whilst adding a political dimension to understandings of class and inequality present in cultural and social history of twentieth century Britain.

Oral History and the Women's Movement

Alongside archival research, the "recovery" of working-class voices in and around the WLM will be achieved through the means of oral histories. The interviews I have conducted for this project and the vast array of existing collections provide direct access to the experiences and perspectives of working-class feminists in the period. The array of accounts since the dissolution of the British WLM include Amanda Sebestyen's 1980s collection of narratives covering women activists' recollections of 1968, 1978 and the interim period, as well as their lives at the time of the book's publication in 1988.[126] In the 1990s, Michelene Wandor produced a collection of oral histories with former liberationists concerned with their motivations and experiences while Liz Heron

[123] Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950', *Past and Present*, 203, 1 (2009), p. 181; 'Breadwinners and Dependants: Working-Class Young People in England, 1918-1955', *International Review of Social History*, 52, 1 (2007), p. 83; *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005), p. 227.
[124] Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 121; James Hinton, "The "Class" Complex': Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain', *Past and Present*, 199, 1 (2008), pp. 232-233.
[125] See for example, James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003); Bob Harris (ed.), *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Michigan, 2005); Gordon Pentland, *Radicalism, Reform and National Identity in Scotland, 1820-1833* (Woodbridge, 2008); John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford, 2006); Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798-1815* (Oxford, 2009).
[126] Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88*.

collected the narratives of some former liberationists' childhoods, including her own.[127] Most recently, Margaretta Jolly directed *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, in which she and other contributors collected 60 women's liberationists' life histories.[128] Add to this a number of regional collections from Bristol, Bolton and the 'Women in the Women's Liberation Movement in Leeds and Bradford' oral history project, respectively, and it becomes clear that individual narratives – written or oral – have been extremely important in constructing the narratives of the WLM.[129] This undoubtedly owes a great deal to the feminist commitment to privileging women's own accounts and making the 'personal political'.[130]

Many approaches to oral history have positioned it as a methodology with which it is possible to gain access to the experiences and perspectives of social groups 'hidden' from traditional sources, such as the working-class, women, and ethnic minorities.[131] Indeed, Ronald Grele has argued that oral history can actually be more suitable for constructing a systematic view of the past than documentary sources as the authors of those sources tend not to have asked questions about the dominant ideologies of their period whereas the oral historian can, albeit retrospectively.[132] This has been a key reason why feminist historians have found oral history particularly appealing as it is a methodology ideally suited to the feminist research principle: 'research by, about, and for women'; as well as a means of integrating women into historical scholarship who had previously been invisible, and providing 'invaluable' insights into women's experiences that documentary sources, often written by men, cannot.[133] In the case of the Women's Movement this can be reformulated as a means of integrating those missed by existing projects and archives into the broader narrative of the WLM. The "absent"

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[127] Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990); Heron, *Truth, Dare or Promise*.
[128] Margaretta Jolly, Polly Russell, Rachel Cohen and Freya Johnson-Ross (interviewers), *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/index.html (Accessed 27/06/13).
[129] Both collections are held at the Feminist Archive North in the Brotherton Library Special Collections at the University of Leeds.
[130] Tess Cosslet, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, 'Introduction', in Tess Cosslet, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London, 2000), p. 2.
[131] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. ix.
[132] Ronald J. Grele, 'Movement without aim: Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 49.
[133] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London, 1991), p. 2; Joan Sangster, 'Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history', Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 87; Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, 'Learning to Listen: Interview techniques and analysis', Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998) , p. 157.

women have tended to be socio-economically or culturally defined as working class and those outside of London and the South of England. For the WLM, it is not *men* who have written the existing history at the expense of women's experiences but London-based, white, middle-class women who have inadvertently privileged their accounts over working class counterparts.

This research inevitably departed from and challenged the feminist research principle that research should be 'by, about, and for women', because as a man interviewing women, this was impossible.[134] R. K. Kirby has suggested that interviewees do not necessarily respond better to those of the same class, race, gender et al. and that *difference* may elicit positive responses provided a theoretical grounding.[135] However, my disruption of the feminist research principle created difficulties in acquiring participants and forced my research frame to be expanded. The original purpose of the oral history component of this research had been to locate and interview self-defining working-class women who had participated in the WLM. However, despite advertising widely across Britain for participants, I received no responses. It was in conversation with participants contacted later through the North East Labour History Society that this failure to find participants elsewhere was due to my sex.[136] An additional difficulty was that having begun by planning to interview self-defined working-class women from across Britain, my participants had various class origins and self-understandings and were located entirely in the North East. Due to this, the research could no longer reclaim a specifically working-class experience of the WLM but was able to 'reconstruct' a regional experience in comparison to existing accounts from other areas, as well as to assess the impact of class on a socio-economically and culturally diverse women's group.

Thus, from a very early stage in the process, it was necessary to go beyond the 'reconstructive mode' of oral history to consider both the process and how the individual narratives are produced. In particular, their relationship to 'popular' or 'dominant memory', how they are situated in and framed by a society's cultural norms, and issues of 'subjectivity', 'intersubjectivity' and power-relations between interviewer and interviewee in the interview process itself.[137] This highlights what Alessandro

[134] Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, p. 2.
[135] R. Kenneth Kirby, 'Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter-Spring 2008), p. 24.
[136] Conversations with Penny Remfry, 17 June 2014, and Anne Torode, 21 May 2014.
[137] Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics and method', R. Perks and A Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp. 76-78; Luisa Passerini, 'Work ideology and

Portelli has argued is the fundamental difference between traditional and oral history sources: the addition of '*meaning*'.[138] Of these points, the most important in relation to acquiring participants and the subsequent narratives that were produced in this research was the issue of 'intersubjectivity'.

Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield have defined 'intersubjectivity' as 'on the one hand… the relationship between personal narratives and the public stories available within popular culture, and on the other, to the relationship between the narrator and the audience.'[139] For the women I had hoped to reach, my sex influenced their perception of me as a potential 'audience' and resulted in the silencing of any narrative before it had begun. Thus, gender does not only pervade the *telling* of life stories but can also shape the entire process.[140] Indeed, this was apparent amongst some of the women who did agree to meet with me to discuss the *possibility* of being interviewed. Of the five interviews I conducted with former members of the Coast Women's Group, my two original points of contact, Penny Remfry and Anne Torode, were keen to know my own political position and my research frame before giving consent to be interviewed.[141] Conscious of this, I had gone into these meetings hoping to follow Penny Summerfield's three suggestions for how researchers can mitigate the traditionally unequal power relations in the process and build rapport with participants: 'first, by seeing the interview as a sharing of experience; second, by placing themselves into a subjective position within the interview; and third by giving the interviewees some responsibility for the project.'[142] However, in these original meetings, the power relations and 'roles' of interviewer and interviewee were partially inverted as I answered as many questions about my political perspective and activities as Penny and Anne. Thus, rather than needing to place myself, I had, in effect, been placed into a subjective position in the process. Moreover, Remfry's and Torode's interrogation of my research frame and motivations ensured that any subsequent interviews would only take place if our respective subjectivities were to meet. It was important to both that their stories – and that of the Coast Women's Group – be collected, and though a female

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consensus under Italian fascism', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 60.

[138] Green and Troup, *Houses*, p. 232; Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 67.

[139] Cosslett et al., 'Introduction', p. 3.

[140] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998), p. 2.

[141] Conversations with Remfry and Torode

[142] Summerfield, *Wartime Lives*, p. 24.

researcher would have been preferable, in her absence a man with a shared political culture could serve as an acceptable substitute.

Alongside this was the need for my research frame to fit with the participants' understandings of the WLM. Jeska Rees has contributed a number of important points on this issue and argued that many participants in the 1970s Women's Movement are still politically and historically conscious, with the consequence that they are very interested in how the story of *their* movement is being told.[143] Furthermore, in their keenness to control the narrative, the traditional power relations of oral history may go beyond equalisation to inversion making the search for veracity extremely difficult.[144] This problem is exacerbated by many interviewees' familiarity with the topics, and even the questions, having been interviewed on countless occasions and/or having produced their own autobiographical accounts. This created some concerns regarding the research frame.

The first was that interviewing middle-class liberationists about the experiences of working-class feminists adds little to the existing overviews of the WLM by Rowbotham, Coote and Campbell, and others, a point my middle-class interviewees were aware of and consequently saw them doubt the usefulness of their involvement. Nevertheless, through the process of discussing class and feminism in more general ways it became apparent that the relationship between the WLM and *class politics* was as important as the particular experiences of working-class women in analysing the relationship between class and feminism. Thus, by framing the interviews in this way, my research frame and the interviewees' memory frames aligned enough to enable the development of 'composed' narratives.[145]

Furthermore, the collaborative development of adapted research and interview questions meant that participants were very clear about the research frame prior to and during the interviews. This limited the need for interruptions or directions, which, as Steven Caunce has advised, can help to prevent the projection of the interviewer's conceptions of the past onto the interviewee's account.[146] Instead, interviewees were able to express the 'subjective dimensions' of their experience because even responses

[143] Jeska Rees, ''Are you a lesbian?': Challenges in Recording and Analysing the Women's Liberation Movement in England', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 69 (Spring, 2010), p. 180.
[144] Ibid., p. 184.
[145] Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, *British Adventure*, *Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994), pp. 22-3.
[146] Steven Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (London, 1994), p. 145.

that appeared tangential were in fact related to how they perceived the research frame, thereby avoiding broadcasting dismissive messages – 'Tell me about your experience, but don't tell me too much.'[147] This approach was also useful for the maintenance of 'composure' within the narratives and allowed the testimony to generate its own agenda'.[148] By enabling 'free' responses, my particular areas of interest were often contextualised within a whole life and a totality of experiences rather than taken as events that were detached from the rest of a respondent's social reality.[149] Once again, this was important in researching a social movement as the line between formal political work and social interaction between women in the movement was not so formally delineated. As Deborah Withers has noted in her study of WLM oral histories in Leeds, friendship and 'getting along' were crucial to maintaining the movement, especially at local level, a factor that resonated with the maintained bonds between the women of the Coast Group.[150]

Nevertheless, the interviews remained structured by a research frame concerned with a particular aspect of social experience and political action – "class" – which, whilst it rarely came into conflict with the participants' memory frames, nonetheless situated their responses within a particular narrative context. In addition, there were occasions when interviewees felt that they had addressed the research frame and had nothing more to add, thereby creating a disjuncture within the interview and undermining the 'equal alliance' between us as I had more questions to ask.[151]

A further aspect of intersubjectivity in oral history is that between 'personal narratives and the public stories available within popular culture.'[152] Lynn Abrams has argued that oral histories demonstrate how memories are 'subject to social influence' and therefore enable a bridging of the gap 'between the self and the society' as the interviewee enters into conversation with their culture.[153] This was particularly true of women's

[147] Anderson and Jack, 'Listen', pp. 158-9, 161.
[148] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge: London, 2010), p. 77; Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject: Intersubjectivities in oral history', in Tess Cosslet, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and autobiography: texts, theories, methods* (London, 2000), pp. 91-92; Callum G. Brown, Arthur J. McIvor and Neil Rafeek, *The University Experience, 1945-1975: An Oral History of the University of Strathclyde* (Edinburgh, 2004), p. 258.
[149] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, 1998), p. 259.
[150] Deborah M. Withers, 'Women's liberation, relationships and the 'vicinity of trauma'', *Oral History*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring, 2012), p. 82.
[151] Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject', p. 104;
[152] Cosslett et al., 'Introduction', p. 3.
[153] Lynn Abrams, 'Memory as both source and subject of study: The transformations of oral history', in Stefan Berger and Bill Niven (eds), *Writing the History of Memory* (London, 2014), pp. 89-90, 97.

liberationists' oral histories as their experiences as political activists made them conscious of 'their' narrative of the WLM. Each had been in a socio-political movement that explicitly challenged dominant discourses surrounding gender, class, race, and sexuality and each produced a 'self-concept' around these types of identity frames.[154]

Moreover, the explicitly political nature of the participants underlined Grele's view that a life-story can become a 'cultural narrative' if the wider cultural context is considered, such as by bringing 'high politics' into their testimonies.[155] On a similarly pertinent note, Abrams has argued that 'when a respondent tells a story about an event or experience they are likely telling us something about themselves and about how they position themselves in the social world,' something that was apparent in all of the narratives.[156] The link between the interviewees' individual political identities and the ideas of collectivism associated with "class politics" in the period analysed in this thesis inexorably challenge Thompson's and Prins' assertions that individual histories can become detached from the political, economic and social context of their period, or become 'locked into the irrelevance of the small scale'.[157]

Nevertheless, despite their political consciousness, potential to subvert the power dynamics of the interview process, and position as historical agents, the participants' accounts of feminist activism in a predominantly socio-economically working-class area allow for the political and economic actions of the elite to be judged from the 'receiving end'.[158] In the context of this research, the 'receiving end' will have multiple meanings. Firstly, the underlying struggle of women fighting as a part of movement against overarching gender oppression; secondly, working-class participants' experiences of class oppression alongside gender and within the movement; and thirdly, as activists in an economically-deprived area struggling alongside local working-class women for nurseries, unionisation and a range of other issues. The second point was not easy to explicate because oral history respondents situate themselves in conceptual frameworks that may not be of their own making, or 'draw on the generalised subject

[154] Anderson and Jack, 'Listen', p. 167.
[155] Grele, 'Movement', p. 48; Michael Frisch, 'Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 35.
[156] Abrams, *Oral History*, p. 53.
[157] Thompson, *Voice*, p. 258; Gwyn Prins, 'Oral History', in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, 2001), p. 125.
[158] Thompson, *Voice*, p. 263.

available in discourse'.[159] In this case, this included the intersection of both the currently dominant historiographical narrative of overriding 'sisterhood' *and* earlier interpretations which emphasised the problems of class and racial difference. In many of the individual accounts, these 'narrative structures' were able to 'infiltrate' private memories and consciousness.[160]

There was an important parallel here with Alistair Thomson's analysis of myth. Thomson suggested that the reason dominant narratives are internalised by those they may not benefit, such as the dominant narrative of 'sisterhood' by working-class women who had felt class had greater significance to their experiences than middle-class women in the WLM allowed, is that individuals feel a need to identify with them.[161] Oral history can thereby illustrate the difficulty of developing and sustaining oppositional positions in changing personal, cultural and social circumstances.[162] By the same token, as Passerini comments, oral history sources can be useful as evidence of social and cultural 'consensus' rather than conflict because they reveal the assumptions that frame society and how individuals respond to them.[163]

Fundamentally, this thesis will demonstrate that the production and use of oral history raises the vital historiographical issue of 'reflexivity', but not only in terms of whether an individual's account is 'true', as has been the case with traditional, empiricist history.[164] Instead, it is necessary to emphasise the need for reflexivity on how the historian's 'research frame' has influenced the respondent's testimony; how the historian's construction of the narrative can impose an interpretation not shared by the source (or vice-versa for politically and historically conscious interviewees); and the ways hegemonic narratives are internalised and rejected by individuals in different periods.[165] Its key contribution to this project is not just to show the past 'as it was' but to understand the subjective and intersubjective '*meaning*' of the past by revealing the assumptions that framed the WLM, the society it existed in, and the individual's

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[159] John Bodnar, 'Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker', *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (March, 1989), p. 1219; Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject', p. 95.
[160] Bodnar, 'Power and Memory', pp. 1201-3.
[161] Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Memories: Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 306.
[162] Ibid., p. 310.
[163] Passerini, 'Work, ideology and consensus', p. 60.
[164] P. M. G., 'Popular memory', p. 84.
[165] Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject', p. 104; Katherine Borland, '"That's not what I said": Interpretive conflict in Oral Narrative Research', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 327; Thomson, 'Anzac memories', p. 310.

relationship to them through the prism of class.[166] On this final point, the subsequent chapters reflect Sara and Sue Scott's point that:

> It may well be that the narrative structure of the spoken life-story is perfectly adapted to capturing the inherent ambiguity of class and status. Certainly life stories are much more complex accounts of the self than accounts made up of identity labels, for example "working class", "lesbian" – life stories couple the individual and the social through a nexus of roles and make possible the exposure and exploration of contradictions within the self.[167]

In the discussions of socio-economically middle-class feminists' relationship with class and the complexity associated with defining and 'living' class, oral histories are an invaluable source for our understanding of class and its use as an analytical framework. Through this deep analysis of the relationship between feminists and class in archival and oral history sources, this thesis will emphasise the usefulness of 'class' as a category of stratification and of analysis. It will argue that class analysis retains both a general validity and a specific relevance to explorations of identity and political activism within social movements, such as the WLM, and in so doing, joins the resurgence in class analysis in contemporary historiography.

Thesis Outline

Chapter one outlines the economic and political context that the WLM was situated in, noting the significance of the rise in class politics within the industrial arena. It will assert that women workers were equally likely to be involved in both 'defensive' and 'political' strikes – understood as offering systemic challenges rather than focusing on wages – as men but that their treatment by the Labour Movement was far from equal.[168] Using a series of case studies and perspectives of women involved in industrial disputes of this kind, the chapter will argue that, despite frequent rejection by the Labour Movement from inclusion within the 'class struggle' versus support from the WLM, women workers constructed their identities around class more so than feminism.

[166] Passerini, 'Work, ideology and consensus', p. 57, 60; Portelli, 'What makes oral history', p. 67.
[167] Sara Scott and Sue Scott, 'Our mother's daughters: Autobiographical inheritance through stories of gender and class', in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London, 2000), p. 131.
[168] John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London, 1988), pp. 108-9; John McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today* (Manchester, 1995), p. 239.

However, it will conclude that the support of the WLM and a recognition of how their sex influenced their experiences, women workers' construction of class was distinct from men's.

Chapter two questions whether difficulties in overcoming the primacy of class in working-class women's identities resulted in a detachment from class politics in middle-class liberationists' political identities. It considers the views of these women to argue that the correct characterization of the WLM's relationship with class politics was one of critical engagement rather than outright rejection, both in its activism and ideology, particularly within the dominant 'dual militancy' current associated with socialist-feminists.

Moreover, the thesis will assert that the WLM's engagement with class went beyond the Labour Movement and attempted to bring class politics into different areas of social conflict in women's lives, including housing, welfare and domestic labour. Chapter three will consider the different forms these efforts took and argue that the WLM sought to reconfigure class into more inclusive and holistic forms that took account of struggles away from the workplace. Nevertheless, as with the WLM's interactions with working-class women in the productive sphere, this chapter will assert that class endured as a socio-economic and cultural barrier between feminists and those they supported.

Chapter four, by contrast, considers the experiences of women who identified as both women's liberationists and working class within the movement. It analyses how socio-economic and cultural class differences between women could result in tensions, accusations of classism and the splintering of the movement into working- and middle-class groups.

The final chapter then investigates how important class was in women's liberationists' personal identities and life stories. It asserts that definitions of the WLM as 'middle-class' reveal useful social, economic and cultural differences between women inside and outside the movement, but also destroy the significance of individual 'class' experiences amongst British feminists. Utilising the feminist mantra 'the personal is political', the chapter will argue that identifications with class went beyond a politics of 'solidarity' and was often based in personal experiences of class difference, oppression and exploitation that shaped subsequent political identities and life stories.

Finally, it will conclude by arguing that the examples drawn on throughout the thesis demonstrate the integral nature of class and class politics to the personal and political actions and identities of women's liberationists. However, it notes that despite this, socio-economic and cultural divisions between women within and outside the movement were rarely overcome. As a result, the WLM could never break from its middle-class composition and become the mass movement its activists desired, even as it supported the struggles of working-class women in many arenas. The WLM serves consequently as a powerful case study that illustrates the economic, cultural and social impact of class on politics and identity in late twentieth-century Britain.

1. Women workers in the 1970s: part of the class struggle?

The 1970s was a decade of economic and industrial 'crisis'. It saw a rise in inflation and unemployment, unstable economic growth and industrial unrest.[169] Of these, inflation ran at a historically fast rate reaching 11 and 12 per cent a year, while unemployment, which up until 1974 had spent the preceding 26 years between 1 and 3 per cent, never fell below 4 per cent thereafter.[170] Meanwhile, after around 25 years of comparably stable growth, the first oil price shock in 1973 marked a turning point which saw the UK economy subsequently lurch in and out of recession for the rest of the decade.[171] Unsurprisingly therefore, the 1970s witnessed what Jim Tomlinson has described as an 'unprecedented cycle in living standards' between sharp falls and recoveries.[172] The combination of inflation - at an average annual rate of 13 per cent between 1975 and 1978 - and unstable living standards with falling real wages, created enormous industrial tension as workers and trade unions fought to keep pace.[173]

The period also witnessed a change in the nature of industrial conflict. Union membership peaked in the 1970s, the number of recorded strikes increased by around 6 per cent on the 1960s, the number of workers involved rose by 19 per cent and most significantly of all, the total days lost to strikes increased from 3,554,000 to 12,870,000, an increase of 262 per cent, while the average number of days lost by each worker on strike tripled from 2.62 to 7.97.[174] There were also some of the largest class confrontations since the 1926 General Strike and the re-emergence of 'political' strikes.[175] As a result, industrial disputes were qualitatively different from those of the 1950s and 1960s because 'a wide range of traditionally moderate and peaceful workers,

[169] Richard Coopey and Nicholas Woodward, 'The British Economy in the 1970s: An overview', in Richard Coopey and Nicholas Woodward, *Britain in the 1970s: The troubled economy* (London, 1996), p. 1.
[170] Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism Fifth Edition* (London, 1992), p. 269; Hugh Pemberton, 'The Transformation of the Economy', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (Oxford, 2005), p. 192.
[171] Ibid., p. 186.
[172] Jim Tomlinson, *Public Policy and the Economy since 1900* (Oxford, 1990), p. 282.
[173] Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology*, 30, 2 (May, 1996), p. 259.
[174] Chris Wrigley, 'Trade Unions, strikes and the government', in Richard Coopey and Nicholas Woodward (eds), *Britain in the 1970s: The troubled economy* (London, 1996), p. 279.
[175] Keith Grint, *The Sociology of Work* (London, 1991), pp. 170-72; Sitnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 123; John E. Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London, 1988), p. 108; John McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today* (Manchester, 1995), p. 239.

many of them women, embarked on strike actions, many for the first time in their lives'.[176]

These factors created a 'decade of crisis' in which the post-war Keynesian paradigm, based on high employment and a social 'contract' between workers, employers, and the state, began to erode. It retreated under the Labour Government at the behest of the IMF in 1976 and finally capitulated to the Conservative Party's monetarist paradigm at the end of the decade.[177] The fall in real wages and the increase in unemployment provided a context without which the high levels of industrial unrest were anomalous but it also constructs a problematic image of workers and trade unions as a monolithic block fighting increasingly desperate battles against redundancy and declining living standards – a singular class or industrial struggle. Such a narrative conceals difference and variation between workers as well as how specific industrial conflicts were understood by the workers involved, the relationship between trade unions and the rank and file, between union branches and the central executive, and individual unions and the TUC.

Most significantly, class politics was trifurcated by two other types of political identity: race and gender. In his recent analysis of this period, Sitnam Virdee has argued that the 1970s, and particularly 1976-79, marked a development in the relationship between race and class as 'collective action against racism and class exploitation in Britain partially intertwined.'[178] Virdee posits a developmental narrative of class-race relations in which working-class solidarity was encouraged by socialist and communist activists within the trade union movement who recognised that racism hindered the formation of the working class as a political entity.[179] The outcome was that by the time of the Grunwick strike in 1976, working-class support for the Asian strikers was 'quick and widespread'.[180]

However, the intersection between class and gender was more complex – not least because the views of socialist activists on women's role in the class struggle had been a

[176] Kelly, *Unions*, p. 107.
[177] Tomlinson, *Public Policy*, p. 277; Michael J. Oliver and Hugh Pemberton, 'Learning and Change in 20th-Century British Economic Policy', *Governance*, 17, 3 (July, 2004), p. 429; Jim Phillips, 'The Miners' Strike: Popular Agency and Industrial Politics in Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), p. 202.
[178] Virdee, *Racism*, p. 123.
[179] Ibid., pp. 127-8.
[180] Ibid., p. 133; Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (London, 1987), p. 289.

primary cause of the WLM's separate and autonomous formation.[181] Moreover, women's strikes and occupations have often received greater attention in feminist than labour historiography, thereby automatically challenging notions of homogeneity in the class struggle and reframing the disputes through a feminist lens. As the activist-historian accounts of Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote have made clear, the industrial action by working-class women at Dagenham and elsewhere in 1968 was hugely influential on how the WLM developed and placed the importance of 'cross-class alliances' at the forefront.[182] This link was apparent throughout the WLM's existence in terms of theoretical concerns, activism and feminist press coverage. Indeed, in many cases, women's strikes were the subject of special issues or reports in publications like *Shrew*, *Spare Rib*, *Socialist Woman* etc. Furthermore, socialist-feminist historians such as Rowbotham and Sue Bruley have placed great importance on these types of actions by working-class women within broader overviews of women's history, such as in Rowbotham's *A Century of Women* and *The Past is Before Us* and Bruley's *Women in Britain since 1900*.[183] Whilst the relationship between the WLM and class politics will be analysed explicitly in the next chapter, it is important here to note that women's industrial actions were a key focus of the WLM and the movement was influential in situating strikes within the frames of class and gender politics. This in turn influenced how women workers understood their struggles and constructed their political identities.

Thus, whilst this chapter will take a similar approach to Virdee's work and outline some of the parallels between women and black workers' respective experiences, it will reach a different conclusion on the relationship between class politics and women workers. It will argue that whilst the TUC made increasingly sympathetic overtures to women workers' concerns over the course of the 1970s, the attitudes and behaviour of trade unions at ground level were far more varied throughout the decade. Women workers were just as likely to be understood as impediments to the class struggle as allies and their significance more likely to be recognised by feminists. This chapter will therefore analyse the extent to which women workers' experiences of industrial disputes in this period were distinct from men's. It will argue that women workers participated in both 'traditional' or 'defensive' industrial action – to protect and improve living standards – and 'political' industrial action - on the principle of equality and against discrimination,

[181] Bruley, *Women*, pp. 148-9; Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Wilson, *Paradise*, p. 185.
[182] Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*, p. 166; Segal, 'Jam Today', pp. 153-4; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10.
[183] Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*; Rowbotham, *Century of Women*; Bruley, *Women in Britain*.

poor conditions, bullying, or for union recognition from employers *and* from trade unions.

The chapter will begin by considering women's changing relationship and increased participation in both the labour force and trade unions, before contrasting their experiences of 'defensive' industrial action to men's. It will then discuss the development and implementation of the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and assess the difficulties women faced in wielding the legislation and winning equal pay in workplaces during 'political' industrial action. Throughout, the chapter will address the relationships between women and trade unions in their institutional form, and with male workers and broader understandings of class politics and solidarity. In this process, it shall be concerned with investigating the intersection of class and gender politics in terms of women's political practice, ideology and identities, particularly in relation to detailed coverage of four symbolic disputes: the Ford sewing-machinists' equal pay strike in 1968; the Night Cleaners' Campaign of the early 70s; the Trico equal pay strike in 1976; and the long-running Grunwick dispute between 1976 and 1978. It will argue that women workers were able to triangulate their identity between class politics and feminism but were more likely to identify with 'the working class', even as trade unions were less likely to recognise women in this way than the WLM.

Women, work and the trade unions

Marxist and feminist theorists in this period were consistently occupied by women's relationship to waged labour. The 1960s had seen notable structural economic change as more jobs became available to women than ever before and in various areas of the economy.[184] Between 1961 and 1971, overall female participation in the labour-force had increased from 37.5 per cent to 42.6 per cent and reached 55 per cent for women of working age.[185] Over the same period, women's percentage of the manual workforce increased from 39.3 per cent to 46.5 per cent in the semi-skilled category, and dramatically from 22.4 per cent to 37.2 per cent of unskilled manual workers.[186] This

[184] Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 4.
[185] Martin Pugh, *Women's Movement*, p. 329; Ken Coates and Tony Topham, *Trade Unions and Politics* (Oxford, 1986), p. 5; Craig Lindsay and Paul Doyle, Office for National Statistics, 'Experimental consistent time series of historical Labour Force Survey Data', *National Statistics Feature* (2003), p. 468.
[186] Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 80.

trend continued throughout the 1970s as the percentage of women active in the labour market rose to 60 per cent by 1979.[187]

However, even with this increase, feminists noted that women continued to have responsibility for childcare and domestic duties, which restricted their involvement in the labour force.[188] Mandy Snell and Mary McIntosh have pointed out also that what constituted "women's work" outside of the home remained 'low paid, low grade and … unskilled.'[189] There remained a clear distinction between men and women's work; most male workers were employed in jobs with a 90 per cent male workforce while female workers were employed in jobs that were at least 70 per cent female.[190] With these figures in mind, Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor agreed with Snell and McIntosh that women's work was characterised by low pay and unskilled status but added that there also tended to be weak trade union organization in female dominated workplaces.[191] Women, as Jane Lewis has argued, remained 'economically disadvantaged' through the combination of these factors.[192]

However, if there was consensus over the status of women workers in 1970s Britain, there were important differences over explanations, particularly between Marxist and feminist theorists. The former predominantly elected to view women as a 'reserve army of labour' who could be brought in and out of employment as capitalism saw fit.[193] This approach situated women within a traditional Marxist paradigm of capitalist production and implied that there was no gender component, *per se*, to working women's exploitation and oppression. This theory came under fire from feminists, such as Heidi Hartmann, who pointed out that the Marxist analysis did not explain why particular people in society fill particular economic roles – why is it women that make up the reserve army of labour?[194] Phillips and Taylor furthered this argument by noting that since the gendered division of labour predated capitalism, the economic system could

[187] Lindsay and Doyle, 'Experimental', p. 468.
[188] Mandy Snell and Mary McIntosh, 'Introduction', in Feminist Review (ed.), *Waged Work: A Reader* (London, 1986), p. 3.
[189] Ibid., p. 1.
[190] Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, 'Sex and Skill', in Feminist Review (ed.), *Waged Work*, p. 54.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain sine 1945* (Oxford, 1992), p. 91.
[193] See O. Adamson, C. Brown, J. Harrison, and J. Price, 'Women's Oppression Under Capitalism', *Revolutionary Communist*, 5 (1976); V. Beechey, 'Some Notes on Female Wage Labour in Capitalist Production', *Capital and Class*, 3 (1977); L. Bland, C. Brundson, D. Hobson and J. Winship, 'Women "Inside and Outside" the Relations of Production', *Women's Studies Group* (1978); Counter Information Services, *Women Under Attack* (London, 1976).
[194] Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', *Capital and Class*, 3, 2 (Summer, 1979), p. 7.

not be the only explanation for it.[195] Instead they contended that capitalism encountered workers who were already 'sex-stratified' by patriarchal social relations, which capitalism was then able to harness for its own needs.[196] This created the irony that just as more women became 'workers', it became more important to understand their experiences as 'women'. Women's experiences were distinctive and particular and could consequently not be explained by class analysis alone.

Nevertheless, in one important respect, women workers' behaviour in this period suggests that they accepted a traditional understanding of themselves as *workers* – increased trade union membership. Up until the late 60s, female unionisation grew steadily alongside their participation in the workforce. Between 1948 and 1974, women's proportion of total union membership rose from 18 per cent to 27 per cent, which, while described as a 'rapid' growth by labour historians Price and Bain, was less dramatic than the 6 per cent swing towards women between 1971 and 1979, reaching 30.2 per cent.[197] It was once earnings struggled to keep up with prices, and indeed fell behind on average in the 1970s, that women's unionisation increased more rapidly, growing by 73 per cent during the decade.[198] This corresponded to a 13 per cent rise in male union membership and indicated workers of either sex perceived trade unions as a key tool of protecting their interests during the first period in the post-war era in which they were facing falling living standards and increasing levels of unemployment.[199] Starting from a lower point, women's increases were significant. Between 1970 and 1979, women's union density rose from 31.2 per cent to 40.4 per cent while their overall membership numbers increased by 47.4 per cent from 2,583,000 to 3,822,000.[200] Women even came to dominate the membership of certain unions, such as the health service union, the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE), which experienced a quadrupling of female membership between 1968 and 1978, as well as in ten other unions by 1974.[201]

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[195] Phillips and Taylor, 'Skill', p. 56.
[196] Ibid., p. 58.
[197] R. Price and G. S. Bain, 'Union Growth Revisited: 1948-1974 in Perspective', in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 14, 3 (November, 1976), p. 347; Wrigley, 'Trade Unions', p. 279.
[198] Chris Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions', in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Nina Fishman (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics Volume Two* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 44.
[199] Wrigley, 'Trade Unions', p. 279.
[200] Ibid., p. 274.
[201] Judith Hunt and Shelley Abrams, *Women, Work and Trade Union Organisation* (London, 1980), p. 15; Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976* (Dublin, 1978), p. 168.

However, women's increased participation in the workforce and membership of trade unions was not reflected in trade unions' executive and delegate positions or in the number of full-time trade unionists. There were just 46 female delegates out of 1,000 at the 1968 TUC Conference, a figure which had improved by just 14 at the Conference six years later, in spite of the fact that women made up 25 per cent of those attending.[202] As table 1 illustrates, women were proportionally poorly represented in each of the eleven largest unions in 1976. The figures for unions with a majority female membership in the same year evidenced an even worse gender divide with women composing just 15.1 per cent of the national executive in these unions, 7.1 per cent of full-time trade union officials and 15.4 per cent of their trade union delegates.[203]

In spite of the persisting male dominance, women's increased unionisation and participation in the workforce opened up industrial avenues of resistance to problems they shared with male workers as employers and the state responded to the inflationary crises of the decade: cuts in real wages and unemployment. Indeed, women workers were frequently more vulnerable to redundancy than men. The official rate of unemployment among women grew three times as fast as among men between 1974 and 1978 while women lost their jobs 50 per cent faster than men in 1975.[204] Women's unemployment was also underestimated in official statistics as many were not entitled to claim benefits and were therefore missing from the figures.[205] In 1972 women made up 15.6 per cent of the total unemployed but this had risen to 28.2 per cent by 1978, a problem concealed by women's overall employment figure rising by 145,000 due to the growth of the service sector, something which was of little comfort to the unemployed.[206] Furthermore, any argument that women workers were offering no more than a 'supplementary' income and should therefore have accepted unemployment and wage cuts more readily than men is undermined by the fact that only 5 per cent of families in the 1970s relied on the wage of a single male breadwinner and that the traditional family ideal covered less than 30 per cent of families.[207] The reality for working women in the 1970s was that their wage was of material importance to them and their families. As a result, it should not be surprising that when faced with

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[202] *TUC Report*, *1968*, p. 453; Sarah Boston, 'Women Workers and the TUC', *Spare Rib*, 29 (November, 1974).
[203] Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 60, 65.
[204] Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London, 1981), p. 229; 'Equal Pay and the Crisis', *Spare Rib*, 48 (June, 1976).
[205] Nick Gardner, *Decade of Discontent: The Changing British Economy since 1973* (Oxford, 1987), p. 183.
[206] Pollert, *Girls*, p. 229.
[207] Philip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 1985), p. 318.

attacks on their employment and living standards, many women workers were just as prepared as men to offer industrial resistance in the form of strikes, and at times, participate in the over 500 occupations and sit-ins which occurred during the decade.[208]

Table 1: Representation of women in trade unions in Britain, 1976
Source: Data calculated from figures in George Joseph, *Women at Work: The British Experience* (Oxford, 1983), p. 231. Figures rounded to the nearest per cent.

Union	Female members (%)	Full-time Female Officials (%)	Female Executive Committee Members (%)	TUC Women Delegates (%)
NUPE	65	3	35	19
NALGO	43	21	18	16
NUGMW	33	11	0	18
TGWU	16	4	0	17
USDAW	59	5	10	33
NUT	75	11	11	4
COHSE	70	18	5	0
CPSA	68	21	47	40
NUTGW	88	17	38	38
APEX	55	33	50	43
AUEW	14	4	0	0

'Defensive' industrial action

The inflationary crises of the 1970s saw the British people faced with an 'unprecedented cycle in living standards' and consequently a heightening of a 'class struggle' between workers and employers over wages and conditions.[209] As Kelly has argued, the period incorporated new groups of workers into these disputes, including women, and also witnessed novel forms of industrial action.[210] One such form was the usage of occupations and sit-ins, during which the actual and symbolic continuation of work in resistance to forced redundancy or industry closure was perceived as a more effective

[208] Kelly, *Trade Unions*, pp. 108-9; McIlroy, *Trade Unions*, p. 239.
[209] Tomlinson, *Public Policy*, p. 282; Virdee, *Racism*, p. 123; Grint, *Work*, pp. 170-72; Kelly, *Trade Unions*, p. 108.
[210] Kelly, *Trade Unions*, pp. 108-9.

tactic than strike action.[211] The proliferation of occupations and sit-ins in the 1970s owed much to the success of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in from June 1971 to October 1972 in resisting the closure of the yards involved and saving the associated jobs. While inventive, worker occupations were by nature *reactive* responses to localised crisis - the threat of redundancy. The consequence of this was that the large amount of factory occupations involving male and female workers were united by the singular motivation of saving jobs. Occupations were consequently not gendered in their motivations but were they gendered in their outcomes?

Dave Lyddon's study of industrial action in 1972 has provided a broad template for workers' success, the keys to which were: solidarity among those taking the action; workers' preparedness to act 'unofficially' to achieve their objectives; support from secondary pickets; and solidarity action by others not directly involved in the dispute, such as respecting picket lines or offering financial aid.[212] While applicable to women's industrial actions, the particular context of women workers' struggles make an addendum necessary. As a consequence of their employment patterns and the relative scarcity of manual women workers, their industrial actions tended to be both smaller scale and less likely to be able to bring the country, or even their particular industry, to a halt.[213] Thus, more so than men, women workers required the solidarity of other workers and the full support of their union, symbolically, physically and financially. This was because, as Lyddon points out, it was often possible for men to use sheer numbers at rank and file level to overcome any union reluctance or hostility.[214] Thus, whilst occupations often shared form and function, was the defence of male jobs more likely to receive trade union support and solidarity from other workers than occupations attempting to save women's jobs?

The case of the first all-female occupation, and the first from which a workers' cooperative was to develop, at a factory in Fakenham in 1972, indicated that the answer was certainly "yes". In 1971, the Fakenham factory's parent company, Sextons in Norwich, ran into financial difficulties, resulting in 275 workers being made redundant before a local property developer saved the factory in 1972.[215] However, the rescue

[211] Coates and Topham, *Trade Unions*, p. 12.
[212] Dave Lyddon, ''Glorious Summer', 1972: the High Tide of Rank and File Militancy', in McIlroy, Campbell and Fishman (eds.), *British Trade Unions*, p. 344.
[213] Pollert, *Wives*, p. 13.
[214] Lyddon, 'Glorious Summer', p. 344.
[215] Judy Wacjman, *Women in Control: Dilemmas of a Workers' Cooperative* (Milton Keynes, 1983), pp. 43, 46.

package negotiated by the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) and the National Union of Footwear, Leather and Allied Trades (NUFLAT) included the redundancy of the 45 female workers at Fakenham in favour of saving as many male jobs as possible.[216] The women workers subsequently mimicked the UCS work-in and continued production in an effort to demonstrate their own 'right to work'.[217] The occupation continued for 17 weeks but the women's union, NUFLAT, refused to recognise their action and consequently offered no strike pay.[218] The union topped this by actively working to discourage their members, other unions, and the local trades council from acting in solidarity or even offering the women financial support, suggesting an *active* reassertion of women workers' inferior status.[219] Thus, the union's view of the women as secondary workers and outside its institutional or political remit left the Fakenham workers without the necessary solidarity of the trade union movement or other workers, in spite of their internal solidarity and preparedness to act 'unofficially'.[220] Indeed, the only secondary support they did receive was from the WLM, both locally and nationally. The Norfolk Women's Liberation Group joined the women workers in their protest outside NUFLAT's Norwich office during the original occupation and the occupation received unanimous support at WLM conferences, including donations and publicity in *Spare Rib* and *Shrew*.[221] Nevertheless, having opted to emphasise their 'right to work' and therefore their link to a prevalent and powerful idea within the class politics of the period, the Fakenham women had limited solidarity to call on once the union perceived them outside of this frame. Furthermore, the women's awareness that their sex had made their dispute more difficult did not encourage the development of a feminist or gender-consciousness as the general disillusionment which permeated the group after their experiences inhibited any kind of politicisation.[222]

However, the intervention of the WLM was illustrative of the movement's commitment to women's industrial actions in the period, often ascribing them greater importance than trade unions, in spite of the class-based structure of women's disputes and their efforts to be recognised within the arena of class politics. This was again evident in another dispute, the Night Cleaners' Campaign, which was symbolic of the distinction in feminist and trade union attitudes and behaviour towards women's class struggles.

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[216] Ibid., p. 46.
[217] Ibid., p. 47.
[218] Ibid., pp. 161-2.
[219] Arsenal Women's Liberation Group, '1972', *Shrew*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (June, 1972).
[220] Lyddon, 'Glorious Summer', p. 344.
[221] Wacjman, *Women in Control*, pp. 48, 113; Arsenal WL Group, '1972'.
[222] Wacjman, *Women in Control*, p. 181.

Figure 1: Special issue of *Socialist Woman*, January 1971.

The campaign was a long struggle conducted by female cleaners and women's liberationists for improved pay and conditions, and union recognition for night cleaners between 1970 and 1973.[223] Although the campaign affected night – and day – cleaners across the country, the campaign was most notable and widely reported on in London, which undoubtedly served as its epicentre and is where the majority of accounts focused their attention.

The Night Cleaners' Campaign was covered widely by the contemporary feminist press, including special issues of *Shrew* and *Socialist Woman,* and Sally Alexander provided an activist account in a contribution to the feminist publication, *Conditions of Illusion*, in 1974.[224] Moreover, Sheila Rowbotham has maintained a strong interest in the topic and

[223] Boston, *Women Workers*, p, 297.
[224] *Shrew: A Magazine of the Women's Liberation Workshop*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (March, 1971); *The Nightcleaners Campaign: A Socialist Woman Special* (January, 1971); Sally Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners' Campaign', in S. Allen, L. Sanders and J. Wallis (eds.), *Conditions of Illusion* (Leeds, 1974).

framed the campaign as 'part of a wider attempt to foreground women workers and challenge trade union complacency about women's subordination.'[225] Thus, the feminist narrative was concerned with women workers' particular exploitation but also with the need for them to be recognised as part of the 'class struggle'. In this respect, and as is clear in each of the examples, women engaged in industrial disputes were perceived in both class and gender terms by the WLM, even when ignored in the pages of labour history. This begs the question of whether the cleaners saw themselves along that same identity intersection and this can be investigated through a brief analysis of the campaign.

At the beginning of the dispute, the cleaners were being paid an appallingly low wage of £12.50 for a forty-hour working week and were predominantly un-unionised.[226] For this, the cleaners worked from 10pm to 6am; received half the rate of male cleaners; rarely received holiday pay; were often sacked without notice; were expected to work twice as hard to cover the duties of absent workers for just 40p extra an hour (employers therefore benefitted from systematic under-staffing); and they were excluded from the Factory Acts meaning there were no restrictions on night work or provisions for compensation after accidents.[227] Indeed, their circumstances were so dire that the general secretary of the Civil Service Union (CSU) suggested it was 'like something out of the nineteenth century.'[228] WLM activists were quick to contrast this poverty pay with the increased profitability of the three main employers at the end of the 1960s and into 1970, when the dispute began. Industrial Contract Cleaners and its subsidies made £111,573 in profit in 1969; Pritchard Cleaners and subsidies made £373,761; and Initial Services and subsidies made £1,603,614, all of which were improvements on 1968.[229] Nevertheless, calls for a joint employer-union council on wages and conditions were rejected by the Pay and Incomes Board (PIB) in 1971 because of the threat of inflation.[230]

This was coupled with methods of top-down class struggle, particularly the sacking of unionised workers. These actions eventually sparked the campaign when West Indian

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[225] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory: *Nightcleaners* Recalled', http://www.workandwords.net/uploads/files/S._ROWBOTHAM_NightCleaners_-_ENG_.pdf, 2. Originally in Maria Ruido (ed.), *Plan Rosebud: On Images, Sites and Politics of Memory* (Santiago, 2008).
[226] 'Report on the night cleaners', *Spare Rib* (July, 1972).
[227] 'Conditions', *Shrew*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (October, 1971).
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

cleaner, Effie, was believed by other cleaners to have been sacked for her union membership.[231] Another cleaner and union member, May Hobbs, rallied others and together they successfully picketed for Effie's reinstatement.[232] Buoyed by this success, Hobbs sought to bring about more wide-ranging collective action as a means of improving the cleaners' pay and conditions through unionisation and approached the local International Marxist Group (IMG), and subsequently the Dalston women's liberation workshop, for assistance.[233] This resulted in the formation of the Cleaners Action Group (CAG).[234] The CAG was composed of cleaners, women's liberationists, and socialists and its activists picketed, distributed leaflets, and drew up a list of demands around wages and conditions and the right for the night cleaners to join trade unions.[235]

In spite of the high profile symbolic success of the sewing-machinists at Dagenham two years earlier, the cleaners still faced the problem of being dismissed as working for 'pin money' by their employers.[236] There also remained an ever-present fear of being sacked for joining the union or being seen as troublemakers by management, a reality that Effie's sacking had seemed to exemplify.[237] Moreover, whereas the sewing-machinists had possessed existing trade union channels and enormous industrial might through their power to halt car production at a multinational company, the night cleaners were without trade union recognition, worked in isolated conditions across different buildings and were employed by various companies making collective struggle exceptionally difficult.[238]

The CAG set out to address these difficulties and had some success in unionising the cleaners.[239] Nonetheless, even with this support, the cleaners found it difficult to arouse the interest of male trade unionists and the trade unions.[240] These frustrations were evident when May Hobbs accused the TGWU of 'indifference' towards the female cleaners at the Workers' Control Conference in Birmingham in 1970.[241] Indeed, Sarah Boston's book, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, noted that the cleaners served as

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[231] Geoffrey Sheridan, 'Rocking the bucket', *The Guardian*, 17 February 1971, p. 9.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', 312; Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 297.
[234] Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', 312; Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 297.
[235] Ibid., p. 298.
[236] Mary Holland, 'Lonely, underpaid women who clean the skyscrapers', *The Guardian*, 29 November 1970, p. 4.
[237] Ibid.
[238] 'Conditions', *Shrew*.
[239] Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', p. 312.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions*, p. 182.

another example how trade unions had to be 'force[d]' to recognise their struggles.[242] She contrasted this with how the campaign illustrated how a 'mutual relationship' could develop between women workers and the WLM, implying that feminist politics was more easily able to address issues affecting exploited workers than the trade union movement.[243]

A further difficulty of unionisation rested on the issue of domestic labour – women's responsibility for the home and family. The relative flexibility of night work was part of its attraction to working-class women in such roles, in spite of its low pay and poor conditions. However, this double-shift left women cleaners with very little time for sleep, usually around four hours a day, let alone political organisation.[244] This problem was exacerbated by the intransigence of trade union officials in moving meeting times to enable the cleaners to attend and encapsulated the trade union movement's apathy towards some of the most exploited workers in the country.[245] Officials were aware of the problems but noted that supporting the cleaners was financially costly to the union because of their low membership contributions.[246] That this would have been addressed by improved wages seemed to escape their consideration.

In spite of this, by July 1972 the CAG had managed to unionise 75 per cent of the cleaners but the TGWU officer responsible for them reportedly remained 'very elusive'.[247] The TGWU's disinterest was also reflected in the experiences of The North London International Socialist Women's Group, who urged the TGWU to be more proactive in recruiting the cleaners but only local trade unionists responded, whilst the union remained disinterested at regional level.[248] The *Morning Star* corroborated this view, reporting that it was the union as an entity rather than local trade unionists – who were actually said to be strongly supportive of the campaign by both the paper and some of the cleaners – which was disinterested in the cleaners' struggle.[249]

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[242] Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 297.
[243] Ibid.
[244] June Southworth, 'The char who cleaned up Whitehall', *Daily Mail*, July 18 1973, p. 7.
[245] Bel Mooney, 'The Night Cleaners' Campaign', *New Statesman*, 12 May 1972, p. 83.
[246] Martin Walker, 'Cleaners face an uphill struggle', *The Guardian*, 18 August 1972, p. 22.
[247] Soldon, *Women*, 182; Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', p. 315.
[248] 'North London I. S. Women's Group Leaflet', in 7SHR/D/1, Box 8, The Women's Library (TWL), London.
[249] *Morning Star*, 11 August 1972; 'Meeting at Longacre, 28/11/1970', in 7SHR/D/2, Box 8, TWL, London.

In contrast, the other union involved, the CSU, was far more supportive of the cleaners' campaign. The union backed the strikes that dotted the campaign, such as that by Fulham cleaners at the Empress State Building in July 1972. In that instance the CSU made the strike official and offered strike pay, as well as encouraging other unions and workers to support the strikers.[250] The result of this recognition was that in addition to the already existing aid from local Communist Party, International Socialist and WL members, the pickets were supported by boycotts of the employer by telephone engineers, dustbin men, canteen delivery men, and building workers.[251] Furthermore, able to coordinate through the CAG and the CSU, May Hobbs was able to garner the support of the cleaners in other buildings, who also came out on strike, leading to victory for improved pay and conditions in the buildings involved.[252] More broadly, however, the campaign lacked this level of solidarity from trade unions and male workers and was consequently extended into an extremely long dispute that relied more on the support of feminists and socialists than the union movement the women were fighting to be a part of.

This was reflected in the views of those involved. The cleaners saw themselves as fighting for 'women workers' in both class and gender fields of struggle. To begin with, Hobbs' and the cleaners' desire to unionise against their employers, and her approach of an IMG rather than the WLM, suggest that they sought to fight along traditional 'class' lines. The antagonistic interests they had as workers against their employer underpinned the campaign. However, this was linked to a wider understanding that they were dealing with exploitative conditions specific to women. Hobbs consistently spoke of fighting both 'exploitation' as workers on the one hand and for the 'girls' on the other, illustrating the intersection between class and gender.[253] She was not alone as Marie, a shop steward, exemplified:

> But it comes to the point when you can't take anymore; you realise that if you don't stand up for yourself no one else will. We need the money and we need our jobs. But we don't give a damn if we lose them if it'll make it better for the women they employ after us.[254]

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[250] Arsenal Women's Liberation Workshop, 'Cleaners' Strike', *Shrew*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (October, 1972).
[251] Ibid; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing in Britain from the 1970s: A Personal Account', *Antipode*, 38:3 (Jun., 2006), p. 613.
[252] Arsenal WL, 'Cleaners'; Rowbotham, 'Cleaners Organizing', p. 613.
[253] Stewart Tendler, 'A cleaners' campaign', *The Times*, 21 August 1972,p. 4.
[254] Bel Mooney, 'The Night the Cleaners Came Out', *New Statesman*, 4 August 1972, p. 84.

This was a powerful statement of commitment to a struggle that transcended their own, and showed that experience of a particular struggle could develop into a more universal consciousness of both class and gender conflict. Moreover, the sentiment was reported as present amongst various cleaners over the dispute along with a belief that a victory would spread militancy to other exploited women workers.[255] That gender played such an important part in their political identities most likely owed much to their experiences of class politics. Their main trade union, TGWU was reluctant to recognise their exploitation and their desire to, in effect, join a broader class struggle. For Hobbs and the cleaners, it was apparent that this reluctance stemmed from their sex: the TGWU perceived the strikers as *women* before they were *workers*. It was consequently unsurprising that of those cleaners spoken to, they often attributed the successes of the campaign to the local WL group, rather than TGWU activists or the union itself.[256] For their most prominent member, May Hobbs, the link with feminist politics became an increasingly important part of her political identity and she became directly involved with the WLM at conferences and meetings and traversed some of the class boundaries between herself and the women's liberationists who supported her, reflecting Boston's earlier point regarding the greater ease of connections between women of different classes than workers of different genders.[257]

Thus, the implication for women's political identities is that when rejected by the institutions of traditional class politics but validated by feminist politics, the more politically conscious cleaners gravitated towards a more sex- than class-based identity. However, this could be reflective of the leaders or most politicised women rather than all of those involved. Indeed, in Rowbotham's view, the campaign dissipated partly because of 'the yawning class gulf between the leafleters [WLM] and the cleaners', a point Alexander's account also flagged up.[258] Furthermore, it is important to qualify that even Hobbs tended to speak on the issues faced by women workers rather than *women* and was also critical of what she saw as the movement's general failure to engage working-class women, as well as liberationists' criticisms of herself.[259] On her experience of being invited to the 'Woman of the Year' awards, she told *The Guardian*: 'These women said, "Surely you're not going are you, May?" I said, "Fucking right I am, it's a free nosh!" The point is *they've* had it all… just because I want a little bit of it now,

[255] Mooney, 'Night Cleaners'.
[256] May Hobbs, *Born to Struggle* (London, 1973), p. 82; 'Report on the night cleaners', *Spare Rib* (July, 1972); Unknown interview transcript with night cleaners, 'Ann' and 'Jean', 7SHR/D/2, TWL.
[257] 'Interview with May Hobbs', *Shrew*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (October, 1971).
[258] Rowbotham, 'Cleaners Organizing', 615; Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', p. 321.
[259] 'Interview with May Hobbs'.

they all get the needle and say I shouldn't go.'[260] It is apparent that class distinction was still keenly felt in women's experiences of political struggle, and that validation from middle-class feminists was not enough to break down the class divide. Nevertheless, the campaign was an example of how working-class women in struggle could construct political identities that intersected gender and class and met in the crucible of experience.

When coupled with another cleaners' dispute at Durham University in 1973 and 1974, the two events illustrate the difficulty of identifying uniform behaviour towards women workers within the trade union movement. At Durham, the dispute was also concerned by low pay but the catalyst for action was the laying-off of cleaners on Thursdays and Fridays during the three-day weeks of the period.[261] However, as the cleaners pointed out, this did not apply to students and staff still using university facilities during the evenings and rightly noted that universities were exempt from the restrictions.[262] Challenging this attack on their pay and conditions was complicated by their frayed relationship with the University-recognised union, the General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU), which had rejected 20 women's memberships in 1972 because it would not represent those working under 21 hours per week.[263] Advised by local feminist and socialist individuals studying or working at the university, the women set up their own TGWU branch, which immediately recognised their membership and stated that no agreements could be made with university management without the women's approval.[264]

The women achieved some success: a picket of university buildings drew sympathetic local and national media coverage and shamed the management into offering improved wages and conditions, which the women accepted.[265] However, GMWU – the recognised union – agreed with the university to a process of 'natural wastage' over the subsequent months and working conditions once again declined as remaining staff were asked to carry out additional duties within their normal hours.[266] With the TGWU's powers limited against the official GMWU, the women gradually drifted away from unionisation

[260] Anna Coote, 'Woman's Guardian', *The Guardian*, 19 July 1973, p. 11.
[261] Lynda Finn, 'Durham cleaners get unionized', *Spare Rib*, p. 22 (April, 1974).
[262] Ibid.
[263] Lynda Finn and Gavin Williams, 'The Durham Experience: Bureaucrats and Women Cleaners', *Solidarity Pamphlet*, 52 (1974), pp. 3-4.
[264] Ibid., p. 4.
[265] Ibid., p. 7; 'Mrs Mopps in Varsity dust-up', *Daily Mail*, 25 January 1974.
[266] Finn and Williams, 'Durham', p. 8.

in a haze of disenchantment, once again illustrating the potential for trade unions to inhibit the development of political identities in women workers.[267]

However, seen alongside the Nightcleaners' Campaign, the two disputes demonstrated how there were not only differences between individual unions' responses to women's strikes, there was variation within unions, such as between the TGWU in London and Durham. Women workers' status as part of the working class was therefore dictated by the views of male-dominated local union branches with the outcome that women's class struggles were regularly separated from men's, regardless of women's own attitudes. Indeed, as the authors of a pamphlet on the Durham dispute noted, the main barrier to unionisation 'is not the attitudes of part-time women workers, but the actual discouragement of the women by trade unions.'[268]

Herein lay an example of what Bourdieu has called a 'classification struggle' in which class, like other forms of political identity, is a conflictual process in which some individuals and institutions possess greater power of definition than others.[269] For the night cleaners, it was a trade union that had classificatory power. This was in spite of the fact that the cleaners' conflict was directly centred on employers' exploitation of an isolated and ignored part of the labour force, and, in this respect, was explicitly framed by class antagonism.[270] By focusing on unionisation as a key aspect of their campaign, the cleaners identified with this class frame and demonstrated this in statements arguing against their exploitation and damning their employers.[271] However, attempts to be recognised as workers ran into a classification struggle with their primary trade union. The TGWU had little interest in their campaign or exploitative conditions and whilst it blamed the expensive nature of supporting a very poor group of workers, it was apparent that gender played a role.[272] The cleaners were very aware of this rejection and thus the classificatory power of the labour movement was able to embed gender in the women's class identities.

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[267] Ibid., p. 9.
[268] Ibid., p. 15.
[269] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984), p. 484.
[270] Exploitation is seen by Rosemary Hennessy as an aspect of class which differentiates it from other types of political identity, such as gender and race, which are marked by oppression. See Hennessy, 'Class', pp. 53-72.
[271] Tendler, 'A cleaners' campaign'; Mooney, 'The Night'.
[272] Walker, 'Cleaners'.

This experience was starkly contrasted with the WLM's commitment to the cleaners' cause. The WLM's recognition undoubtedly contributed to how gender came to intersect class in women's identities. For some, the experience opened their minds to broader issues and led to feminist conclusions, such as one cleaner's comment: 'I think women should be allowed to live their own lives and not be dominated by men.'[273] However, even at this intersection of class and gender, socialist-feminists in the WLM were unable to usurp class' foundational position within the cleaners' political identities. The same women who complimented the WLM on their support also criticised the movement's failure to engage with more working-class women and even those from the other side reflected that class barriers prevented a lasting unity for the majority.[274] The campaign therefore serves as an example of how class and gender are often inextricably linked, even in cases of worker exploitation, but also how the economic and cultural structures of class render a purely gendered political identity impossible.

Whilst the cleaners' disputes illustrate the varied but generally negative response of trade unions to women workers' workplace struggles, this was not the only story, particularly for white collar workers. One union which demonstrated a consistent enthusiasm for supporting women's industrial disputes throughout the period was the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), the white-collar subsection of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). One example of this, from an engineering factory in Ipswich in summer 1975, illustrated how the support of both the trade union and solidarity from male workers led to a radically different outcome to the aforementioned cases of isolated industrial action by women. The strike in question came about after the company, Louis Newmarks, reviewed the male workers' wages and offered them an increase but rejected the women office workers' calls for a similar pay rise in line with other factories in the area.[275] TASS supported the strike at central and local level, as did the male workers in the factory, with the convenor stating that: 'The shop floor felt so disgusted that we felt we should come out.'[276] This combined action by female and male workers was so effective that rather than the dispute lasting months and ending in failure, it instead resulted in not only the company almost immediately

[273] 'Interview with Jean Wright', *Shrew*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (October, 1971).
[274] Ibid; 'Interview with May Hobbs'; Rowbotham, 'Cleaners Organizing', p. 615; Alexander, 'Nightcleaners', p. 321.
[275] 'Equal Pay and the Crisis'.
[276] Ibid.

accepting the women's demands but also paying the male workers an unexpected bonus.[277]

Once again, and this time among white collar workers, the women strikers sought to defend their interests in the 'class' arena rather than as *women* but on this occasion, the trade union also perceived them as *workers*, with the equal status that this implied. This suggests that class solidarity was possible across both gender and 'collar' when trade unions – significant classifiers of industrial disputes – offered a universalising class narrative which incorporated all workers and positioned them in opposition to their employer. This example therefore implies that if a 'traditional' terms and conditions strike could be reframed into a 'political' strike in the eyes of those involved, class could become an overarching collective identity able to subsume gender difference between workers. However, women workers' battles for equal pay throughout the period indicated that gender was always embedded in the narratives of the disputes and political identities alike.

Equal pay and the meaning of 'political strikes'

The campaign for equal pay has been dated as far back as the 1830s with subsequent peaks and troughs in trade union interest and activism.[278] One peak of symbolic significance was the TUC's adoption of the commitment to equal pay in 1888, carrying the implication that equal pay would have been a focus of the trade union movement thereafter.[279] However, by 1968, eighty years on from the resolution, outside of the teaching profession and the civil service, equal pay remained no more than a resolution.[280] The decision of female sewing-machinists at the Ford factory to take strike action over unequal grading consequently threw the issue of workplace equality back on to the political agenda.

The strike has taken on great significance in the historiography of the Women's Movement. In particular for its focus on the idea of 'equality' and as having been important for the concurrent development of the WLM.[281] For Rowbotham, it placed

[277] Ibid.
[278] Mary Davis, 'An Historical Introduction to the Campaign for Equal Pay', http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/roaddisplay.php?irn=820 (accessed 2 February 2015).
[279] 'TUC Equal Pay Resolution', *Women's Union Journal*, 15 September 1888. The resolution was passed unanimously.
[280] Davis, 'Equal Pay'.
[281] Rowbotham, *Century*, p. 349

'equality' on the political agenda, while Coote and Campbell's history of the movement, *Sweet Freedom*, considered it to have had 'a formative influence on the newly emerging women's liberation movement', a point reiterated in subsequent individual accounts.[282] Segal, for example, suggested that the women 'provided early role models for the Women's Liberation Movement.'[283] Rowbotham has also asserted its role in forcing the Labour Party to create and pass the Equal Pay Act in 1970, a view recently endorsed by Selina Todd, although Jane Lewis has noted that this must be coupled with Britain's obligations after joining of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the necessary condition of equal pay in the Treaty of Rome.[284]

For the trade union movement, the focus is slightly different. The TUC's learning resources on the strike, for example, illustrate less of a concern with the principle of equality in favour of the strike's symbolic significance in terms of male and female trade unionists' solidarity over a "women's issue". The resource focuses on the 'unstinting support of their [the strikers'] union convenor [male]' and the difficulty of facing opposition from the company rather than their status as women.[285] Moreover, problems of male solidarity with the women are concealed within the ambiguity of 'some' male colleagues opposing the strike.[286] That these problems were tied up with wider social and cultural understandings of 'women's work' is undeniable and is demonstrated by the parallel between the mainstream media's response to the strike and male workers' attitudes recounted by the strikers.

Indeed, the media's response was in stark contrast to the TUC's interpretation, where a series of hysterical claims over losses to male jobs and damage to industry highlighted that the strikers had failed to understand their position as women rather than as workers. Taking *The Times* as an example, headlines included 'Ford talks failure threat to 40,000 [male jobs]' and 'Ministry acts as women threaten jobs at Ford', while an editorial discussed the need for 'Firmness' and considered the possibility of the company's acquiescence 'disastrous'.[287] The narrative placed women as extant to the working class and even damaging to its interests.

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[282] Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 10.
[283] Segal, 'Jam Today', pp. 153-4.
[284] Rowbotham, *Century*, 341; Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (London, 2014), p. 289; Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 117.
[285] TUC Learning Resource, *Winning Equal Pay*, http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/TutorsPack.pdf, p. 10.
[286] Ibid.
[287] *The Times*, 14 June 1968, p. 22; *The Times*, 15 June 1968, p. 1;'Editorial', *The Times*, 24 June 1968, p. 9.

While this does not seem to have been generally reflective of male workers' attitudes in the factory, some of the women did recount an internalisation of the media narrative among some of their male colleagues. One striker recalled: 'The men would not come out, although we asked them to come out with us, and fight for us… They thought we were working for pin money. Women's work is always pin money if you're married… If they'd come out with us, it would have been over in days.'[288] Another striker underlined this point, stating they often faced questions from male workers: 'You did get a lot of people saying, "What are you doing this for? You only come to work for pin money, women."'[289] Indeed, another recalled that her own husband had opposed the strike, highlighting the difficulty the strikers had simply being defined as workers as much as the direct conflict with the employer.[290]

The notion that they were working for 'pin money' was particularly frustrating to those whose decision to strike had caused serious financial sacrifice. One woman told the *Daily Mail* that she had been using her pay to save up for a divorce but that striking meant 'it looks as though I'll have to stay married.'[291] Others expressed more obvious anger: 'It drives me mad when I read in the papers about the women working for pin money. I work for the necessities of life. People that criticise the women should come and see the conditions we're working in.'[292] Another agreed, recalling: 'But our wages weren't for pin money. They were to help with the cost of living, to pay your mortgage and help pay all your bills.'[293] The importance of the women's wages was also underlined by the need for a number of the women to apply for National Assistance during the strike.[294]

It is consequently unsurprising that the agency for the strike lay with the women themselves. It had been at the insistence of shop steward Lil O'Callaghan that male convenor Bernie Passingham brought the issue to a vote – 'get off your arse Bernie and

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[288] TUC, 'A woman's worth: The story of the Ford sewing machinists', *Recording Women's Voices* (The TUC and Wainwright Trust, 2006), http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/display.php?irn=619 (Accessed 01/02/2013).
[289] Betty Crocker, 'The real story of Made in Dagenham', *Workers Liberty*, 14 July 2008, http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/07/14/real-story-made-dagenham.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Michael O'Flaherty, 'Men back the Dagenham girl strikers', *Daily Mail*, 19 June 1968, p. 5.
[292] Lynda Lee-Potter, 'Before you criticise these striking women…', *Daily Mail*, 28 June 1968, p. 6.
[293] Simon Goodley, 'Dagenham sewing-machinists recall strike that changed women's lives', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jun/06/dagenham-sewing-machinists-strike (accessed 01/10/2014).
[294] O'Flaherty, 'Men back'.

do something about it' – and the women continued to play leadership roles in the strike, with eight women from the strike committee eventually ending up at Downing Street to discuss the issue of equality and settle the dispute with Barbara Castle.[295] Their commitment to the strike was demonstrated in votes and public statements and they dictated the terms of the dispute, focusing it on equality rather than the specific pay claim itself. In spite of smiles for the press, the women showed an obvious anger towards their employer on the one hand, and an awareness of the gendered dynamic to their struggle on the other. This was demonstrated at the National Union of Vehicle Builder's (NUV) national conference, which took place during the strike, as a delegation of thirty women waved posters and banners in the hall reading, 'No surrender to Fords' and 'No sex discrimination' to pressure the male delegates to vote in favour of supporting their strike, which they did.[296]

There was a strong sense amongst the more radical women that while the strike was officially concerned with grading, it was underpinned by a struggle against sex discrimination. Rose Boland, one of the strike leaders, was definite that sexual discrimination was the root cause of the strike, telling *Socialist Worker* that the original skill evaluation which sparked the dispute was gender-biased and when asked if she thought the strike was a struggle against sex discrimination she replied without hesitation: 'I do. Definitely.'[297] Another also framed the dispute in gendered terms, recalling her feelings at the time: 'Well, we want C grade if the men are getting it. We want equal pay.'[298] Another was explicit in distinguishing between the 'official' purpose of the strike and its 'real' purpose: 'The strike is officially about upgrading our rate but really it is about sex discrimination.[299] At times, even their spokesman was clear that the actual terms of the dispute concealed its wider symbolism, arguing: 'This strike is over sex discrimination… we think it is grossly unfair that skilled women should get a lot less because they are women.'[300] This perception was undoubtedly strong for a number of the women and was illustrated after the strike when Boland and others on the strike committee affirmed their commitment to feminist politics of this type by subsequently playing roles in the development of NJACCWER.[301] Alongside their statements, banners

[295]Goodley, 'Dagenham'; Staff Reporter, 'Heart-to-heart over cups of tea', *The Times*, 29 June 1968, p. 1.
[296] R. W. Shakespeare, 'Union aid for Ford women', *The Times*, 19 June 1968, p. 19.
[297] Rowbotham, *Century*, p. 349; Socialist Worker, 'Ford machinists' strike, 1968: an inspiring demand for women's rights', www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=15057 (accessed 24/05/14).
[298] TUC, 'A woman's worth'.
[299] Jean Stead, 'Hands that rock industry', *The Guardian*, 20 June 1968, p. 1.
[300] Eric Silver, '187 women at Ford may stop 40,000', *The Guardian*, 15 June 1968, p. 1.
[301] Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 10.

and unanimous support for strike action, this suggests that the strikers' primary understanding of the dispute was gendered.

However, certain factors question this perspective. For one, most of the women's accounts are clear that the strike was primarily concerned with equal grading rather than equal pay, as well as with being understood as skilled workers. One of the strikers, Sheila Dawson, noted how the strike 'ended up' being about equal rights having started as a grading issue.[302] Indeed, there was even ambiguity in strike committee members' statements, such an affirmation by Boland which placed regrading at the centre of the dispute, three days after their spokesman had defined the strike in terms of sex discrimination.[303] Boland even occasionally framed the conflict as a simple pay dispute, telling *The Times*: 'We came out for an extra five pence an hour. We haven't got it and we won't be going back until we do.'[304] This inconsistency likely owed more to the strike committee's belief that for many of the strikers the dispute was genuinely concerned with regrading and improved pay rather than sex discrimination. This was, after all, the eventual outcome with the strike successful in forcing Ford to abolish the 'women's grade', thereby pushing the women on to the same 'B' grade as 'B' graded men, but it was unable to achieve the 'C' grading that represented real pay equality.[305] Indeed, it took another strike sixteen years later, lasting seven weeks, to finally achieve parity.[306] The women had voted for this settlement and even if some votes may have followed the NUV's recommendation to accept the offer, Boland and others suggested that this represented the reality of the majority perspective. She told *Socialist Worker* during the strike, 'I don't think the women will go out for the 100 per cent equal pay in the C grade just yet. We're concerned with proving that we are skilled workers… Personally I think that if a woman does the same type of work as a man she should be entitled to equal pay.'[307]

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[302] Crocker, 'The real story'.
[303] Eric Silver, 'Ford agrees with unions but women unimpressed', *The Guardian*, 18 June 1968, p. 1.
[304] Alex Hendry, 'Ford women strikers meet today but peace still unlikely', *The Times*, 18 June 1968, p. 19.
[305] Sue Hastings, 'A woman's worth: the story of the Ford sewing machinists – notes by Sue Hastings' (TUC, 2006), http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/display.php?irn=651 (Accessed 01/02/2013).
[306] 'Ford sewing machinists' strike, 1984', http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/Tl_Display.php?irn=99 (accessed 24/05/14).
[307] SW, 'Ford machinists' strike, 1968'.

Figure 2: Striking sewing-machinists on Dagenham picket line, June 1968. TUC Library Collections.

While Boland mixed pessimism of the intellect with optimism of the will, others were far more fatalistic: 'It'll all be forgotten as soon as it's over… We want equal pay, we want equal rights, but women won't fight for them and we'll never get them.'[308] This belief was partly formed through the experience of being 'jeered' by the non-working wives of men put out of work by the strike.[309] However, it was also undoubtedly tied to the intersection between sex and class, as gender expectations on working-class women were seen by the strikers as severely restrictive on their political engagement. Explaining her fatalism, the striker continued: 'They haven't the time, they're too involved in their home lives. They'll go on settling for their smaller pay packets and a peaceful life.'[310] Another agreed with the general point and expressed an awareness of how this highlighted a class tension between working-class and middle-class women in terms the balancing of work and political engagement with domestic duties: 'No au pair girls for us.'[311]

However, such ire could also be extended to other working-class women, even those working for the same company in the same roles at the Halewood site in the North West of England. One of the Dagenham strikers contended of 'the north': 'It's a different

[308] Stead, 'Hands'.
[309] Goodley, 'Dagenham'.
[310] Stead, 'Hands'.
[311] Ibid.

world. They're completely at men's bidding and they'll never get their rights.'[312] This was a particularly surprising view when 190 women workers at Ford's Halewood plant had voted to join the strike on 17 June, in spite of being in a different union, the TGWU.[313] Moreover, their commitment to the strike from that point remained as strong as those at Dagenham, as expressed by Kathie McGovern, chair of the Halewood strike committee, who stated: 'If we get nothing from these negotiations we'll be out again at the weekend.'[314] Beyond challenging the disparaging views of their comrades in the South, these actions and statements also indicated a change in women's attitudes towards work at a social level in the North West. Elisabeth Roberts' study of working-class women in the area between 1940 and 1970 found that women were 'mothers first and workers second' and regarded women's wages as 'extras' in much the same way as some of the male workers in the Dagenham factory.[315] The Dagenham women's view of those at Halewood was thereby evidenced in existing cultural attitudes in the North West but the behaviour of the Halewood workers suggested this was a point of disjuncture. Thus, although uncommon, when coupled with the difficulties of facing sexist narratives within the media and from male colleagues, as well as some of their husbands, the dismissal of women in 'the north' underscored how problematic it was for women to unite around class or gender as each cut across each other in deleterious ways that also included further intersections, such as region.

Nonetheless, the statements of those on the strike committee and the more radically minded strikers suggest that for a significant number the strike had served as a spark towards a feminist consciousness. Furthermore, while the reality of the vote on returning to work highlighted that the organizing principle of the strike for the majority of the women was less radical than a feminist demand for full equality this did not diminish the strike body's determination. Levels of identification with equality, the trade union movement or as workers differed but there was a shared understanding that they were fighting as women workers. It was fundamentally in that particular arena of class and feminist struggles that they were successful; both in challenging a sex-based definition of what a 'worker' was and that skilled work could also be women's work. Thus, they ended the dispute as workers conscious of how class and gender identities could intersect in political action, and, in so doing, played an influential role in placing this problem at the heart of the emerging British WLM.

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[312] Ibid.
[313] Hendry, 'Ford women'; Labour Staff, 'Ford women likely to stay out', *The Times*, 18 June 1968, 2.
[314] 'Warning from Ford women', *Daily Mail*, 1 July 1968, 8.
[315] Elisabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History*, *1940-1970*, p. 235.

Moreover, their success, alongside a large demonstration in Trafalgar Square organised by the NJACCWER, and the United Kingdom's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) and consequent commitments to equal pay in the Treaty of Rome, forced the secretary of state for employment and productivity, Barbara Castle, to insist that equal pay should be phased in to government economic policy.[316] This eventually took the form of the Equal Pay Act (EPA) in 1970, which was to come into force at the end of 1975.

EPA was superficially successful. Women's earnings as a percentage of men's improved significantly from 63.1 per cent in 1970 to 75.5 by 1977.[317] Similarly, an Office of Manpower study in 1971 found that approximately 20 per cent of national wage agreements and Wages Council orders covering manual workers had predominantly levelled women's pay up.[318] However, a year later, another report found that of the 200 companies it investigated; only four had made plans to implement equal pay, implying that companies outside of collective agreements were far less likely to respect the legislation.[319] Furthermore, the general improvements concealed as much as they illuminated due to their focus on a comparison between single women and single men. Married women, who were more often in part time work, suffered twice the labour market disadvantage compared to married men.[320] The figures were additionally skewed towards improvements for white collar workers as highlighted by a Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) 'Rights for Working Women' pamphlet in 1975. It noted that amongst manual workers, women's earnings as a percentage of men's had only improved from 50 to 54 between 1970 and 1974.[321] Similarly, Pat Thane has argued that women in low-paid, low-skilled employment benefitted little and that their experiences of pay inequality were exacerbated by the periods of economic crisis after the OPEC price shock in 1973.[322] Furthermore, EPA did not cover discrepancies in access to either sick pay or occupational pension schemes with the consequence in 1973 that 65 per cent of male manual workers to 48 per cent of female workers received the former, while 50 per cent of male manual workers to 19 per cent of female workers

[316] Rowbotham, *Century*, p. 341; Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 117.
[317] Mandy Snell, 'Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination', in Feminist Review, *Waged Work: A Reader* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 19.
[318] Thane, 'Women and the 1970s', p. 178.
[319] Felicity Todd, 'Some Facts about Equal Pay', in Sandra Allen, Lee Sanders and Jan Wallis (eds.), *Conditions of Illusion: Papers from the Women's Movement* (Leeds: Feminist Books, 1974), p. 300.
[320] Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 80.
[321] Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 295.
[322] Thane, 'Women and the 1970s', p. 179.

were opted into the latter.[323] The distinction was only slightly better between white collar workers with 78 per cent of men enrolled in occupational pension schemes to 50 per cent of women, although only 3 per cent fewer women received sick pay than men, 90 to 93 per cent.[324] Overall, while 75.5 per cent was an improvement, it was also far short of equality, and highlighted that the EPA was ineffective at achieving its stated goals in the workplace for many women. So why was this the case?

The Equal Pay Act contained individual and collective approaches to achieving equal pay and outlined the conditions of equality as follows:

a) The woman is employed on like work with a man in the same employment.
b) The woman is employed on work rated as equivalent with that of a man in the same employment.
c) The woman is employed on work which is different but, in terms of the demands made on her (for instance under such headings as effort, skill and decision), of equal value to that of a man in the same employment.[325]

Thus, at an individual level, it required employers to give equal treatment for pay and terms and conditions for men and women in like work or in different work that had been given an equal value under a job evaluation scheme.[326] The collective provisions applied to collective pay agreements, wages council orders, and employers' pay structures, which covered large numbers of workers and meant that most women received at least a small improvement in pay and conditions as a result of the Act.[327] In spite of this, a large number of women workers in low paid and female only workforces were excluded from these collective agreements, such as cleaners and canteen assistants, and consequently fell completely outside the terms of the Act.[328] For those outside of collective agreements, unequal pay was predominantly challenged using the individual approaches and consequently relied heavily on individual claims that women

[323] Sarah Boston, Women's Work', in Sandra Allen, Lee Sanders and Jan Wallis (eds), *Conditions of Illusion: Papers from the Women's Movement* (Leeds, 1974), p. 263.
[324] Ibid.
[325] 'Disputes as to, and enforcement of, requirement of equal treatment', Chapter 41, Section 1, Equal Pay Act, 1970, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1970/41/section/1 (accessed 01/12/2014).
[326] Snell, 'Equal Pay', p. 13.
[327] Ibid.
[328] Ibid., p. 14; Celia Briar, *Working for Women? Gendered Work and Welfare Policies in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1997), pp. 136-7.

had difficulty in taking to tribunals and even more so in actually winning.[329] Systemic inequality in the sexual division of paid and unpaid labour went unaddressed.

One of the main frustrations women workers and the wider Women's Movement had with the trade unions was their disinterest in challenging the 'major' cause of the Act's ineffectiveness: employer schemes to comply with the letter of the law but to minimize its scope.[330] These schemes took various forms including changing job content, restructuring or regarding the workforce so that women were at the lowest grade, job evaluations that defined male workers as 'skilled' and women as not, and depressing the lowest male rate of pay so that the amount the female increase was lowered.[331] In effect, the state had colluded in this process by producing equality legislation with such easily exploited loopholes.[332] Moreover, the five year implementation period had provided time for employers not to adjust to the Act but to evade it, something for which employers needed little encouragement, as was demonstrated by the publication of a collection of evasive tactics entitled 'Equal Pay: An Employer's Guide'.[333]

One of the key methods of evasion permitted by EPA was the downgrading of women's skilled labour and 'feminine' skills, such as dexterity, against 'masculine' skills like strength.[334] Thus, by systematically defining skilled work as work that women didn't do, employers were able to bypass the legislation while the state and the trade unions for the most part looked on. It was possible for trade unions to challenge these employer tactics but it was very unusual for them to do so unprompted, much to the frustration of many women workers and feminists across the spectrum of the Women's Movement, such as Selma James and Audrey Wise.[335] James contended that while unions supported EPA in principle, they completely ignored the issue of 'grading', in spite of it being the fundamental means employers had of maintaining unequal pay.[336] Similarly, Wise, a committed trade unionist herself, demanded both a redefinition of equal pay as being 'a situation where women's average wage rates in all employment do not differ from men's average' so that all loopholes would be closed and that in the meantime, for evasion of

[329] Snell, 'Equal Pay', p. 12; Lewis, *Women*, p. 9; Briar, *Working for Women*, pp. 136-7.
[330] Snell, 'Equal Pay', pp. 21-25.
[331] Ibid., p. 22; Phillips and Taylor, 'Sex and Skill', p. 60.
[332] A view shared by Briar in *Working for Women*, p. 101.
[333] Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 283.
[334] Phillips and Taylor, 'Sex and Skill', p. 60.
[335] Selma James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', WLM Conference 1972, TUCRIC Box 3, Feminist Archive North (FAN); Audrey Wise, 'Women and the Struggle for Workers' Control', *Spokesman Pamphlet No. 33* (Nottingham, 1974), pp. 9-10.
[336] James, 'Women, the Unions'.

the existing legislation to be prevented through the formation of combined workers' committees in workplaces.[337] Revealingly, James' and Wise's critiques have been reflected in a range of subsequent historiography suggesting that, whilst the trade union movement had been committed to the principle of equal pay since 1888, it tended to pay lip service to equality and abdicated its vital role as an enforcer of the newly passed legislation.[338]

However, the trade union movement's apathy was not reflected in public statements. TASS, for example, maintained similar levels of support for women workers involved in equality disputes as it did in 'traditional' strikes. This may have had a great deal to with the direction of the national women's organiser, Judith Hunt, who was associated with both the Communist Party and the Women's Movement, and was keen to use TASS's engagement with equal pay disputes to illustrate the loopholes of EPA.[339] Hunt wrote in 1975: 'The greatest threat to the pay of male workers is the existence of unorganised labour, male or female, NOT equal pay. The only person who benefits from discriminatory wage settlements and practices is the employer.'[340] This was an ideological position that sought to show how equality struggles were inextricably tied to the power of the working class and echoed Virdee's assertions of similar roles played by socialists over race.[341] A random snapshot of the union's commitment to this programme reported by *Spare Rib* in February 1976 suggested it was consistent: AUEW-TASS was involved in five equal pay disputes in that month alone, three in Scotland, one in Birmingham and one in London.[342] In this respect, Hunt and TASS illustrate Virdee's point that leftists within the trade union movement in this period were able to affect a more inclusive political trajectory for 'class struggle', whether that was over race or gender.[343]

Indeed, AUEW-TASS were not the first unions to make a commitment to an equal pay agenda and incorporate gender issues into the class struggle. Another, the Association

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[337] Wise, 'Women and the Struggle', pp. 9-10.
[338] Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist*, p. 210; Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 287-297; Soldon, *Women*, pp. 181-182; Phillips and Taylor, 'Sex and Skill', p. 65; Irene Brugel, 'The Reserve Army of Labour 1974-79', in Feminist Review, *Waged Work: A Reader* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 42; Snell and McIntosh, 'Introduction', p. 8; 'TUC Equal Pay Resolution'; Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics: Government and Unions since 1945* (Oxford, 1993), p. 172.
[339] 'Equal Pay and the Crisis', *Spare Rib*; Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The Final Years of British Communism, 1964-91* (London, 2004), p. 177.
[340] Judith Hunt, 'TASS Policy: Towards Equal Pay' (London, 1975), p. 3
[341] Virdee, *Racism*, p. 128.
[342] 'Equal Pay and the Crisis', *Spare Rib*, 48.
[343] Virdee, *Racism*, pp. 127-8.

of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX), had seen the implementation and acceptance of Phase II of the government's income policy in 1973 as an opportunity to focus on achieving equal pay.[344] General Secretary, Roy Grantham, argued: 'With the limitations imposed on general wage increases the members are saying for the first time that this is an issue they can really get stuck into.'[345] Interestingly, Grantham implied that the inflationary crisis and the incomes policy introduced to address it resulted in greater interest from male workers and the trade union movement, rather than a retreat towards male workers' interests, because it was an alternative way of addressing the falling living standards of *all* its workers. Thus, a specifically female issue, equal pay, was being understood as a *worker* issue. Once again, therefore, there is a parallel with the experiences and struggles of how black workers were incorporated into a broader and consequently stronger working class.[346] However, it was also indicative of a patriarchal attitude towards women workers that only saw their interests as important enough to pursue if there was nothing to be done for men. In this respect, it varies from TASS and the holistic class understandings of socialist activists within the trade union movement. Nevertheless, it stood in contrast to the majority of unions in the period who were much quieter on the subject. This can be partially attributed to the government's £6 ceiling on pay rises and the consequence that the enforcement of equal pay in a workplace would often exceed this amount, creating a tension between both trade unions' commitment to the incomes policy and equal pay, and between male and female workers over pay increases.[347]

APEX's commitment was not found wanting to begin with. This was demonstrated during an equal pay strike by clerical workers at the Salford Electrical Instruments (SEI) factory, a subsidiary of the General Electric Company (GEC). APEX had rejected the employer's original offer because it noted that women's pay firstly ought to rise at the same rate as men's but that it should additionally rise to the legally accepted one third differential between men and women, meaning a larger rise for female workers than men.[348] In addition to the union's support, the women were joined on strike by the male workers in the factory. The novelty and joy of experiencing male solidarity was summed up by one of the women strikers: 'It's been really marvellous on the picket line, really

[344] Sarah Boston, 'APEX: 'we back equal pay'', *Spare Rib*, 14 (August, 1973).
[345] Ibid.
[346] Virdee, *Racism*.
[347] Boston, 'APEX'; 'Equal Pay and the Crisis', *Spare Rib*, 48.
[348] Boston, 'APEX'.

solid.'[349] The strike was successful in achieving its stated goals for the white-collar workers APEX represented but its victory did not affect the manual workers in the factory. These women were to have a very different experience of interactions with their trade union, the AUEW, and the male manual workers in the factory.

The manual women workers in the Heywood SEI factory struck for equal pay in 1974 but found their male counterparts rather less supportive than the clerical staff's experiences. Not only did male workers consistently ignore picket lines but when the women strikers attempted to force male solidarity by padlocking the men in the factory in October 1974, the men simply cut the padlock, while also helping the employer thwart the women's attempted occupation by smashing down the factory doors.[350] Nor could the women rely on support at home because their husbands were reportedly either unwilling or unable to share in the domestic labour of the household, highlighting how patriarchal attitudes could undermine women's strikes at work and at home.[351] The SEI management took advantage of this vulnerability by persuading the local authorities to close the nurseries on the grounds that the women had time to look after their children because of the strike, adding state institutions to those agents acting against the strikers.[352]

Interestingly, their luck was no different with women workers at the other SEI factory in Salford at Eccles, where the women ignored three calls from the AUEW to down tools in solidarity with the Heywood strikers.[353] By being unable to either call on class solidarity or 'sisterhood' during their struggle, their chances of success were significantly reduced, and it was perhaps with this in mind that the AUEW effectively ended the strike by recommending the women accept a meagre pay offer - well short of equality - from the management.[354] The women themselves did not see it that way. Instead they felt frustrated at male union officials' tendencies to speak on behalf of the women rather than with them, while the collective attitude towards the settlement was encapsulated by one woman's statement: 'They've sold us down the river.'[355]

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[349] Ibid.
[350] 'What happened at Heywood?', *Spare Rib*, 31 (January, 1975); Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas, and Hilary Wainwright, ''The Housewife and her Labour under Capitalism' – A Critique', *New Left Review*, 89 (January-February, 1975), p. 70.
[351] 'Striking for Equal Pay', *Women's Voice*, 6; 'Heywood?', *Spare Rib*.
[352] Tony Cliff, *The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism* (London, 1975), p. 144.
[353] 'Heywood', *Spare Rib*, p. 31.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid.

While this example illustrates how male union officials could patronise radical women workers from 'superior' positions, when contrasted with the help the Fakenham workers had longed for, it highlights how complex and difficult it was to negotiate the relationship between the trade unions and different sets of women workers. The AUEW's support for the Heywood strikers was hamstrung by the failure of either male workers or other women workers to act in solidarity. This was particularly frustrating to the strikers as the dispute had made them conscious of both their position as workers but also as women. However, the support of the union in principle, and the consequent possibility of success, seems to have provided the grounds for the development of a more class and gender conscious group than in the other examples of defeated women's strikes.

Returning to the heterogeneity of trade union responses between branches, APEX's positive actions towards its clerical staff at SEI was not repeated a few months later in April 1975 when 700 of Dunlop's clerical staff went on strike in Coventry.[356] This strike was concerned with Dunlop's attempt to circumvent the equal pay legislation by simply grading women's jobs in a lower pay category than male workers. Even without the support of men in the factory, the women were in a strong bargaining position as the withdrawal of their labour had the potential to bring all of Dunlop's factories in the area to a standstill – an unusually powerful position for women workers to hold. Nevertheless, they were undermined by APEX and Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff (ACTSS) who lowered the pay claim repeatedly and eventually accepted a grading system that placed women at the bottom.[357] This acceptance made any further action by the women unofficial and therefore unsupported by the unions, an isolation that would have led to an inevitable defeat. In so doing, they allowed the Equal Pay Act to be undermined by an employer. Furthermore, they colluded with the employer by accepting a patriarchal definition of 'skill' that was based on sex and reinforced the employers' distinction between male workers – skilled/important – and women workers – unskilled/expendable. They thereby excluded the women from the 'class' struggle while simultaneously rejecting the significance of a sexual struggle for equality. In the eyes of critics, actions like these represented following the 'path of least resistance' when it came to women's industrial struggles.[358]

[356] 'From the Shop Floor'.
[357] Ibid.
[358] Geoffrey Sheridan, 'The chances are…', *Spare Rib*, 12 (June, 1973).

However, the full backing offered to a successful clerical workers' strike for equal grading in Coalville in the same year suggest that the Coventry dispute was due to a failure at regional and branch level rather any systemic reluctance to engage with women workers' struggles on an ideological basis.[359] For the most part, APEX's stated commitment to using the inflationary crisis-induced incomes policies to focus on gender equality in the workplace was borne out by its general support for women involved in such disputes. Moreover, in spite of the odd example to the contrary, the same was also true of AUEW-TASS, something underlined by two separate equal pay strikes at Bronx and Newmark Engineering factories, respectively, in late 1975 and early 1976. In both these cases, the women were supported by the AUEW and by the male workers in the factories and were quickly successful.[360] These examples are insightful not just because of the difference in the outcome but in the subsequent attitudes of the workers involved.

It was noted earlier than when trade unions and male workers left women strikers isolated, they were firstly more likely to be defeated but in addition, they were left disillusioned and de-radicalised as both *workers* and *women*. However, when supported by trade unions and male workers, not only were they more likely to succeed, a sense of both class-consciousness and gender-consciousness was nurtured; something the words of one of the Bronx Engineering strikers testify to: 'We have got to fight [for equality]. It's not only for ourselves we have got to make this effort, but for future generations of women in this factory. Otherwise women will always stay in the position they are.'[361] While the struggle remained localised, there is a consciousness of the ideological context of gender oppression that equality strikes existed in. It also illustrated an awareness of how the workplace was site of struggle not only as a worker but as a *woman*.

The intersection of class and gender identities in equal pay strikes is best analysed through the longest and most symbolically important equal pay strike during the period. The strike took place over 21 weeks in summer 1976 at the Trico windscreen-wiper factory in Brentford, Middlesex. The preceding twelve months had seen 'exhaustive discussions' over the payment of a higher rate to twelve men formerly on the night shift who had been moved to the same hours as 400 women on a lower rate.[362] The employer refused to raise the women's pay to match the men's and instead offered to freeze the

[359] 'From the Shop Floor'.
[360] 'Equal Pay and the Crisis'.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Roger Butler, 'The Strike for Equal Pay – Trico-Folberth, Brentford, Middlesex', *AUEW Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (July, 1976), 27; Geoffrey Sheridan, 'More Equal Pay', *Guardian*, 14 July 1976,p. 9.

male rate until the women's caught up.[363] The workers met this offer with disdain and on May 24 1976, all 400 women voted for strike action, supported by the twelve men and their AUEW branch.[364] Shortly after, AUEW's Southall District Committee endorsed the strike and the Executive Committee made it official on June 15.[365]

Nonetheless, in spite of full AUEW backing, its place as the longest equal pay strike in British history, and its success, the Labour Movement's key institutions, the TUC and the Labour Party, were predominantly apathetic towards it. The strike was ignored at the 1976 Labour Party Conference, even though the events were concurrent, and while it did receive a supportive motion at the 1976 TUC Conference, action was thin on the ground.[366] However, when its importance was recognised by radical elements of the trade union movement it was seen as symbolic of all equality disputes and of the trade union movement's inclusivity and strength – a parallel to the TUC's interpretation of the Dagenham dispute. Jack Dromey, for example, who would later go on to co-write an account of the Grunwick strike, stated: 'We think this is the most important strike that is happening at this moment in the country. It is a struggle that we in the trade union movement cannot afford to lose.'[367] This view was supported by the *Morning Star* after the women's victory as the paper used its front page to note that, 'They have set an example to the whole labour and trade union movement.'[368] Within this broad narrative was the understanding from those in the engineering industry that the strike had a particular significance to them. One divisional organiser for an engineering union told the *Morning Star*: 'This is one of the most important strikes of the post-war years in my view.'[369]

The feminist narrative on the other hand positioned the strikers as part of the Women's Movement and the strike as being as much concerned with the *idea* of equality rather than specific to the dispute. This was particularly prevalent in WLM press, such as *Shrew*, which was adamant in framing the strike in revolutionary terms: 'If they don't

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[363] Butler, 'Strike', p. 27.
[364] Judith Cook, 'More Backing for the Equality Strikers', *Labour Weekly*, 6 August 1976, p. 3.
[365] Ibid.
[366] National Executive Committee, *Report of the Seventyfifth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Blackpool, 1976* (London, 1976); Judith Hunt, 'Equality for Women' Motion at Trades Union Congress, *Report of the 108th Annual Trades Union Congress, Brighton, September 6th to 10th, 1976* (London, 1976), pp. 467-8.
[367] 'What Trico strikers need', *Morning Star*, 24 August 1976.

[368] David Turner and Helen Hewland, 'They've won!', *Morning Star*, 16 October 1976.

[369] 'Back women strikers urges union', *Morning Star*, 7 August 1976.

win, then the Equal Pay Act will be shown to be what we have always found it was intended to be – a contemptuous and obvious nod and a wink in the direction of the feminist movement and part of the continuous co-option of radical politics that persists in liberal democracies as some kind of endemic disease.'[370] *Spare Rib* was less explicit in its endorsement of the strike as being symbolic of the women strikers' engagement with feminism but the fact that it was featured in five consecutive issues implies that the editors thought it similarly significant to the Women's Movement.[371] Thus, for the WLM, Trico was not just an equality strike but an adoption by the women of a feminist consciousness based around fighting for one of the founding principles of the WLM.

Thus, once more women taking industrial action in this period had two narrative frames against which to construct their political identities and again their actions and statements offered evidence to support both perspectives. This was certainly true in one of the most ideologically insightful aspects of the strike, which was the women's decision to reject the Equal Pay Act and its accompanying tribunals in favour of emphasising the principle of equality and collective action. On the surface, this suggested that the women were demonstrating the sort of feminist consciousness evoked by the feminist press.[372] Indeed, the words of the strike committee on the subject bore a strong similarity to *Shrew*'s argument that EPA was 'a contemptuous and obvious nod and a wink in the direction of the feminist movement', which were: 'We are not prepared in this case to use a Tribunal that has allowed the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts to become a lawyer's paradise and cobweb of loopholes for the discriminator.'[373] This was an opinion reiterated in *The Times*, in which one woman stated: 'We are simply not prepared to abide by tribunals which are clearly failing to help the majority of women reach equal pay.'[374]

Furthermore, a host of individual strikers explicitly associated their actions with their identity as women. One told the *Morning Star*: 'It's our aim to show that we are totally committed to carrying on our struggle and that we fight not only for ourselves but for

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[370] 'Trico Women Strike', *Shrew* (Autumn, 1976), p. 11.

[371] *Spare Rib*, 49-53 (August-December, 1976).

[372] 'Trico Women Strike; *Spare Rib*, 49-53.

[373] 'Trico Women Strike'; 'Trico Strike Committee Bulletin' (12 August 1976), TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/emuweb/objects/nofdigi/tuc/imagedisplay.php?irn=1231&reftable=ecatalogue&refirn=781 (Accessed 25 Oct. 2013).

[374] Caroline Moorhead, 'The first great battle of the equal pay campaign', *The Times*, 21 July 1976.

other women.'[375] These were familiar words and were repeated almost exactly by one of the shop stewards speaking to the *New Statesman*: 'A victory for us will be a victory for all women – so we *have* to win.'[376] Another was equally definite about the link: 'We're carrying the rod for all women, let's see it through to the end.'[377] A banner held aloft by three further strikers outside the TUC also reflected this identification, reading 'We only want women's rights'.[378] This identification was coupled with a collective sense of the ideological purpose of the strike – the principle of equal pay. The shop steward interviewed by the *New Statesman* noted: 'We are not just fighting for our own case, we're fighting for the principle of equal pay.'[379] Two others were also adamant about this point, with one stating, 'We're out for equal pay, not a silly little pay offer', while another echoed her sentiments, 'We're not here for a pay rise or a productivity deal or anything else, we're out here for equal pay.'[380]

The women's general sentiments around the gendered purpose of the strike were summarised neatly in a *Labour Weekly* report which noted the recurrence of the following points in conversations with the strikers: 'They are continuing, they say, for all women in their union, for all women workers, and to highlight loopholes in the equal pay legislation.'[381] Thus, it is clear that the strikers were conscious that their sex played a significant role in the dispute and in their collective consciousness. However, other sources reveal important differences of interpretation between the strikers and the feminist ideology of the WLM.

For one thing, the alternative the women saw to the legislation and its means of redress was not the Women's Movement, but 'strong Trade Union organisation' while there was also a clear class-based approach in what the strike committee's bulletins chose to emphasise.[382] It was not identification as women or association with feminism but with other workers against an employer – an understanding of the dispute in class terms.

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[375] 'Mass Picket at Trico Today', *Morning Star*, 23 August 1976.

[376] Bel Mooney, 'Trico Women's Strike', *New Statesman*, 3 September 1976, p. 298.
[377] Helen Hewland, ''Say Equal Pay and Mean it' – Trico call to TUC today', *Morning Star*, 7 September 1976.
[378] 'Photograph – Equal Pay Strike at Trico-Folberth, Brentford' (1976), TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, http://www.unionhistory.info/Display.php?irn=7000033&QueryPage=AdvSearch.php (Accessed 25 Oct. 2013).
[379] Mooney, 'Trico', p. 298.
[380] Chris Davis, 'Trico Strike: All Those in Favour …', *Socialist Worker*, 25 September 76; 'Interview with Becky, a shop steward', *Shrew* (Autumn, 1976), pp. 12-14.
[381] Julia Langdon, 'Where women are wiping the smiles off the bosses' faces', *Labour Weekly*, 20 August 1976, p. 9.
[382] 'Trico Strike Committee Bulletin'; Hunt, 'Equality for women' at TUC Conference 1976, 467.

The committee was explicit in challenging employer 'divide and rule' tactics over gender and focused on the unity between male and female workers: 'We are tired of hearing that, if they have to pay women more, they will have to lay men off. YOU CAN'T DIVIDE AND RULE US!'[383] There were also direct identifications with the trade union movement: 'We shall say to the world – "OUR MOVEMENT WON FOR US THESE RIGHTS AND NOBODY WILL TAKE THEM AWAY FROM US – UNITED, WE WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED."'[384] Moreover, a reconsideration of the first two goals of the strike highlighted in the *Labour Weekly*'s overview – to be for the benefit 'of all women in their union' and 'for all women workers' – illustrates that while the women's approach was gendered, it had a fundamental relationship to the arenas of class and trade unionism.[385]

Furthermore, a range of individual accounts suggest this perspective was widely shared. In one example, the theme of working-class unity was restated in couplet form on a banner flying outside the TUC Congress in Brighton, which read: 'Equal Work At Home, Equal Pay At Work, When Women and Men Unite, The Bosses Go Berserk.'[386] Indeed, this sense of working-class unity has remained key for some of those involved, such as Phyllis Green, an ever-present on the picket-line, and Sally Groves, who both recalled feeling like the strikers and their supporters were united 'as workers' rather than as women.[387] Moreover, for Phyllis, the distinction she perceived within the Women's Movement between women and men served as part of the explanation for her decision not become involved in it, concluding on men and women in politics: 'I thought we were better together.'[388] Similarly, Groves reflected: 'That experience of the strike, it was incredible really. It made me realise how much if we fight something together, talking of men and women, and all types of people, all races… united you stand, divided you're lost…'.[389]

Over the course of the dispute, this class-based consciousness began to become transferrable to other social and political arenas. Becoming victims of police brutality and employer-police cooperation on the picket lines, for example, resulted in a

[383] Trico Committee, 'Bulletin No. 8', 12 August 1976.
[384] Ibid.
[385] Langdon, 'Where women', p. 9.
[386] 'Photography – Equal Pay Strike at Trico-Folberth, Brentford' (1976), TUC Collections, London Metropolitan University, http://www.unionhistory.info/Display.php?irn=7000151&QueryPage=AdvSearch.php (Accessed 25 Oct. 2013).
[387] Interview with Phyllis Green and Sally Groves, 17 July 2014.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Ibid.

suggestion by one striker that 'There's one law for the rich and one for the poor.'[390] Moreover, there was a sense, albeit far from universal, that the women had recognised the power of class struggle to change all aspect of their lives: 'The further women are involved in making specific demands for democratic rights such as equal pay, equal opportunity, adequate nursery facilities, etc. and the more we win successive demands, the clearer we see that the root evil is not so much lack of rights but capitalism itself.'[391] These sentiments were also put in practice immediately after the successful conclusion of the strike with many of the women, who had spent much of the preceding months on their own picket line, joining the pickets at the nascent Grunwick strike.[392]

Figure 3: Trico strikers outside the 1976 TUC Congress in Brighton. TUC Library Collections.

The women's class consciousness informed their perspectives on some of Trico's male workers' refusal to strike in solidarity where the language of trade unionism and class

[390] Martin Rabstein, '"We're more determined now" Trico strikers say', *Morning Star*, 31 July 1976.
[391] Sally Groves, 'Trico - One year on', *Morning Star*, 25 May 1977.
[392] Nichols, 'Trico Women Win'.

struggle was in plain sight with the repeated use of the derogatory class term 'scab'. One woman, for example, was clear in her view of the men who stayed at work: 'I don't want to work with scabs. None of us are going to support anything the men ever do.'[393] A *Spare Rib* report suggested this was commonplace, stating that 'the women feel that any men working in the factory are scabs.'[394] Men, it seemed, were derided for betraying their class rather than as sexists.

The women's attitudes highlighted the flaws in the feminist narrative. Notions of feminism amongst the women were rarely mentioned beyond the overt struggle for workplace equality but this was framed within a struggle to be understood as equal *workers*. Their oppression as women was understood but they perceived themselves as agents of the trade union movement and class struggle. It is important to note that this was not simply a case of internalising a more prevalent and disseminated narrative. In the form of other trade unions within the factory and amongst the male workers, the women faced what Joan Scott has described as the 'exclusionary' nature of class, as their identity as 'workers' was consistently challenged.[395] As noted above, there were a large number of male workers in the factory that did not strike, including at least one husband, whilst none of the male-dominated white-collar staff acted in solidarity, all of which served to undermine the women's identities as striking workers.[396] This exclusionary definition emphasised the significance of gender in their perception of the women strikers' identities – their struggle was thus defined as a *women's* struggle.[397] It was primarily only their own union, AUEW, which was fully supportive of the Trico women's equal pay strike and thereby legitimised the 'worker' identity.[398]

Nonetheless, it is clear that the women's predominant understanding of the dispute tended to focus on the dynamics of class conflict rather than gendered divisions and this was reinforced through their experiences. From the strike committee through to individual strikers, the women repeatedly made clear their understanding of the dispute as being an important trade union struggle. Moreover, trade unionism was 'OUR MOVEMENT'; they would not be 'divided and ruled'; it was 'not their fight alone' but a

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[393] 'Police Protect Equal Pay'.
[394] Jan O'Malley and Jill Nichols, 'We're out till we win', *Spare Rib*, 49 (August, 1976), p. 20.
[395] Joan Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 36.
[396] 'Interview with Becky', p. 13; 'Police Protect Unequal Pay', *Spare Rib*, 50 (September, 1976), p. 17; 'Trico Women Strike'; Robert Taylor, 'No peace yet in equal pay strike', *Observer*, 11 July 1976, p. 3; 'We're out till we win'.
[397] 'Interview with Becky'.
[398] 'Trico Women Strike'.

fight for the rights of all trade unionists; and the strike had 'heightened' their awareness of their position as workers *and* trade unionists.[399] Unlike the women at Dagenham, who had to push their union to support them, and the night cleaners, who were unable to gain any more than minimal support from theirs, the Trico women received the full and immediate support of the AUEW at local and national levels. This enabled the fight for recognition as 'workers' to be subsumed beneath the specifics of the dispute itself and for class to dominate the strikers' identities. In spite of being an equal pay strike, few, if any, concurred with the WLM's impression that it was a 'feminist' strike, although they did appreciate liberationists' support on picket lines.[400]

Nevertheless, class identities were strongly inflected by gender. There were numerous statements of fighting 'for all women', as well as an insistence that the strike was about the principle of equality rather than a pay rise.[401] Furthermore, the refusal of many male workers in the factory to support the strike made sure that the 'exclusionary' nature of class was still very apparent.[402] The justification of the women's lower rate of pay was sexual discrimination and combined with the weaknesses of male solidarity, sex was a significant aspect of their identities. However, with the dispute fundamentally structured by an antagonistic class relationship between workers and employers and their identities within this framework legitimised by their union, the strikers were, politically, more workers than women.[403]

Thus, trade union support played a very influential role in how striking women workers constructed their political identities and the extent to which these identities were internalised and applied beyond the finite nature of their own struggles. However, as the decade progressed, the reverse could occasionally be true, such as during an equal pay strike at the Laird Portch clothing factory in West Scotland in 1977. There, the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW) failed to acknowledge the strike because it had to be approved by the executive committee, which only met quarterly.[404] This was therefore not only a problem for female workers on strike at inconvenient times but for any rank and file unionists, regardless of gender.

[399] 'Trico Strike Committee Bulletin'; 'Victory at Trico!'; 'One Year On'.
[400] Interview with Green and Groves; Interview with Anne Fitzgerald, 18 July 2014; 'Interview with Becky'.
[401] 'Mass Picket at Trico'; Hewland, 'Say Equal Pay and Mean it'; Andrew Ward, 'Trico: We're Staying Out', *Socialist Worker*, 28 August 1976; 'Trico Women Strike'.
[402] 'Trico Women Strike'; O'Malley and Nichols, 'We're Out Till We Win'.
[403] 'Trico Women Strike'; 'Interview with Becky'; Harvey, 'Don't Let Us Down!'; Harvey, 'Victory at Trico!'; Groves, 'One Year On'; Nichols, 'Trico Women Win'.
[404] 'Striking for Equal Pay', *Women's Voice*, 6 (June, 1977).

Nevertheless, the union convenor on the strike was clear that she positioned the action within both the Women's Movement and 'class' politics: 'We are really annoyed with the union for not helping us … we're not just fighting for ourselves but for all women in the industry.'[405] The notion that they were fighting 'for all women in the industry', as opposed to 'all women' or 'all workers', again demonstrates the intersection of gender and class in women's workplace identities, particularly during times of struggle. They were *women workers* but not in the sense that some trade unions in the period had defined them. Instead, they perceived their oppression as both sex- *and* class-based – a 'double oppression' that needed to be challenged. The women were conscious of fighting this battle not only with their employer but with the trade unions principally designed to protect them. This was particularly true at Laird Portch, where the female convenor made it clear that the union had been of little help: 'All our national organiser did was to tell us our own wage rates … this wasn't much help.'[406] Unfortunately, detached from union support and male solidarity, gender consciousness was not enough to defeat their employer and the strike was defeated.

However, the defeat did not leave the women de-radicalised. Instead, it was redirected at the trade union movement itself. This was made clear by Ellen Nicklin, the convenor, who suggested that the women were left disillusioned and angry with the structural and ideological composition of the trade union movement: 'Joining another union wouldn't be a solution. They are all bureaucrats. It's a business to them. And they forget who they represent… We are not just angry at the employers now. We are angry with the union.'[407] The Laird Portch women's attitudes were to be shared by other women workers in a far more famous industrial dispute: the Grunwick strike.

The strike at Grunwick, composed of predominantly Asian women workers, took place from 20 August 1976 to 14 July 1978. Fuelled by underlying tensions over poor pay and conditions and a lack of grievance procedures, it was sparked by the sacking of Devshi Budia.[408] A number of workers walked out in protest, including the subsequently famous Jayaben Desai, and, after speaking to the Citizens Advice Bureau and the TUC, the workers joined APEX and their strike was officially recognised on 30 August.[409] Over

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[405] Ibid.
[406] 'Interview with Ellen Nicklin', *Women's Voice*, 11 (November, 1977).
[407] Ibid.
[408] Ruth Pearson, Sundari Anitha and Linda McDowell, 'Chronology of Events', *Striking Women: Voices of South Asian women workers from Grunwick and Gate Gourmet*, http://www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen/grunwick/chronology.
[409] Ibid.

the next two years, there were mass pickets, enormous media coverage, and inquiry after inquiry, with the strikers' right to union recognition eventually rejected by the House of Lords.[410] Increasingly desperate and facing defeat, some of the women resorted to hunger strikes but APEX and the TUC refused to endorse the action or call for any further mass pickets, even threatening the hunger strikers with suspension from the union if they continued to disregard union rules.[411]

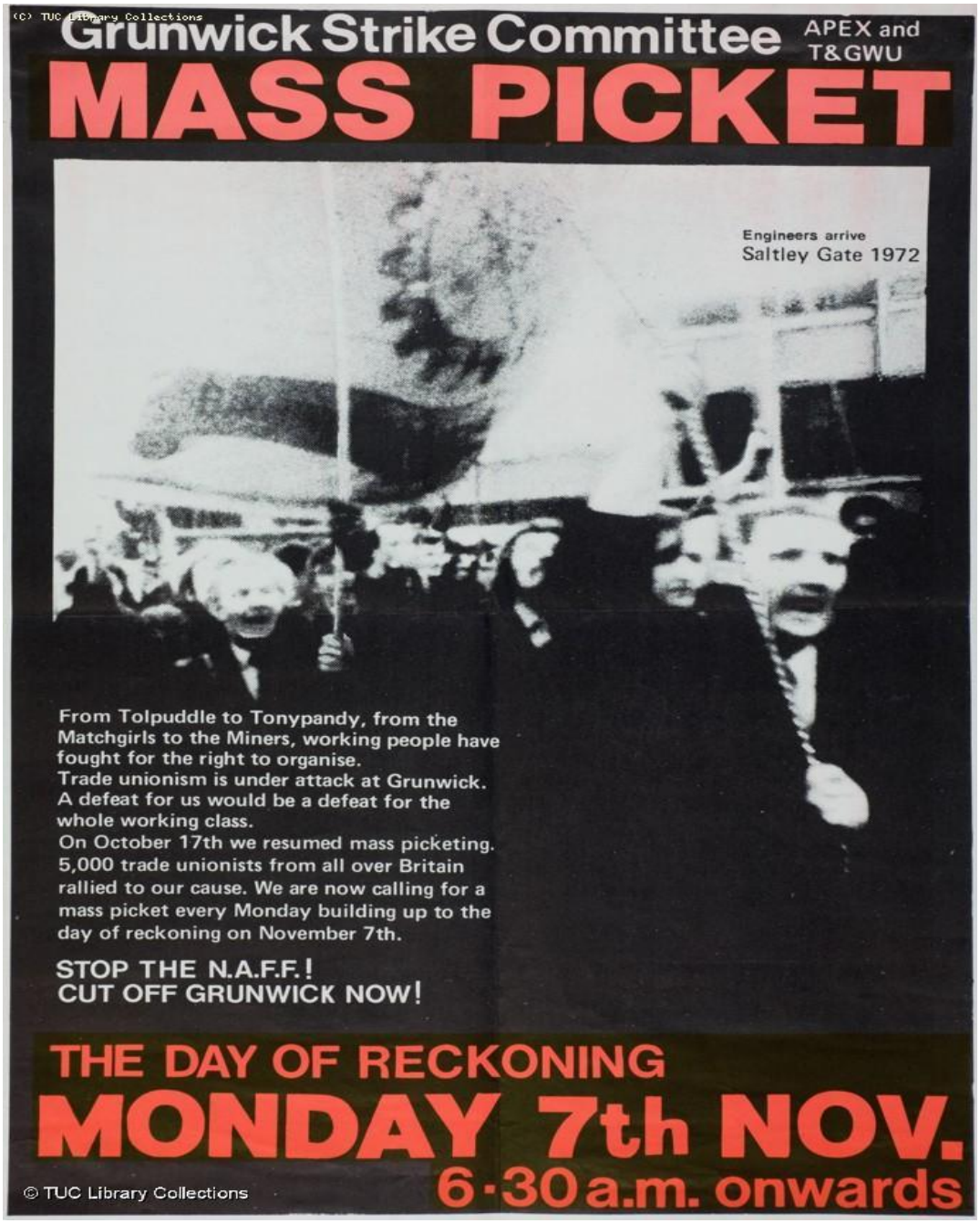

Figure 4: 'A defeat for us would be a defeat for the whole working class.' Grunwick strike poster, November 1977. TUC Library Collections.

[410] Ibid.
[411] 'Indian Workers Solidarity Meeting, July 1978' in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Britain-Africa-The Caribbean', *Women in Struggle* (London, 1978), TUCRIC Box 1, FAN.

As a result of involving mainly Asian women workers, their receipt of trade union support, and solidarity action from various white male workers, the Grunwick strike sits alongside the Dagenham dispute for historical significance. This is due to its reputation as a symbol of the trade union movement's growing awareness and acceptance of the changing nature of the labour force.[412] This interpretation even spread as far as the Yorkshire coalfields, where Arthur Scargill, then President of the Yorkshire region of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), underlined the strike's importance: 'This is a focal point in the history of our movement… I want to warn this audience that if we are defeated at Grunwick, it is a terrible defeat for the whole movement.'[413] The General Secretary of APEX, Roy Grantham, focused directly on the racial component at the time, stating: 'This is the first major dispute involving immigrant workers to which the unions have given full support.'[414] However, the predominantly female nature of the strike was seemingly of less concern to the Labour Movement and was rarely mentioned by prominent individuals like Grantham or grass roots trade unionists acting in solidarity. Stan Bishop, one such trade unionist, told the TUC's 'Britain at Work' project that 'It was probably one of the first… not the first but the second dispute which was really about race.'[415]

It is perhaps surprising then that both the contemporary Women's Movement and feminist historians have tended to also attach Grunwick with enormous significance and that they also shared a similar interpretation. Sue Bruley, both a former liberationist in London at the time of the strike and a feminist historian, for example, wrote in her history of women in Britain that, 'The sight of the diminutive Jayaben Desai standing up to the mass police ranks on the Grunwick picket line is one of the unforgettable images of the 1970s.'[416] Moreover, the recent *Striking Women* AHRC project, conducted by feminist social scientists, accepted this interpretation in its overview, contending that: 'Although it was ultimately lost, this strike has become constructed as an iconic moment in the history of the Labour Movement: the moment when the trade unions recognised the rights of women and minority workers as equal to those of white working class men.'[417]

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[412] Bruley, *Women*, 168; Thane, 'Women and the 1970s, p. 181.
[413] 'Get to that picket line!', *Socialist Worker*, 15 October 1977.
[414] Robert Taylor, 'Marathon strike threatens rights', *The Observer*, 20 March 1977, p. 4.
[415] 'Interview with Stan Bishop' by Peter Atherton, 10 March 2010, *Britain at Work Oral History Project*, TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University (Online: Accessed 08/10/13).
[416] Bruley, *Women*, pp. 167-8.
[417] Ruth Pearson, Sundari Anitha and Linda McDowell, 'Introduction', *Striking Women: Voices of South Asian Women Workers from Grunwick and Gate Gourmet* (2010), www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen/introduction (Accessed 08/10/13).

These narratives are partially explained by the strikers' attitudes, which tended to reflect the idea that the strike was symbolic of a unification of the working-class in struggle, above gender and racial difference. The women strikers, as had been the case in the other studies, were confident in situating their struggle in terms of 'class', particularly in the form of using the traditional methods and language of industrial disputes. Jayaben Desai's comments, for example, often read as if they originated from a class struggle handbook: 'All this time I have been watching the strikes and I realised that the workers are the people who give their blood for the management and that they should have good conditions, good pay and should be well fed.'[418] Another of the women was equally explicit in where she situated herself in industrial politics: 'Bosses are bosses, to me, we are the workforce and without the workforce there would be no boss, and no work done.'[419] A third woman was keen to situate their actions within the broader context of the class struggle in Britain at that time: 'It's every working-class person in this country and I can't just sit there and think about myself.'[420] This was coupled with a general desire amongst the Grunwick strikers to challenge racist discourses that black and Asian workers were incapable of understanding industrial relations and capitalism in the context of the class struggle or the trade union movement and was tied to the principle of demonstrating their position as an active part of the working class.[421] The sense of solidarity was keenly felt by those on strike and drew in workers who did not personally feel dissatisfied with their pay and conditions but felt that unionisation and strike action was for the benefit of everyone involved, even the employer. Urmilaben Patel recalled: 'Everybody thought we should form a union… they were doing good things for the whole staff and the company as well. So that was why I walked out and gave support them. This was my intention.'[422] Patel's motivations are also an indication that there were differing degrees of solidarity between the women. Whereas many were keen to emphasise the class element of the dispute, such as Desai, others perceived the strikers' demands as simply reasonable claims that the fulfilment of which could be beneficial to workers and employer – a notion of class conflict was lacking.

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[418] 'Grunwick Women', *Spare Rib*, 61 (August, 1977).
[419] BBWG, *Women*.
[420] Ibid.
[421] 'Indian Workers', BBWG, *Women*; Sheila Cunnison and Jane Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions: Challenging the Culture of Masculinity* (Aldershot, 1993), pp. 107-8.
[422] 'Interview with Urmilaben Patel', by Roraima Joebear and David Walsh, 29 February 2012, *Britain at Work Oral History Project*, TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University (Online: Accessed 08/10/13).

Moreover, it could certainly be argued that a commitment to class struggle was absent for the majority of workers at the plant as the strikers composed a minority of the workforce. Indeed, this factor served as an important foundation of owner George Ward's rejection of the strikers' claims, going so far as to hold a ballot of those continuing to work on whether they wanted a union, which the ballot overwhelmingly showed they did not.[423] However, evidence given to the Scarman Enquiry – set up to rule on union recognition within the plant – by those still working suggested that the democratic process was deeply flawed. One woman testified that Ward 'wanted a big "no" against unionism… He said those who voted "yes" would be classed as political revolutionaries and were not fit to work for him. He said he would know how people voted… I honestly wanted the union but I did not want to say "yes" in case Mr Ward found out and gave me the sack.'[424] The witness' fears were not without merit; the ballot was carried out department by department so that it was far easier to discern who had voted for what.[425] This example is illustrative in two ways. Firstly, it shows how an employer may on the one hand reject class politics as representative of workers' interests whilst at the same time organise his own class power against his workers' rights to unionisation. Secondly, it demonstrates the uneven nature of economically derived class power whereby two agents may both be class 'conscious' – aware that a union protects/harms their interests – but the class power of the employer is able to curtail that of the worker through the latter's fear of potential economic deprivation. This exemplifies Erik Olin Wright's point that 'Explanations of conflict always require at least two elements: an account of the opposing *interests* at stake in the conflict and an account of the *capacity* to pursue those interests.'[426] Thus, the synonymous nature of 'class-for-itself' with 'class consciousness' in Marxist theory can become a misleading equivocation when class conscious individuals lack the 'capacity' to *act*.[427]

What is also significant in this respect is the power of institutions of working-class struggle, most notably trade unions, to act as gatekeepers of class and political identity. Throughout the Grunwick dispute, APEX and the TUC alternated between accepting, challenging and rejecting the women workers' political consciousnesses. For the majority of the dispute, the Grunwick strikers received the support of their own trade

[423] Nikki Knewstub, 'Grunwick woman feared sacking on union vote', *The Guardian*, 15 July 1977, p. 2.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Jake Podorelski, 'The strike that goes on and on', *New Statesman*, 1 April 1977, p. 426.
[426] Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative studies in class analysis* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 35.
[427] See for example, Cohen, *Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 73-77.

union, APEX, a range of others, and also huge crowds of male workers at the mass pickets.[428] As a result, these groups legitimised and reinforced the development of a class or worker consciousness amongst the women, which, over the course of nearly two years of struggle, many had internalised – as the identifications with the working class and the trade union movement stated by various strikers illustrated.[429] However, as the strike wore on it became clear to the women, as well as other trade unionists on the strike committee, that the TUC was unprepared to offer support beyond gestures. Ken Montague, a member of the strike committee recalled that the 'TUC consistently blocked action that could have closed down Grunwick', while Desai noted in the summer of 1977: 'If the TUC wanted, this strike could be won tomorrow.[430] Moreover, the strikers were unable to send their messages to the TUC directly due to the fact that they already had representation from APEX.[431] Whether this revealed a bureaucratic quirk or evidence of underlying reluctance to engage, the outcome of this refusal was a diminishment of the strikers' autonomy. This was illustrated ultimately once the union-defined routes of industrial struggle had been exhausted and the strikers attempted to extend the dispute into different and unsanctioned areas in the form of hunger strikes. It was then that the full force of APEX and the TUC's definitional powers came into play. By rejecting alternative means of class struggle, the trade union movement undermined the identity the women had constructed as workers and made them distinct.

It was because of this that Amrit Wilson complicated the dominant narrative of the strike by contending that, 'At Grunwick the unity of the working class was achieved' but was subsequently broken by union bureaucracy.[432] The feelings of betrayal vocalised by the strikers attested to its validity. Brixton Black Women's Group's report described the women as 'very upset' about the trade union movement's unilateral withdrawal from the struggle and their individual statements attested to this.[433] Desai was unequivocal in her condemnation of the union: 'The union views itself like management. There's no democracy there… The union says we have to accept everything that they say… They have done the same thing to us as Ward [factory owner] did – they suspended us.'[434] Similar sentiments were common, such as this statement from another striker: 'Even if

[428] Philip Whitehead, *The writing on the wall: Britain in the seventies* (London, 1985), pp. 216-9.
[429] 'Grunwick Women', *Spare Rib*; BBWG, *Women*.
[430] 'Cowardice of union leaders lost the strike', *Socialist Worker*, 12 August 2006; Ambalavener Sivanandan, 'Grunwick', *Race and Class*, 19:1 (July, 1977), p. 71.
[431] Jake Podorelski, 'Falling from the Apex', *New Statesman*, 21 October 1977, p. 535.
[432] Amrit Wilson, 'Finding a voice: Asian women in Britain', in H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London, 1997), p. 35; BBWG, 'Indian Workers'.
[433] BBWG, 'Indian Workers.'
[434] Ambalavener Sivanandan, 'Grunwick (2)', *Race and Class*, 19:3 (January, 1978), p. 294.

APEX is recognised, it will not be our victory… it would be the victory of the union… not the victory of the real people who are fighting.'[435] In spite of these statements firmly to the contrary, there remained a desire amongst trade unionists and feminists to frame the dispute in more positive terms. Women's liberationist and journalist, Anna Coote, for example, emphasised how the strike had been inspirational to other immigrant workers seeking to organise and suggested that the strikers had been successful in contesting the narrative that immigrant workers undermined the Labour Movement.[436] The strike's defeat and the women's feelings of betrayal were not depicted as calling this account into question. Similarly, the recent *Britain at Work* TUC project provided an example of how the dismissal of the strikers' voices can still occur if they problematise the dominant narrative. While being interviewed, Patel shared similar feelings of betrayal and defeat as those noted above, which resulted in this exchange with the interviewer:

> David Walsh (interviewer): Everybody found the strike an inspiration, so even though you didn't win against George Ward, you set an example to all other trade unions. That is still there. We've never gone back from that. That was a real breakthrough, I think, what you did. So that's a kind of victory.
>
> Urmilaben Patel: Of course, a victory, yes.[437]

The interviewer's sincerity is not in doubt but the attachment to the 'unity of the working class' narrative can result in exactly this pressure on participants to conform. There is also an irony that it is the same body, the TUC, which sought to emphasise this interpretation when their actions suggested a rejection of it decades earlier. Indeed, in many respects, the Grunwick dispute has greater parallels with the Night Cleaners' Campaign than the equally symbolically treated Dagenham strike, because both were examples of the trade union movement playing a key role in rejecting women workers' class identities. Having felt assimilated into the broad class struggle during the dispute through the support of their union and the TUC, as well as having the visible support of masses of rank-and-file workers at mass pickets, the legacy of this 'betrayal' afterwards

[435] Ibid.
[436] Anna Coote, 'Grunwick: the lessons of the bitter end', *New Statesman*, 19 May 1978, pp. 662-3.
[437] 'Interview with Patel'.

was to re-emphasise their identities along racial and gender lines alongside class.[438] As with the women at Trico, they resisted their rejection from 'class politics' by maintaining a working-class political identity but the rejection did reassert difference along racial and gender lines.

The women strikers at Grunwick, in line with the many other examples cited, illustrated the classificatory power of important institutions on political identity, as they encountered both legitimisation and rejection from class politics by the trade union movement. Throughout the two years of the dispute, the women on strike consistently identified with class politics, whether it was perceiving the strike as an important aspect of the difficulties faced by 'every working-class person in this country', or suggestions that 'without the workforce there would be no boss, and no work done' and 'the workers are the people who give their blood for the management'.[439] Moreover, as was common to each of the disputes discussed in this chapter, this was coupled with a desire to demonstrate that as women, and as Asians, they were a worthy and politically active component of the working class.[440] For the majority of the dispute, they were successful. They had the support of their own trade union, many others, and leading lights from the left of the movement like Arthur Scargill framing the dispute as a 'focal point in the history of our movement'.[441] However, as the strike wore on APEX and the TUC refused to take action the strikers believed necessary to end the dispute in their favour and APEX threatened some with dismissal if they continued to take the struggle into their own hands through hunger strikes.[442] In so doing, they restored the strikers' lines of distinction – as Asians and women – and left those involved feeling betrayed. Nevertheless, and highlighting the power of individual agents to resist their 'classificiations', the strikers' experiences of conflict with their employer and working-class solidarity at mass pickets, resulted in lasting class identifications, in spite of rejection by the TUC and APEX. It was 'the union', not the movement, which had betrayed them. Gender *and* race were thus embedded in the strikers' class constructions. This is important because it places the agency for this identification with the strikers and highlights the complexity lost in the censorious TUC narrative.[443]

[438] Sivanandan, 'Grunwick (2)', p. 294.
[439] 'Grunwick women'; BBWG, *Women*.
[440] BBWG, 'Indian Workers'.
[441] 'Get to that', *SW*.
[442] BBWG, 'Indian Workers'.
[443] 'Interview with Patel'; Coote, 'Grunwick', pp. 662-3.

The nature of women's industrial action

The Trico and Grunwick strikes, as well as being illustrative of the complex intersections of class and gender in women strikers' political identities, were also indicative another distinctive aspect of women's industrial action: the length of disputes. It was noted above that the increasing length of strikes and number of days lost distinguished industrial action in the 1970s from the preceding two – possibly even five – decades.[444] However, whilst this was reflective of industrial action in the period generally, it had a specific resonance with women's strikes and occupations, which seemed to have a greater tendency to become extended disputes. According to the *Employment Gazette*, there were 17 disputes lasting more than 10 weeks during the 1970s – all of which were male only or male dominated – of which 13 were continuous.[445] However, as outlined in table 2, there were also at least nine examples of women's strikes lasting longer 10 weeks between 1972 and 1975, although none of these were present in the *Employment Gazette*'s statistics.

Table 2: Women's or women dominated strikes lasting over 10 weeks[446]

Dispute	Length (weeks)
Blackpool Empire Pools	18
Grunwick Processing Plant	69
Imperial Typewriters, Leicester	13
Maclaren Controls, Glasgow	19 (14 occupied)
SEI (1974)	10
SEI (1975)	11
Slumberland Beds, Paisley	19 (15 occupied)
Trico	21
Wingrove and Rogers, Liverpool	17

This was for two reasons. Firstly, The *Gazette* defined 'large stoppages' as those involving 200,000 or working days lost.[447] Since women's strikes tended to involve

[444] Wrigley, 'Trade Unions', p. 279; Kelly, *Trade Unions*, p. 107; McIlroy, *Trade Unions*, p. 239.
[445] 'Large Industrial Stoppages', *Employment Gazette*, Vol. 88 (September, 1980), pp. 995-6.
[446] Data taken from Cliff, *The Crisis*, p. 142; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Striking Progress 1972-1973', *Red Rag*, no. 5; and Margaret Edney and Dave Phillips, 'Striking Progress 1973-1974', *Red Rag*, no. 8.
[447] 'Large Industrial Stoppages', *EG*, p. 994.

fewer workers this resulted in fewer working days lost overall and absence from these figures. Secondly, women were rarely in a position to bring an employer's production to a complete halt if men continued to work, such as happened at Trico, and with men and women at Grunwick, again limiting the total number of working days lost. The authors of the report were aware of the 'arbitrary' nature of this definition and noted the difficulty of ascertaining the exact lengths of disputes or whether different sections of an organisation were involved in different simultaneous disputes rather than combined efforts.[448] That this ambiguity also had the consequence of removing women workers from narratives of the industrial politics of the 1970s – in spite of a myriad of examples to the contrary – went unmentioned.

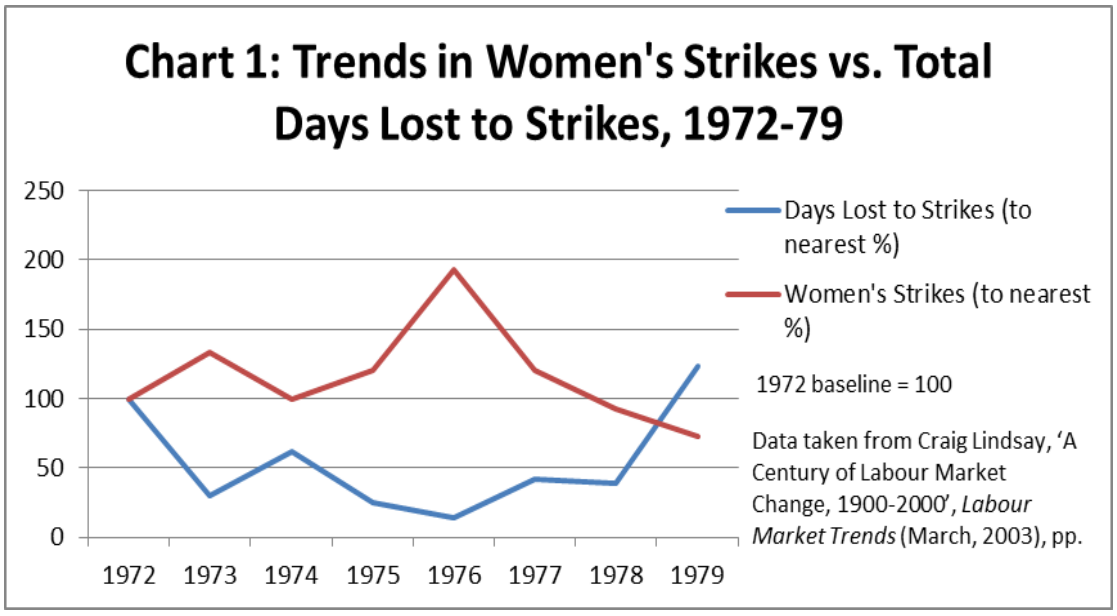
The result of this invisibility was that women workers' actions are seen to be insignificant in comparison to men's in the period. They are thereby constructed as 'victims' of economic crisis or passive recipients of equality rather than active historical agents. Concealing women's workplace radicalism constructs a misleading picture of women in the twentieth century and plays into narratives which portray women as conservative and inclined to regard their employers 'with indifference or respect rather than indignation or resentment.'[449] Narratives of that nature reinforce ideas that 'class struggle' in the twentieth century was an entirely male domain. Thus, the recovery of the many important and radical industrial struggles by women – and identifications with class politics by those involved – serve a crucial role in contesting such simplistic perspectives.

There are no official figures for the total number of strikes undertaken or led by women workers in this period and measures of industrial action, such as in the *Employment Gazette*, illustrated that women's presence could easily be lost in combined data. To counter this, I collated reports from *Socialist Worker* and the *Morning Star* between 1972 and 1979 of disputes involving only women, numerically dominated by women or for equal pay with women in a minority of strikers.[450] Due to the appearance and disappearance of many of these disputes from the pages of *Socialist Worker* and the *Morning Star*, it is difficult to offer an overall analysis of their lengths and outcomes. However, a tentative analysis reveals certain trends. There were 140 total reported strikes but only 59 had reported beginning and end dates. Out of these 59, the average

[448] Ibid., p. 996.
[449] John Benson, *Affluence and Authority. A Social History of 20th Century Britain* (London, 2005), p. 213.
[450] Strikes taken from *Socialist Worker* and *Morning Star*, 1972-79 inclusive.

length of the strikes was 58 days including the 69 week Grunwick dispute or 50 days if Grunwick is excluded as an anomaly. This is considerably higher than the average of 8 days for all workers involved in industrial disputes during the 1970s.[451] It is important to note that longer strikes would have had greater symbolic significance to news sources such as the *Morning Star* and *Socialist Worker* so there may have been a selection bias in the strikes reporters chose to cover. Short stoppages involving women workers that would have brought the average length of disputes down may not have been reported at all. Nevertheless, since there were far more strikes by men than women in this period, the sheer quantity of women's disputes lasting more than 10 weeks – at least 9 – points to a conclusion that extended industrial conflict was more commonplace for women than men.

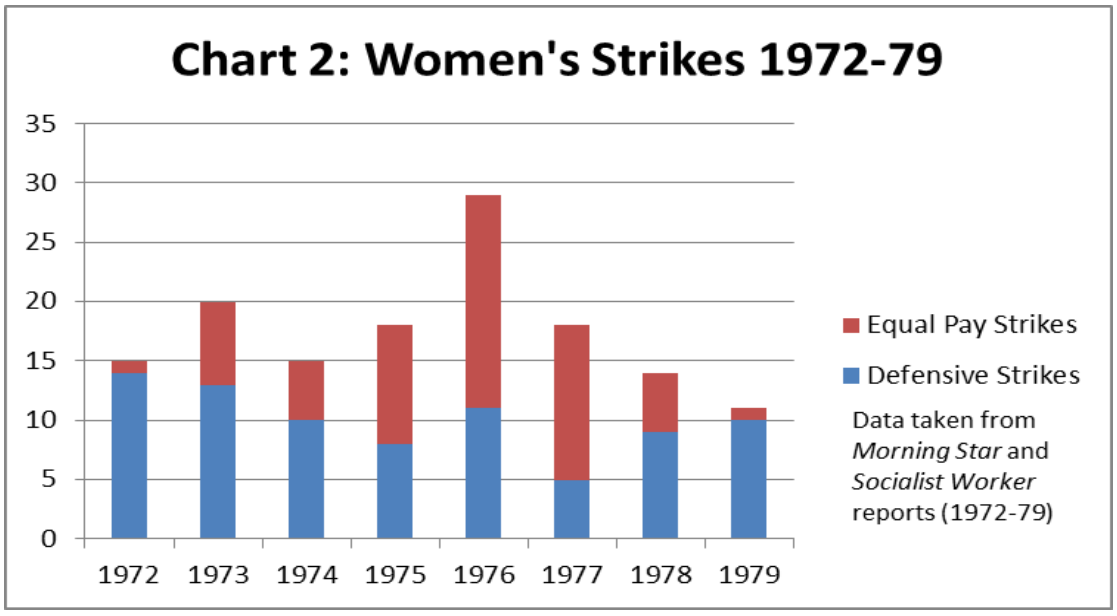
The extended nature of many of their disputes highlighted the problem women had in getting trade unions and male workers to support their identification with class politics. Even in successful strikes, such as at Trico, working-class support for the women involved was far from universal or immediate and this was important in weakening women's strike action and extending their disputes. Conversely, as the night cleaners' strike at the Empress State Building illustrated, when backed by a trade union and solidarity action by other workers, women were able to be successful far more quickly.



The collated *Morning Star* and *Socialist Worker* strike data also suggests that trends in women's strikes did not follow the same patterns as are present in official data. Chart 1

[451] Wrigley, 'Trade Unions', p. 279.

shows an inversely proportional relationship between the number of women's strikes and the total number of days lost to strikes over the period. This is encapsulated by the data for 1976, when the number of women's strikes peaked but the total number of days lost was lowest, and in 1979 when the reverse was true for the period. This indicates that women's industrial militancy did not always follow the same trends as men's in this period and must have been subject to different motivations. One alternative factor the data is able to reveal is the prominence of equality as a distinct political characteristic of and motivation for women's disputes between 1972 and 1979. Out of the 140 total strikes, 60 were for equal pay indicating that around 43 per cent of industrial action taken by women in the 1970s was 'political'. The distribution of equal pay strikes also support Boston's point that whilst the five year implementation period of EPA enabled employers time to develop avoidance tactics, those years were also 'critical years for the development of working women's consciousness.'[452] As chart 2 illustrates, there were an increasing number of equal pay strikes up to a peak in 1976 – the year of the Act's enforcement – before a trailing off in equality strikes at the end of the decade. The chart also demonstrates that this increase reflected a shift in the political character of women's strikes with equal pay strikes composing an increasingly large proportion of women's strikes up to 1977 before declining sharply. This can be explained in three ways.



Firstly, the sources available may not provide a representative sample of equal pay strikes in 1978 and 1979 due to changing priorities and the limited resources of *Socialist*

[452] Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 280.

Worker and the *Morning Star*. The papers were undoubtedly focused on the 'winter of discontent' for a notable portion of these years, as well as speculation over the calling of the General Election by Callaghan's Labour government. Thus, emphasis on women's industrial action may have declined in contrast to the 1975-77 period when levels of overall industrial action fell. Similarly, women's role in strikes was reported only when it was seen as significant – female leaders, women numerically-dominant, or equal pay-oriented strikes. The existence of women strikers outside of these categories may have been concealed amongst the swelling of male industrial action. This must be understood alongside a second explanation. Lower numbers of equality strikes after 1977 may have reflected the success of the combination of collective industrial action by women workers with the 'spirit' of EPA, thereby rendering further industrial action over the issue unnecessary. In support of this perspective was the dramatic rise in women's pay as percentage of men's from 65 per cent in 1970 to 73 per cent in 1976.[453] Moreover, there was a correlation between the drop in the number of strikes and an enormous fall in the usage of equal pay tribunals between 1976 and 1979, which fell from 1,742 to 91.[454]

This is tied to a third possibility: a shift in women workers' focus by 1978 to what Rowbotham has called an 'increasingly defensive resistance' by trade unions, social movements and the broader Left in response the economic crises of the late 1970s.[455] In the context of falling living standards, defending gains and existing conditions may have become more important than pressing further. Indeed, this is evidenced in the rise in the number of women's recorded strikes not concerned with equal pay from 5 in 1977 to 9 in 1978 and 10 in 1979. Moreover, in all years where the total number of days lost to strikes was above 10 million, there were also at least 10 recorded 'defensive' women's strikes. Thus, the levels of male and female workers' 'defensive' industrial action were generally commensurate over the period.

What is clear is that women's strikes were often different in both their length and political character to men's, with 1975-77 representing a peak in both the focus on the political issue of equal pay and a discrepancy with overall rates of industrial unrest. Moreover, the disparity between the highest and lowest proportion of women's strikes that were concerned with equal pay, 72 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, highlights

[453] Susan Harkness, 'The Gender Earnings Gap: Evidence from the UK', *Fiscal Studies*, 17:2 (1996), p. 1.
[454] Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, pp. 209-10.
[455] Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*, p. 170.

the fluid nature of women's industrial disputes. Equality was an important motivating factor but not the only one for women workers in this period, nor was its importance consistent. Indeed, this raises another question: if the nature of women's strikes were varied and changeable over the decade, was this irregularity reflected in the trade union movement's attitudes towards women workers, too?

Trade union culture

Sheila Cunnison and Jane Stageman have noted that women were 'little seen and seldom heard' within the male dominated environment of 1970s trade unions.[456] Indeed, according to Michael Kimmel, 'dominance', over women, and other men, was the main characteristic of the trade union movement for most of the twentieth century and Chris Wrigley's work suggested that, in many unions in the postwar period, women were 'patronized and more usually belittled'.[457] The latter perspective was certainly evidenced in Ann Pollert's 1972 study of a unionized workplace, in which she recounted how male workers and union officials saw women workers as separate entities; they worked only for 'pin-money' because their primary social role was as a housewife or mother.[458] However, this narrative ran alongside another amongst male trade unionists that felt frustration with women workers for their lack of interest in industrial politics.[459] The combination of the two often created a self-fulfilling prophecy in which unions neglected and subordinated women's interests but then complained when they showed little interest in engaging with trade union issues. This was encapsulated in one local GMWU official's view in 1977 that women did not attend branch meetings because of their domestic commitments but did not begin to consider doing anything to change this scenario, such as altering meeting times or setting up childcare facilities.[460] Thus, the official found it problematic that women didn't attend branch meetings but immediately imposed a definition of their social role to explain it and failed to conceive of any alternative situation in which the original problem could be rectified. One trade unionist and feminist from the period, Betty Cook, has also pointed out that it was not only male officials that could reject solutions. Cook's suggestion to her female branch chair in USDAW that the meetings could be rearranged to encourage more women's

[456] Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, p. 11.
[457] Michael Kimmel, *Changing Men* (California, 1987), pp. 26-28; Wrigley, 'Women', p. 43.
[458] Pollert, *Girls*, p. 161.
[459] Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing*, p. 45.
[460] Ibid., p. 84.

attendance was immediately dismissed.[461] The men, though, were not clear of responsibility. Cook recalled that women who did come often faced attempts from the men to 'undermine us because "I'm a man and I know better than any of you women".'[462]

That these issues were still present in trade union branches by 1977, nearly a decade after the formation of the WLM, highlighted the movement's inability to universalise feminist workplace concerns within union structures. However, as the recollections above indicated, for many liberationists this had not been for lack of effort. During this period, local liberation groups set up crèches all over the country and the movement's national publications, like *Spare Rib*, explicitly linked this aspect of women's oppression to trade union practice and called for change, such as in the June 1973 issue. In an article on trade unions, one author agreed that the practical problems of childcare and domestic 'duties' restricted women's involvement in trade union activities.[463] In contrast to the GMWU official referred to above, he added that this problem was easily avoided by simply altering meeting times so that women could attend, and noted that where this had occurred at a Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) branch in North-West London, women's attendance had doubled, thereby indicating that women did not reject trade union activities innately.[464] This example is important because it illustrates that whilst women workers, trade unionists and liberationists faced huge difficulties in tackling sexist practices within trade union structures, this was far from a universal experience. Indeed, the UPW had seemingly been more greatly inclined towards recognising women's importance as early as the 1968 TUC Conference, when it sent one of the few female delegates. Moreover, in a discussion on unilateral support for equality strikes, the delegate raised the problem of only 46 of the 1,000 delegates being female and argued: 'There are not sufficient women in the audience today to take part in this debate – and not just in this debate but in every single debate that takes place in this Congress.'[465] However, the amendment to TUC policy was rejected by the General Council on the following grounds: 'We do not believe that it is right that the General Council should commit themselves in advance automatically to support industrial action irrespective of any other factors.'[466] It is not hard to decipher that the 'other factors'

[461] Interview with Betty Cook by Rachel Cohen, 29 and 30 August 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/59.
[462] Ibid.
[463] Sheridan, 'The Chances Are…', *Spare Rib*, p. 12.
[464] Ibid.
[465] *TUC Report*, *1968*, pp. 457-458.
[466] *TUC Report*, *1968*, p. 459.

were the interests of male workers in the workplaces where equal pay strikes took place.

From the WLM's perspective, changes to these attitudes and practices were far too slow in coming. Angry articles appeared in *Spare Rib*, such as Angela Phillips' in 1973, which asserted that trade union officials were reluctant to change their dominant behaviour towards women strikers and that, even in support, they were keen to take charge of disputes.[467] This was something that women's liberationist, Anna Paczuska, experienced first-hand when she attempted to support an equal pay strike in Newton Aycliffe in 1968. Paczuska recalled that in spite of the strike fundamentally being a women's dispute, it had been instigated and led by male workers who also excluded the women from the tactical discussions which took place in a local pub.[468]

However, there were frequent attempts by female trade unionists to address these problems with varying levels of success. In 1971, for example, a female shop steward at an electrical engineering plant in Burnley opted out of the formal trade union structures to form her own having become tired of male-dominated trade unions ignoring women's issues, such as workplace bullying.[469] The former steward, Pat Sturdy, came together with other women in the plant to form the 'Women's Industrial Union (WIU)', to which only women workers were permitted to join.[470] In spite of hostility from the established union, the WIU managed to recruit over 200 members in quick time, with one asserting that she had got more out of the WIU in a couple of months than from other unions in twenty years.[471] However, without greater funds, the WIU was unable to expand out of its original factory and Sturdy returned to the established trade union movement.[472] Whilst unhappy enough with male attitudes within the Labour Movement to break away from it, Sturdy never rejected the type of politics it was associated with. Reflecting on her experiences in an interview with *Spare Rib*, she suggested that the Labour Movement would recognise women's interests if they forced it to through action: 'I think the men'll back us. Whenever I've won fights I've had men come up to me and say, "Good for you". If they've not taken us seriously until now I think it's because we've left it up to them. Once we start fighting for ourselves we can only gain respect.'[473] Thus,

[467] Angela Phillips, 'Whose Bloody Battle?', *Spare Rib*, 8 (February, 1973).
[468] 'Anna Paczuska Interview', in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 149.
[469] Jane Hewland, 'Women's Industrial Union', *Spare Rib*, 3 (September, 1972), pp. 17-18.
[470] Ibid., p. 17.
[471] Ibid.
[472] Ibid., p. 18.
[473] Ibid.

even when frustrated with the institutions of class politics, working women like Sturdy rarely rejected its form in favour of a feminist perspective.

Some trade unions responded to such challenges in positive ways. The GMWU, for example, produced a pamphlet in 1973 entitled, 'Equality for Women Workers: A GMWU Guide for Negotiators', which stated: 'It is essential that all GMWU negotiators and representatives at every level and in all industries should understand the special problems of women workers.[474] It also offered an appendix detailing some of the myths pertaining to women workers, including 'No. 1: Women work only for pin money.'[475] Sadly, as detailed above, this recognition was nowhere to be found when the same union refused to deal with Durham cleaners due to their uneconomic financial contributions or in the local official's attitude towards women's branch attendance.

However, these examples, whilst symbolic of the inconsistent treatment of women workers by trade unions generally in the period, may not have been reflective of the GMWU. The regional official at Durham was eventually arrested for corruption and the union's central executive was usually supportive of women workers, such as the pamphlet and in calling for EPA to be strengthened in regards to job evaluation and with the introduction of representative rather than individual bargaining in 1977.[476] This highlights an extremely salient point. Trade unions in the 1970s, as Hay and Philips have shown, were unable to control branches and rank-and-file members with any degree of regularity.[477] If this factor is applied to the trade union movement's relationship to women workers, the distinction between national statements and local realities is clear.

At national level, a developmental narrative reflecting incremental improvements in trade unions' treatment of women workers seems apparent. In 1977, the TUC produced a 'Charter of Aims for Women Workers', which went beyond equal pay to incorporate issues of education, starting work, promotion, sick pay and pensions, maternity, returning to work, health and safety, family responsibilities and care of children, marital status, family planning and abortion, and women as members of the community.[478] This

[474] GMWU, 'Equality for Women Workers: A GMWU Guide for Negotiators' (Surrey, 1973), p. 3.
[475] Ibid., p. 23.
[476] 'TUC Preliminary Agenda for 1977 TUC Women's Conference' (13 January 1977), Economics Box 1, Feminist Archive South (FAS).
[477] Hay, 'Narrating Crisis', p. 257; Hay, 'Winter of Discontent', p. 548; Philips, '1972 Miners' Strike', p. 199.
[478] Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 57-8; Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316.

new level of support was seemingly underlined by an 80,000 strong march of trade unionists and feminists against the Corrie Bill in October 1979, which contributed to its defeat in the House of Commons.[479] This led a number of female trade unionists to reflect that things were considerably better for women workers by the end of the 1970s than the start: 'Things did change in the 1970s… The Women's TUC also became more militant and campaigning at this time… All of this coincided with the growth of the Women's Movement generally and a much more vigorous agenda for and by women.'[480] Others saw trade union support for the abortion campaign as symbolic of this shift:

> Abortion was one of those issues that had come up from the Women's Movement… The new trade union feminists were saying, 'Come on, this the sort of issue our unions should be looking at, this issue has a big effect on our lives.' Something like abortion which is supposed to be private is actually a very public issue… a trade union issue, it affected women's working lives.[481]

However, whilst these views were far more common than prior to the Dagenham strike in 1968, they concealed large local variation, ambivalence towards some of the changes even within the TUC, and the persistence of dominating patriarchal behaviour into the 1980s and beyond. Kate Willan, a member of various unions throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s recalled how sexist attitudes had 'definitely not' disappeared, and that, at best, male officials paid 'lip service' to feminism into the 1980s and 1990s.[482]

Furthermore, the TUC's 1977 'Charter' had come after rejecting a more radical version created by the Working Women's Charter Campaign (WWCC) – a coalition of female trade unionists and women's liberationists – by 6,224,000 votes to 3,697,000.[483] The Charter won support from NUPE, NUJ, NALGO, CPSA, ACTT AUEW, and some local branches and trades councils but Charter Groups were expelled by numerous others across the country.[484] In this, the Charter served as another example of the trade union's heterogeneous treatment of women workers' interests.

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[479] Wrigley, p. 58.
[480] Ibid., pp. 58-59.
[481] Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316.
[482] Interview with Kate Willan, 8 October 2014.
[483] 'Working Women's Charter', *Spare Rib*, 41.
[484] Ibid.

Conclusions

Women became increasingly involved in the workforce and trade unions in the late 1960s and 1970s. This coincided with economic and industrial relations crises as living standards fluctuated wildly and workers sought to protect themselves through class struggle in the workplace.[485] Since women's wage was important to household income, it was inevitable that some women would take part in defensive industrial actions of this kind. What was not inevitable was their treatment by trade unions or their interpretations of the disputes. In many cases, though not all, they were perceived as working for 'pin money', disinterested in trade unionism, uneconomical to support, and, fundamentally, of secondary importance to the interests of male workers. Women workers in 1970s thereby shared experiences of trade union dismissal and apathy with earlier generations that ran through Chartism to Women's Suffrage.[486] Although these attitudes did not prevent women's industrial action, which was widespread and often extended, trade union actions affected the outcome of disputes and the development of political consciousness amongst female strikers significantly. In short, apathetic unions usually resulted in defeat and disenchantment with political action.

However, in the form of the WLM, particularly in London, striking women had an alternative support network which was at times able to instigate broader class solidarity, both from trade unions and the working class, such as during the Night Cleaners' Campaign. In contrast to the continuity with earlier periods in the Labour Movement's response to women workers, this was a disjuncture with previous feminist movements, which had tended to dismiss working-class women's actions.[487] Despite this and due to its nature, the WLM had a limited direct impact on the outcomes of strikes and occupations but was able to influence strikers' political identities towards a political consciousness of gender inequality and oppression, although this was always underpinned by a recognition of class in the women's identities.

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[485] Tomlinson, *Public Policy*, p. 282; Grint, *Work*, pp. 170-72; Kelly, *Trade Unions*, p. 108; Virdee, *Racism*, p. 123.
[486] See for example, Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (London: Temple Smith, 1984); Anna Clark, *The struggle for the breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London: Virago, 1978) and Richard Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).
[487] Evans, *Feminists*; Thompson, *Chartists*; Liddington and Norris, *One Hand*.

In spite of their inherently gendered component, the same was also true of 'political' or equality strikes during the period. Beginning with Dagenham in 1968 and peaking – actually and symbolically – with Trico in 1976, equality strikes composed over 40 per cent of women's total reported industrial actions in the period. These strikes often revealed and contested the ambiguities and loopholes of EPA and in so doing the female strikers seemed to be exhibiting explicit identifications with feminism. In practice, however, an awareness of their gendered exploitation was used to inflect, albeit strongly, rather than underpin, their political identities, which remained rooted in class, even when rejected by the institutions of class politics.

Considered together, one other factor is clear from women's political identities during defensive and political strikes: experience was an essential component of how these identities were constructed. Women workers' experiences were underpinned by a structural class antagonism between workers and employer and their identifications with class politics flowed from this. However, by encountering classification struggles through gender – and race – this straightforward identification was complicated, requiring 'in situ' responses.[488] The importance of these varied experiences echoed E. P. Thompson's famous definition of how class 'happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'[489] Class remained dominant in the women's political identities because this was the primary axis of antagonism in the disputes but their difficulties in gaining recognition as part of this class – outside of themselves – embedded gender and race into the process.[490] Thus, while class 'happened' on all four occasions, these examples reveal that the process was complicated for the women involved by the intersection of patriarchal and colonialist narratives within class-based institutions and amongst male workers. Their identities were constructed in opposition to these narratives and consequently the class that 'happened' was neither male nor white but gendered and racially inflected. Class, then, was not 'defined by men as they

[488] Thompson's notion of 'in situ' consciousness formation was extrapolated from in Marc. W. Steinberg, 'Culturally Speaking: Finding a Commons between Post-Structuralism and the Thompsonian Perspective', *Social History*, 21, 2 (May, 1996), p. 207.
[489] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ (Accessed 29/07/2014); Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, 'Marxist Historians', in Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (eds), *The Houses of History* (Manchester, 1999), p. 36; Thompson, *Making*, pp. 8-9.
[490] Crompton, *Class*, p. 151.

live their own history', as E. P. Thompson famously contended, but by women as they lived theirs.[491]

The distinct experiences of women owed much to the heterogeneous nature of the trade union movement's response to their conflicts. Some, particularly white collar unions with women in prominent executive roles, such as Judith Hunt in TASS, were resolute and consistent in their support for women's strikes, whether defensive or political. Many others, such as those in the clothing industry, such as NUFLAT, were consistently disinterested in their female members' interests, whilst many more, such as the GMWU, seemed to be divided between the executive and local branches, with the latter also exhibiting great regional variation.

Some historians have argued that trade unions' attitudes towards women workers became both more coherent and positive as the decade progressed, as evidenced by the passing of charters and resolutions by the TUC, as well as the movement's strong resistance to potential restrictions on women's rights to abortion in the Corrie Bill in 1979.[492] This was also reflected in the attitudes of some female trade unionists, who noted changes in practices and a greater recognition of women's issues within branches.[493] For others, however, there was a strong sense that this was little more than 'lip service' that concealed ongoing struggles for recognition which continued into the 1980s and 1990s.[494] Thus, whilst there are some parallels with Virdee's narrative of the trade union movement's understanding of class broadening in the late 1970s to include issues of race, the picture was far messier for women workers.[495]

Overall, the enormous range of women workers' interactions with trade unions in this period make a metanarrative impossible. In one respect, this reflects the divergent nature of trade unions, which, as William McCarthy has argued, should make us sceptical of the idea of a trade union 'movement'.[496] However, the context of massive industrial unrest in the 1970s indicates that trade unions were, at least briefly, more than the sum of their individual parts. Moreover, certain generalisable elements are apparent. Trade unions' relationships with workers were gendered. Unions were more likely to

[491] Thompson, *Making*, p. 10.
[492] Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 57-8; Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316.
[493] Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316; Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 58-59.
[494] Interview with Willan.
[495] Virdee, *Racism*, p. 123.
[496] W. E. J. McCarthy, 'Introduction', in W. E. J. McCarthy (ed.), *Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 9.

represent the interests of their male members than female and to take action on men's behalf. By contrast, they were usually implored or forced to take action alongside women workers, could ignore them altogether, or, as at Grunwick, could assert tactical and definitional control over a dispute. Thus, trade unions' actions were hugely important to both the outcomes of women's industrial action and their political identity construction. Trade unions, as Snell has asserted, were in a 'key position' to take action to identify and end gender inequalities but because ideas of class solidarity and patriarchy coexisted within the trade union movement, they were far from consistent in doing so.[497] The result was that when women became involved in workplace conflicts, they came to identify with broader notions of the working class and class politics rather than trade unions as institutions. In this, as the next chapter will argue, they were not so different from the women's liberationists who supported women workers' struggles.

[497] Snell, 'Equal Pay', p. 36.

2. The Women's Liberation Movement and Class Politics

As the last chapter illustrated, the WLM was involved consistently in supporting women workers' industrial actions and workplace struggles, often to a greater extent than the trade union movement and traditional institutions of class politics. However, this did not result in the development of a 'mass' Women's Movement involving large swathes of the British working class. In terms of its social composition, most historians and participants have agreed that the WLM, as opposed to the wider 'Women's Movement' it was a part of, was 'typically' middle class.[498] In concert with origin narratives surrounding feminists' frustrations at their treatment by the 'Male Left', this has created an impression that second-wave feminism was defined by its rejection of the concepts of 'class' as a useful means of understanding women's position in society, and of 'class struggle' as an important theatre of political action. As discussed in the introduction, this is tied to perspectives on academic feminism which emphasise its theoretical deconstruction of traditional class analysis. Alternatively, ideological differences over class within the WLM – between Far Left-aligned and non-aligned socialist-feminists or between socialist- and radical/revolutionary-feminists – are seen to have been inherently destructive and a key aspect in the movement's disintegration.[499]

This chapter will argue that women's liberationists' relationships with the traditionally male forms of class politics were more complex than either of the above accounts allow. It will begin by offering credence to 'rejectionist' narratives by considering feminist critiques of the Far Left and trade unions. It will note that trade unions, the Labour Party and the Far Left were male-dominated institutions and groups, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, persistently sexist. This created great tensions between those groups and feminists, provided an impetus for the formation of an autonomous Women's Movement, and influenced how individuals and groups perceived and interacted with each other. It will also agree that this could cause divisions between feminists over the concept of class and commitment to class struggle in relation to feminism.

However, through a consideration of the views of individual feminists, WLM groups, and ideological currents within the movement, this chapter will argue that the distinction

[498] See for example, Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*; Rowbotham, *Women in Movement;* Segal, 'Jam Today'; Pugh, *Women's Movement*.
[499] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*.

between feminism and class politics was rarely clear-cut. The association of 'rejection' with the WLM's relationship to class struggle is a false dichotomy that fails to recognise that British feminism was seen to be uniquely identified with class politics amongst its North American and European sister movements. Furthermore, it will assert that feminism and class politics were sites of enormous cross-fertilization. Women's liberationists were ideologically committed to class politics and, by the end of the 1970s, had taken their feminism into trade unions and the Labour Party. Class had the ability to unify as much as divide – including across the black/white dichotomy within feminism. The chapter will therefore conclude by arguing that the WLM's relationship with class politics was not characterised by rejection but by critical engagement and a perception of their interconnectedness.

The case for 'rejection'

Many women's liberationists, particularly at the movement's formation, were already engaged with the broader politics of the Left before they identified as feminists overtly.[500] However, their subordinate positions within these groups as secretaries and sex objects and exclusion from ideological and tactical discussions fostered an anger that served as an important foundation for the development of an autonomous Women's Movement.[501] This was true across the country. The Manchester and District Women and Socialism Group's history of the WLM's development, for example, noted a frustration at being 'tea-makers' as one of the underlying causes.[502] Coupled with Juliet Mitchell's critique of women's oppression being a 'subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupations of socialists', it is clear that frustration with the actions and theories of the male Left – be it Far Left groups, the trade union movement or the Labour Party – was a strong current within the WLM.[503]

This played out in specific and general forms and differed from group to group and feminist to feminist. However, there were certain notable trends. One of which was over the tactics and masculine traits of the Labour Movement. In a recent interview,

[500] Bouchier, *Feminist Challenge*, pp. 122-3; Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', p. 210; Interview with Segal, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[501] Bruley, *Women*, pp. 148-9; Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*, p. 166; Wilson, *Paradise*, p. 185; Bird, 'Women's Studies', p. 265.
[502] Manchester and District Women and Socialism Group, 'Development of Women's Liberation Movement', 1978, *FAS: Politics/Policy 11*.
[503] Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: the Longest Revolution', *New Left Review*, I/40 (November-December 1966), p. 12.

former liberationist, Barbara Taylor, discussed her antipathy towards the perceived tactics of the Labour Movement and her struggle to engage as a result, even on disputes she supported in principle, like Grunwick. Taylor recalled being 'absolutely terrified, just terrified' on the Grunwick picket lines and that her abhorrence of violence prevented her from fully identifying with the strike.[504] Gail Chester agreed, citing the problem of 'masculine politics' at the Grunwick pickets and with industrial action generally as a reason for her distaste for trade unionist politics.[505]

Equally abhorrent to many feminists, and what was perceived as encapsulating many male workers' attitudes towards women in the period, was liberationists' experience with a group of holidaying mineworkers in 1971. Skegness was the location of the second national conference of the WLM whilst the miners were having a party in the venue next door. The miners' decision to hire a stripper to entertain its members was met with a great deal of understandable feminist hostility and saw liberationists barge in to disrupt and protest against proceedings.[506] The miners involved were not formal representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) or working-class politics, but miners were widely perceived as the bastions of working-class struggle and the individuals consequently became symbolic of endemic sexism for some of the feminists. For others, like Sheila Rowbotham, whose activism and subsequent academic work emphasised the importance of links between feminism and the Labour Movement, these 'farcical' interactions were a 'disaster' and highlighted the barriers between the male working class and the WLM.[507]

Nonetheless, patriarchal attitudes amongst male workers and trade unions, expressed in numerous forms, were difficult to stomach for many feminists. Anne Torode, an interviewee from the Coast Women's Group in North Tyneside, suggested that that the traditional Left treated the working class like a political pawn, whilst trade unions were often obsessed with men's wage rate and saw anything else as a 'diversion'.[508] When coupled with directly sexist treatment of women in left groups, trade unions and the

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[504] Interview with Barbara Gold Taylor by Margaretta Jolly, 5 and 16 December 2011, *Sisterhood and After; An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/38.
[505] Interview with Gail Chester by Margaretta Jolly, 25, 26 and 27 July 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/27.
[506] Interview with Sheila Rowbotham by Rachel Cohen, 22 November 2010 and 7 December 2010, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/10; Interview with Ursula Owen by Rachel Cohen, 21 and 22 October 2011 and 16 February 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/36.
[507] Interview with Rowbotham, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[508] Interview with Torode.

Labour Party, as Kate Willan and Pat McIntyre recalled from their experiences of 'day to day politics', these masculine constructions of class and political action made a separate physical space necessary for some feminists, even when they felt connected to the class struggle.[509]

Indeed, there were numerous accounts of women leaving Far Left groups to identify solely with the WLM. One such account of leaving the International Marxist Group (IMG) in 1973 encapsulated many feminists' frustrations. The three authors had argued the year before that membership of the WLM and a Far Left party was 'compatible' and noted that the IMG was the best of the Left over women's issues.[510] However, this perspective had changed as a result of the IMG's failure to recognise that 'women are not just another oppressed group, but a crucial one' and that the 'imperfection' of all relationships under capitalism did not relieve male socialists from scrutiny of their personal lives in terms of their treatment of women and whether 'women's issues' were diversionary.[511] This problem had manifested in a flashpoint issue in 1973 over the IMG central committee's refusal to sell an issue of *Socialist Woman* written by socialist-feminists within IMG because of a cartoon criticising the group.[512] The conclusion was clear that the solution was to reject direct engagement with the Far Left altogether: 'Come out, sisters. Stop "intervening" and make your contributions to your own movement.'[513]

The critiques were not limited to those who left. Many women who remained within Communist and socialist organisations attempted to change their male comrades' attitudes around the relationship between women's liberation and socialism. The idea of women's oppression as a diversion from the class cause was the subject of particular focus. Communist women told their party in 1972 that:

> Our Party now, before socialism is achieved, should and must do much more on this [women's liberation]. Women's Lib has fired the imagination of and generated activity among our Party women, along with others in the

[509] Interview with Willan; Interview with Pat McIntyre, 24 February 2014.
[510] Wanda Maciuszko, Paula O'Flynn and Carol Riddell, 'On Leaving the International Marxist Group', in 'Papers from Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference, September 1973', *FAS: Politics/Policy 3*.
[511] Ibid.
[512] 'Whatever next for the male left?', Flyer, April 1973, *FAS: Politics/Policy 9*.
[513] Maciuszko et al., 'On Leaving'.

> working-class movement… It challenges the thinking of all of us about women in relationship to class struggle.[514]

The predominantly Communist-feminist editors and contributors of *Red Rag: A Magazine of Women's Liberation*, shared this perspective. The magazine's existence was unauthorized by the central executive of the CPGB and was 'virulently opposed' by many male Communists.[515] Nevertheless, its early articles insisted on the necessity of the WLM because socialism would not 'automatically' end women's oppression: 'The Women's Liberation Movement, far from being a diversion… is rather a necessity.'[516] Another contributor also concurred on the WLM's success in bringing this issue to the fore for many women, arguing it had 'changed this situation'.[517]

However, responses to the WLM on the Far Left indicated that feminist critiques were not overly successful. Discussing 'Women in Class Struggle' in the mid-1970s, the CPGB maintained that the 'secondary questions that affect women' could only be tackled after the dictatorship of the proletariat and that this struggle could 'not afford the disaffection of any of its sections.'[518] Other Far Left factions, such as Communist Unity, drifted between disdain and sexism in its appraisal of the WLM, arguing that it was dominated by 'blatant feminism' and 'petty-bourgeois feminists with their bra-burning-type antics'.[519] Women, meanwhile, 'often [held] backward political views' and the WLM was 'doomed to degenerate'.[520] Similar dismissals continued into the 1980s and 1990s and were espoused by women whose primary identification was with the Far Left, such as Kate Marshall's perspective that 'the episodic activities of isolated groups of feminists' became 'merely symbolic gestures… which [avoided] confronting the roots of women's oppression'.[521] Similarly, Mary Davis' and Lynette Myers' account argued that campaigns around the WLM's demands took place 'despite the WLM rather than because of its active intervention' and that the movement 'failed to address let alone invite the

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[514] Communist Women's Department, 'Women's Status' (September, 1972), p. 8, *TUC Library, London Met*.
[515] Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London, 2007), p. 181.
[516] Florence Keyworth, 'Women's Role in the Labour Movement', *Red Rag: A Magazine of Women's Liberation*, 1 (1973), p. 6 and rest of issue.
[517] Brenda Jacques, 'What the Women's Movement Means', *Red Rag: A Magazine of Women's Liberation*, 1 (1973), p. 8.
[518] CPGB, 'Women in Class Struggle' (c. 1975), p. 13, *TUC Library, London Met*.
[519] Communist Unity, 'Women in Class Struggle' (1974), p. 15, *TUC Library, London Met*.
[520] Ibid., pp. 1, 17.
[521] Marshall, *Real Freedom*, p. i.

most exploited and oppressed – working-class women, black and white', to engage with it.[522]

The ideological and practical support offered by the WLM to women workers during industrial disputes in this period that were outlined in the last chapter, illustrated that such sweeping attacks were not reflected in the reality of working-class women's experiences. However, of greater importance in understanding the WLM's relationship with class politics was its response to such critiques by the Far Left. Rather than accept their rejection from the class struggle, women's liberationists, much like the women workers they supported, instead engaged in a Bourdieuean classification struggle over the meaning of class, trying to reframe it along gendered lines.[523] Feminist's critiques of socialist politics, such as those by the former IMG members, were usually coupled with a persisting commitment to socialism and class politics and a continuing identification as socialist-feminists. Indeed, this was reflected in rest of the 1973 Socialist-Feminist Conference at which the IMG paper was presented. The Hackney Women's Group attempted to 'show that feminism and the working-class struggle do have a common cause' whilst the Arsenal Women's Liberation Group argued that a focus on sexism had to be balanced by an awareness of class oppression and exploitation, whilst the former IMG members also asserted their belief in socialism.[524]

Moreover, for those whose identity was more strongly located to class than gender, like McIntyre in Durham, the problem with the institutions of class politics was not only sexism but also the distinction between rank-and-file members and union leaders.[525] This attitude was prevalent in leftist critiques of the Labour Movement in the 1970s, particularly by those associated with the revolutionary left like Tony Cliff, who argued that trade union leaders' autocratic control of disputes allowed strikes and occupations to be defeated more easily.[526] This perspective has been developed in histories of the period where Dave Lyddon has argued that 'hostile' union leaders undermined the strength of a strike, whilst Colin Hay has noted the distinction between union members and the trade union bureaucracy in the 'winter of discontent'.[527] McIntyre's use of this

[522] Mary Davis and Lynnette Myers, *Women and Class* (London, 1990), pp. 22, 23.
[523] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 484.
[524] Hackney Women's Group, 'Autonomy of the Women's Movement' and Arsenal WLM Group, 'Notes on Class and the Women's Movement', in 'Papers from Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference, September 1973', *FAS: Politics/Policy 3*.
[525] Interview with McIntyre.
[526] Cliff, *The Crisis*, pp. 67-8.
[527] Lyddon, ''Glorious Summer', p. 344; Hay, 'Winter of Discontent', p. 548.

argument highlighted how feminists' critiques did not only focus on the experiences of women but on the logistics of class politics more generally.

However, the exact positioning of class and gender within a hierarchy of oppression did cause tensions, particularly between those who were associated with Far Left groups and those who were not. One of those involved in *Red Rag*'s creation, Val Charlton, recalled how a shared belief in the value of class politics was not enough to prevent divides between Communist and non-Communist contributors.[528] There was a distinction between defining oneself as a women's liberationist committed to class politics and defining as a Communist committed to feminism, as expressed in a *Red Rag* editorial which noted feminism as the primary political identity: 'We are feminists first and foremost because feminism is the political movement which emerges as women's response to their own oppression.'[529] In the eyes of the feminist identity camp, the Left-women could be frustrating because of unflinching expressions of the party line at conferences and in discussions. Jo Sutton recalled attending the 1974 national WLM conference in Edinburgh with women from the CPGB but was irritated by their block voting and censuring of those who did not.[530] In short, 'They don't develop thoughts, just the line.'[531]

Conversely, Left-aligned feminists, like Elizabeth Wilson, could feel that the more libertarian WLM lacked the aura of 'reality' offered by traditional class politics, whilst others found common cause with an expansion of women's rights but did not accept the WLM's critiques of class politics.[532] Thus, a failure to recognise the primacy of class in the hierarchy of oppression would prevent the WLM from proceeding on 'the correct political basis', as one *Socialist Woman* article stated.[533]

Despite the BWM's separation from traditional Left parties and the white WLM in favour of full ideological and tactical autonomy, black feminists still found themselves debating the significance of these issues in their political identity constructions. Some, like Judith Lockhart and Melba Wilson, respectively, were clear that their feminism was inherently

[528] 'Val Charlton Interview', in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 165.
[529] 'Editorial', *Red Rag*, 4 (1973), p. 1.
[530] Elizabeth Arledge Ross and Miriam L. Bearse, 'A Chronology of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain: Organisations, Conferences, Journals and Events, with a focus on Leeds and Bradford' (November, 1996), p. 17, *FAS: Politics/Policy 1*.
[531] Ibid.
[532] Morgan et al., *Communists*, pp. 180, 182.
[533] 'For a socialist position on abortion', *Socialist Woman* (May/June 1973), p. 8.

linked to socialism and class struggle, whilst others, like Gerlin Bean, recalled discussions regarding whether they were part of the WLM, class struggle, Black nationalism or all three, as well as in what order.[534] The outcome was that by 1975, the Socialist-Feminism current was seen to be generally divided between those aligned with Far Left groups and those who were not.[535]

Others in the WLM were far more fervent in responding to Far Left dismissals and Left-aligned women in the WLM, rejecting any direct engagement with the Labour Movement or even class politics in a broader sense. Class was most commonly rejected as a useful concept for understanding women's oppression by 'radical' and 'revolutionary' strands of the WLM. A collection of radical feminists wrote in 1972 that 'every man is a policeman for male supremacy' and argued that a feminist revolution would be 'the only revolution in history to cut across class, race and nationality to unite the world's most oppressed people.'[536] Furthermore, to focus on class was to be a victim of 'false consciousness' and the authors were adamant about the purpose of the WLM: 'We are not fighting capitalism, we are fighting sexism… We do not fit into their [socialists] theory, we do not have to fit into their struggle.'[537] Those identifying with 'revolutionary' feminism later in the decade were equally strident, arguing that: 'Sex struggle *is* the struggle. All women are in the class that is women, subsuming all minor differences – which anyway come from male supremacy. Attempts to divide us are attempts to defeat us.'[538]

This critique extended beyond the male left and even Left-aligned feminists towards socialist-feminism as a whole, which was defined as part of the 'liberal takeover of the WLM' that moved feminism away from the fundamental issue of the 'sex-class system'.[539] The feminist publication, *Spare Rib*, with its focus on 'work' issues and consistent concern for women's industrial action in its news pages was a particular target of revolutionary feminist ire, being accused of leaving out the 'anger and hate towards men (on which all the energy of the movement was originally based)'.[540] This

[534] Interview with Judith Lockhart by Sheila Ruiz, 2 March 2009, Interview with Melba Wilson by Kimberly Springer, 13 August 2009 and Interview with Gerlin Bean by Ashley Whitfield, 9 September 2009, in 'Do you remember Olive Morris?' Oral History Project, *Lambeth Archives*.
[535] Ibid., p. 21.
[536] Radical Feminists (Miscellaneous), 'Thoughts on Feminism', London 1972, pp. 1, 4, *FAS: Politics/Policy 13*.
[537] Ibid., pp. 24-26, 28, 29.
[538] 'Revolutionary Feminism: Statement from the 1st Year', 1977, *FAS: Politics/Policy 4*.
[539] 'Introduction to Revolutionary Feminist Conference, July 1977', p. 1, *FAS: Politics/Policy 16*.
[540] Ibid., p. 3.

was reflected in the strand's theoretical focus with conferences far more likely to consider 'male supremacy' than 'class' or workplace struggles.[541]

These examples illustrate Patricia Hill Collins' point that oppression does not take the form of one fundamental type at either an objective or subjective level.[542] Moreover, at that subjective level of identity construction, they exemplify Scott's point on the problem of 'particularity'.[543] When traversing a landscape of intersecting oppressions and differing explanations – often linked to totalising narratives of class, gender or race – how do individuals 'determine the salience of one or another of these identities?'[544] For Scott and Collins, identifications around one primary 'location' – class, gender or race in this context – are inherently exclusive to those who fall outside.[545] When applied to social movements, David Meyer has argued that:

> Every social movement organisation struggles with defining itself in the context of other issues and other movements and potential movements. The most vigorous debates within movements take place about which issues ought to be linked, and which ought to be eschewed, or minimally, ignored.[546]

This process was certainly evident surrounding the importance of class to women's liberation. However, it seems that for the majority of British women's liberationists, the question was not whether class struggle 'ought' to be linked to feminism but *how*. Whilst feminists disagreed about whether capitalism or patriarchy was the larger enemy, those within and outside Left groups tended to recognise that both were structures that needed to be challenged. Thus, in practice, the WLM's support for women's industrial action across Britain in the period was an important unifying, rather than exclusionary force, within feminism.

Indeed, even within radical and revolutionary feminisms, the absence of class was not total. Another paper from the 1977 conference argued that there were *two* class

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[541] See for example the topics from the 1978 London regional conference: Male supremacy (2); sexuality and biology; pornography; reproduction; C-R; love; and Women's Power – 'Revolutionary Feminist London Regional Conference, February 1978', *FAS: Politics/Policy 16*.
[542] Collins, *Feminist Thought*, p. 18.
[543] Scott, *Gender*, p. 25.
[544] Ibid.
[545] Collins, *Feminist Thought*, *passim*; Scott, *Fantasy*, p. 36.
[546] Meyer, 'Restating the Woman Question', p. 291.

systems: 'Capitalism and patriarchy' but that the latter had greater significance due to its more pervasive influence on women's lives and politics.[547] Moreover, some radical feminists in the mid-1970s drew attention to the problem for left-wing women of joining either male-dominated Far Left groups or being detached from working-class struggle in the WLM due to its predominantly middle-class composition.[548] Socialist-feminists linked this to the growing 'separatist' current within Radical and Revolutionary feminist circles which disputed the usefulness of interacting with men at all, socialists or otherwise, and the tensions this caused between feminists with husbands and male children as well as with the many feminists seeking to build links with the Labour Movement.[549]

It was consequently far more common for feminists to provide critiques of the structures and institutions of class politics, rather than the importance of class. Individuals like Selma James, and many associated with the 'Wages for Housework' strand of the WLM fell within this bracket. As discussed in the previous chapter, James was a fierce critic of trade union attitudes and practices towards women and had 'always felt' that the trade union movement had 'nothing to offer women'.[550] However, this did not prevent a strong identification with the institution, exhibited in her assertion that she 'would have died to protect a union'.[551] Indeed, this was an essential part of James' political identity and theoretical contributions; she felt that women's issues were working-class issues and pointedly stated in her speech at the Ruskin Conference that 'We *are* working class.'[552] Her commitment was demonstrated throughout the 1970s, such as when the Notting Hill Women's Liberation Workshop group she was involved in produced a leaflet entitled, 'Women Against the Industrial Relations Act' in 1971.[553] In it, the group asserted that the Act was 'an attack on the whole working class, and that includes women', as well as emphasising that: 'OUR STRUGGLE IS AGAINST THIS ACT AND BEYOND IT, AGAINST THE WHOLE STRUCTURE OF THIS SOCIETY.'[554] Later in the decade, James was highly complimentary towards the 1972 Miners' Strike because of the strikers' autonomous action and disregard for union

[547] 'The Need for Revolutionary Feminism', p. 2, *FAS: Politics/Policy 16*.
[548] Hilary Rose and Jalna Hanmer, 'Radical Feminism, Reproduction and the Technological Fix', *British Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Aberdeen* (April, 1974), pp. 3-4.
[549] Sally Alexander and Sue O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood under stress', *Red Rag*, 8 (Feb. 1975), p. 20.
[550] 'Selma James Interview' in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 185.
[551] Ibid.
[552] Ibid., p. 194.
[553] Excerpts in Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class; The Perspective of Winning* (Pontypool, 2012), p. 41.
[554] Ibid., pp. 41 and 42.

bureaucracy – repeating the theme raised by McIntyre – whilst in 1973 she contended that class-inflected feminism was better able to grasp 'the totality of working-class struggle' than the trade union movement.[555] In both instances, the implication was that her objection was not to class politics or even trade unionism but to trade union bureaucracy and power structures. It was this perspective, rather than a simplistic disavowal of all types of class politics which underpinned the relationship between feminism and class for many in the movement.

The politics of 'dual militancy'

One of the key ideas amongst socialist-feminists was 'dual militancy' within the Labour Movement and WLM, which for those like Cynthia Cockburn, was a 'necessary and irreducible condition of Left feminism'.[556] Sue O'Sullivan had similar recollections, noting how the link between a trade union consciousness and the WLM made actions like the Night Cleaners' Campaign possible and how this facet of feminism was 'very connected with a history around organising people in workplaces.'[557] However, this engagement was usually coupled with a critique of the Labour Movement's treatment of women workers, which indeed framed feminism's history of organising in workplaces as a consequence of trade unions' neglect.[558] Lynne Segal has strongly supported this perspective, asserting that liberationists' support for women's industrial actions was a vital component of feminism:

> So my point is that when we engaged in that or supporting hospital workers, supporting nursery workers, campaigning for unions for nursery workers, for night cleaners and so on, all these many campaigns, it didn't feel like somebody else's struggle.[559]

Feminists like Segal, Rowbotham, Coote and Campbell asserted that working-class women's industrial action in 1968 and 1969 had a formative influence on the WLM, and this has also been reiterated in interviews with other liberationists. Ellen Malos, for example, recalled that the movement's original demands were essentially broadened out

[555] Ibid, pp. 64 and 80.
[556] Interview with Cynthia Cockburn by Margaretta Jolly, 13 and 14 January 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/42.
[557] Interview with Sue O'Sullivan by Rachel Cohen, 5, 6 and 18 January 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/40.
[558] Ibid.
[559] Interview with Segal, 'Sisterhood and After'.

versions of the issues raised by NJACCWER.[560] This socialist-feminist position was one which saw the 'Woman Question' as going 'hand-in-hand' with the 'Social Question' of inequality and capitalism, and therefore, as socialist-feminist Sarah Boston argued, there was a necessary and inevitable engagement with the Labour Movement.[561] This engagement took a number of forms. Firstly, and almost universally across national publications like *Spare Rib* and local WLM newsletters alike, the feminist media reported on equality strikes, strikes by women over any cause, and even devoted attention to male-dominated disputes in which women participated. An example of the latter was a *Spare Rib* report on predominantly male occupation at Crosfields Electronics in London in 1975.[562] The report focused on the women's role in the occupation but also highlighted their radicalisation and sense of being linked to female and male workers in a way they had not felt previously.[563] In spite of appearing in a feminist publication, the authors were more concerned with the women's development of 'class-consciousness' than their impressions of feminism. This underlined the significance feminists attached to women's involvement in class and trade union politics, offering it a central role in women's activism.

Whilst WLM activists were undoubtedly concerned with inculcating a feminist consciousness in the women they supported, this was underpinned at all levels by a principle of acting in 'sisterhood' with all women in struggle. Whether it was London WLM groups fighting for night cleaners' unionisation, the Oxford WLM group's call for picket line support for a women's strike at a local hotel, or editorials in the *Manchester Women's Paper* arguing that equal pay was best achieved by joining a union – for which it provided contact details for the TUC – it was apparent that women's industrial struggles held at least symbolic importance to the WLM.[564] For feminists linked directly to Left groups, such as the authors of *Socialist Woman* magazine, there were frequent echoes of trade unionist language and framing, such as the magazine's description of an industrial dispute in Cumberland over sacking and blacklisting where 'The whole principle of trade unionism [was] at stake!'[565]

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[560] Interview with Ellen Malos by Margaretta Jolly, 24, 25 and 26 October 2010, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/06.
[561] Sarah Boston, '"Woman's work" means low pay and double exploitation: why?', *Spare Rib* (October, 1973).
[562] Lynne Segal and Alison Fell, 'They call us militants', *Spare Rib*, 37 (July, 1975), pp. 9-10.
[563] Ibid.
[564] 'Oxford Women's Liberation Newsletter', January, 1977; *The Manchester Women's Paper* (January, 1976), p. 7.
[565] West London Socialist Women's Group, 'Dispute at Brannon's Thermometers, Chester Moor, West Cumberland' (c. 1971), *FAS: Economics 8*.

For the most part, the class composition of the groups seemed to have had little impact on responses to industrial action. The Bolton group, for example, was 'by and large… a sort of middle-class group', but this did not prevent its members from 'trying to get Working Women's Charter discussed and accepted by Trades Council and Union branches' in 1974, or donating the proceeds from a play about the Trico equal pay strike to the Grunwick strike committee in 1977.[566] Moreover, as detailed in the previous chapter, more prominent disputes, such as the Night Cleaners' Campaign, the Trico equal pay strike and the Grunwick strike, were the focus of special publications and fundraising activities, and illustrated feminists' preparedness to offer concrete support to working-class women.

This disparate sisterhood continued throughout the period but in 1974 an attempt was made to formalise the link with women in the Labour Movement: the Working Women's Charter Campaign (WWCC). The WWCC was set up with the purpose of creating a direct link between the WLM and the trade union movement as well as introducing a more developed theoretical understanding of gender oppression into the latter.[567] However, it also had more immediately practical goals, which were apparent in its ten-point 'charter':

> We pledge ourselves to agitate and organise to achieve the following aims:-
>
> 1. The rate for the job regardless of sex, at rates negotiated by the trade unions, with a national minimum wage below which no wages should fall.
> 2. Equal opportunity of entry into occupations and in promotion, regardless of sex and marital state.
> 3. Equal education and training for all occupations and compulsory day-release for all 16-19 year olds in employment.
> 4. Working conditions to be, without deterioration of previous conditions, the same for women as for men.

[566] 'Interview with Kath Fry by Janine Perry', 11 January 2009, *Bolton Women's Liberation Movement Oral History Project*, in Bolton Women's Liberation Group Box 6, Feminist Archive North; 'Bolton Women's Liberation Newsletter', April, 1974; 'Minute Book 4', June, 1977, in Bolton Women's Liberation Group Box 1, Feminist Archive North.
[567] Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 315; Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing*, p. 28.

5. The removal of all legal and bureaucratic impediments to equality – e.g. with regard to tenancies, mortgages, pension schemes, taxation, passports, control over children, social security payments, hire purchase agreements.
6. Improved provision of local authority day nurseries, free of charge, with extended hours to suit working mothers. Provision of nursery classes in day nurseries. More nursery schools.
7. 18 weeks maternity leave with full net pay spread before and after the birth of a live child; 7 weeks after birth if the child is stillborn. No dismissal during pregnancy or maternity leave. No loss of security, pension or promotion prospects.
8. Family planning clinics supplying free contraception to be extended to cover every locality. Free abortion to be readily available.
9. Family allowances to be increased to £2.50 per child, including the first child.
10. To campaign amongst women to take part in the trade unions and in political life so that they may exercise influence commensurate with their numbers and to campaign amongst men trade unionists that they may work to achieve this aim.[568]

Whilst only explicitly mentioned in point ten, the desire to change trade union structures and practices was seen as an important aspect of achieving the preceding nine points. In an interview with *Spare Rib* in 1975, campaigners flagged up the issue, asking of female trade unionists within the Labour Movement: 'But when it comes to a branch meeting, a weekend school, or a national conference, where are they?'[569] This was often true for individual feminists. Michele Ryan, a WWC campaigner in Birmingham, saw WWC's main aim as addressing the problem of representation by bringing feminists, female trade unionists and working-class women together to work and organise.[570]

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[568] 'Brent Working Women's Charter Campaign, 1974', TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, http://www.unionhistory.info/Display.php?irn=809&QueryPage=AdvSearch.php (accessed 16 October 2014).
[569] 'Working Women's Charter: "Not just a paper document"', *Spare Rib* (November, 1975).
[570] Interview with Michele Ryan by Rachel Cohen, 24 and 25 October 2010, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/35.

The Campaign received a varied response; it won support from NUPE, NUJ, NALGO, CPSA, ACTT, AUEW and some local branches of other unions and trades councils but was rejected by the TUC by 6,224,000 votes to 3,697,000.[571] Furthermore, several women's committees were expelled by other local trades councils across the country.[572] However, the TUC did produce its own 'Industrial Charter for Women' in response to this challenge, which incorporated the majority of the Charter's demands as it dealt with education, starting work, pay, promotion, sick pay and pensions, maternity, returning to work, health and safety, family responsibilities and care of children, marital status, and women as members of the community.[573]

The WWC was received more positively by prominent female trade unionists, particularly in white-collar unions. Judith Hunt, for example, suggested that the WWCC had produced a more 'comprehensive' approach to dealing with inequality and oppression in women's employment.[574] Furthermore, Hunt attributed positive changes in trade union practices to increased female membership but additionally to 'the developing movement for women's liberation and women's rights over the last ten years.'[575]

Such mixed successes within the trade union movement's official channels were also reflected in its interactions with women workers, as well as the rest of the WLM. The Coast Women's Group, for example, was sharply critical of the WWCC's Secretariat's tendency towards 'unhealthy and undemocratic' control of the movement's agenda and added that its stated goals of recruiting working-class women had failed.[576] Moreover, it suggested that this was tied to the fact that its campaigners offered little real support at picket lines, such as at the Trico equal pay dispute.[577] Three women who were active in the first WWCC workshop were far more damning, writing in 1977: 'Trico is often used as a shining example of the Charter's credibility within the Labour Movement, yet no credibility was actually gained. The intervention by the "leadership" was a political

[571] 'Brent Working Women's Charter'.
[572] Ibid.
[573] Wrigley, 'Women', p. 57.
[574] Judith Hunt, 'Organising Women Workers', *Studies for Trade Unionists*, 1:3 (September, 1975), p. 17.
[575] 'How Women can Organise', in *Women in Action* (Spring, 1980), p. 19, *FAS: Economics 2*.
[576] Coast Women's Group, 'Some fundamental problems with the WWCC', *Scarlet Woman*, No. 4 (July, 1977).
[577] Ibid.

failure – no wonder the Trico speakers did not turn up for the Charter rally.'[578] The authors also argued that the 'leadership' saw themselves as too important to 'grace' picket lines and instead spent too much time trying to frame strikes 'correctly' at committee meetings, which led to a lack of credibility in the eyes of many female strikers.[579]

Interestingly though, and much like the broader relationship the WLM had with the Labour Movement and class politics, criticism did not equal outright rejection. The subtitle of the above article was 'Towards a Socialist-Feminist Movement', which implied a continued commitment to the political ideals of the WWCC, and the authors had been Charter activists to that point.[580] Indeed, most of those in the Coast Group were also WWCC activists. Willan and others became involved with WWCC in spite of such critiques and not being directly affected by many of its points due to being outside of paid labour.[581] Nonetheless, they still adopted a 'worker' identity, albeit one located around domestic work: 'It was rather strange because I think two or three of us weren't what you call "working women" in terms of going out to work but we considered ourselves working women because we worked in the home, you know.'[582] This illustrated how the WLM's theoretical reformulations of what constituted 'work' encouraged a political definition relating to class as much as to gender.

Moreover, the experiences of the Coast Group demonstrated that critical ideas and activism around class politics were shared by feminists across UK regions and were not simply London-centred. Indeed, this highlighted a broader point that identifications with class were seen as symbolic of the particularly British nature of the movement, with the trade union and Labour Movement focus distinguishing the British WLM from its US counterpart. This was evidenced in outsider perspectives on the British WLM, such as that of American feminist Barbara Winslow, who declared in her history of the movement that, 'In England, the women's liberation movement was sparked off by actions of working women.'[583] Winslow contrasted this with the 'primarily middle class'

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[578] Sue Oppenheimer, Margaret Page and Celia Shalom, 'Some Fundamental Problems with the Working Women's Charter Campaign/Towards a Socialist-Feminist Movement', March, 1977, *FAS: Economics Box 2*.
[579] Ibid.
[580] Ibid.
[581] Interview with Willan.
[582] Ibid.
[583] Barbara Winslow, *A Short History of Women's Liberation: Revolutionary Feminism* (Ohio, 1978), p. 64.

focus of the American Women's Movement.[584] This was a point recalled regularly by American feminists based in the UK. Susie Orbach had originally been politically active in New York, but described how coming to Britain had given her the sense that British feminism was deeply tied to a consciousness of class politics and socialism – 'the class issue was absolutely profound' – and suggested that feminists' support for the Grunwick dispute was symbolic of this link.[585] Another American feminist involved in the British movement, Lois Graessle, recalled similarly that there was a notable section of the WLM which was composed of women 'more from a location within the Marxist and left tradition in this [Britain] country' than the 'psychological' strand of US feminism.[586] Having come from the latter, Graessle found interactions with working-class and trade union women to be 'quite an education for me'.[587] There were similar accounts from American black feminists who became involved in the Black Women's Movement in the UK. Melba Wilson recalled how the Brixton Women's Group defined itself as a 'black, socialist, feminist movement' and that it was a new experience to have to deal with Marx and class politics.[588]

Even those from European backgrounds like Anna Paczuska, from a Polish immigrant family, struggled with class politics and the concepts of class prevalent in the British left.[589] This reflected Jon Lawrence's similar findings in his analysis of the 1960s *Affluent Worker* studies, in which he pointed out that non-British workers were more likely to talk dispassionately about class or even ignore it altogether.[590] This suggested that, as Lawrence argued, class is a purely cultural concept with a particular resonance in British society.[591] However, once engaged in activism, immigrant feminists like Paczuska found that it was experience – rather than awareness – that enabled her ideology to develop. Through her experience of joint struggle in the trade union and feminist spheres, Paczuska shared many women's view that this link was fundamental to the WLM's vitality: 'For a time the mainstream of the Women's Movement did actually

[584] Ibid., p. 63.
[585] Interview with Susie Orbach by Polly Russell, 6 and 10 June, 4 July, 15 August, 6 October and 29 November, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/25.
[586] 'Lois Graessle Interview' in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), pp. 126-7, 132.
[587] Ibid., pp. 132-3.
[588] Interview with Wilson by Kimberly Springer, 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'
[589] 'Anna Paczuska Interview', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 149.
[590] Jon Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2014), p. 227.
[591] Ibid.

straddle that thing between feminism and socialism. Every women's conference had delegations of working-class women. The Equal Pay Campaign united us like the fight for the vote united women before.'[592]

At times, this was reciprocated, such as in trade unionist Audrey Wise's desire to link the 'trade union working-class equal pay strand, and the women's lib strand' of the Women's Movement and her assertion that 'the Women's Liberation Movement WORKS.'[593] Judith Hunt concurred and noted the 'cross-fertilisation between the trade unions, women's rights campaigns and the Women's Liberation Movement' and thereby underlined the centrality of this relationship to the British WLM.[594]

In addition, the attitudes of middle-class feminists towards working-class politics and those of female trade unionists towards feminism illustrate an important point made by Avtar Brah regarding the distinction between the 'politics of identity' and the 'politics of identification'. Brah has argued that political coalitions between groups existing in different social circumstances can be achieved through an original identity becoming linked with other 'imagined communities' whose struggles and experienced are identified with.[595] Applied to women's liberationists and female trade unionists, it is possible to specify an original 'identity' – as women/working class – based on the 'particularity' of their experiences that dictates their primary mode of struggle.[596] This would be understood as the 'politics of identity' in which those outside the 'gender' or 'class' identity are excluded from political action. However, the 'politics of identification' rests on the recognition of many commonalities of experience between groups – in this case, the recognition of shared exploitation and oppression between the working class and women in a capitalist and patriarchal society, particularly with working-class women.[597] Thus, even when the WLM could be physically detached from the institutions of class struggle (although it often was not), women's liberationists still understood themselves and their political identities as part of the 'imagined community' of class struggle.

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[592] 'Paczuska Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 157.
[593] 'Audrey Wise Interview', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 212; Audrey Wise, 'Trying to Stay Human', *Red Rag*, 3 (1973), p. 3.
[594] 'How women', p. 19.
[595] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London, 1996), p. 93.
[596] Ibid., pp. 85, 90-93.
[597] Ibid., p. 93.

Recognition of these strands of struggle and the 'politics of identification' was also shared across racial lines, although the experiences of racial and class differences for some black feminists meant that it could be difficult to accept the levels of unity described above. Gail Lewis has discussed the challenge she felt in relating to the 'petty bourgeois white women' in the WLM but felt that the struggles of women workers, such as the sewing-machinists' strike at Dagenham in 1968, 'seemed right'.[598] This class distinction between the groups saw her understand women's efforts at Dagenham and the workplace in this period as separate from the WLM and more in line with the class politics of her trade unionist grandfather than feminism.[599] Thus, whilst identifying with women's industrial actions in a very similar way to white feminists like Segal, her perceptions of the relationship were strongly inflected by her experiences as a black, working-class woman – two crucial axes of difference with many liberationists. Here we see how the 'politics of identification' can be limited by the experience of 'difference' in which black feminists identified more easily with class struggle than 'white feminism'.[600] For those defining the BWM as distinct from the WLM, there was a shared understanding that it was linked to trade union and class politics. Carol Leeming, Donna Patricia Jackman and Judith Lockhart had all come to feminist politics through trade unionism and remained active in class politics alongside black and feminist struggles throughout the period, perceiving them as linked.[601] More broadly, the headings for potential black women's study group discussion topics were frequently based around 'Blacks', 'Women', 'Capitalism', and 'Imperialism', summarising accurately the concerns of the BWM.[602] This was additionally evidenced in the umbrella group, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), which placed class struggle in its constitution from draft stage onwards, stating its role as: 'To support those struggles of the working class which further the interests of all working people – black and white, female and male.'[603]

However, this 'politics of identification' with class alongside gender was not universal within the WLM. The views and actions of some feminists provided evidence that black feminists may have been correct to perceive a distinction between trade union struggles

[598] Interview with Gail Lewis by Rachel Cohen, 15 and 18 April, 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/14.
[599] Ibid; Gail Lewis, 'From Deepest Kilburn', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985), p. 229.
[600] Brah, *Cartographies*, p. 89.
[601] Interview with Lockhart; Interview with Leeming and Jackson, 'Heart of the Race'.
[602] Stella Dadzie, 'Black Women's Study Group' (undated), *Stella Dadzie Collection*, *Dadzie/4/12*, *Black Cultural Archives* (BCA).
[603] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution' (Aug., 1980), *Stella Dadzie Collection*, *Dadzie/1/1/12*, BCA.

and liberationists. O'Sullivan recalled that at times there were difficulties in bridging the gaps between themselves and working-class women in terms of seeing their respective struggles as connected.[604] The last chapter illustrated the rarity of working women translating their workplace struggles into a feminist consciousness but O'Sullivan noted that this problem was felt in both directions.[605] Even for socialist-feminists like Rowbotham, committed to building links between feminism and the Labour Movement in both her activism and academic work, effective communication between classes proved challenging. In an insightful pair of examples from interviews conducted in 1990 and 2010, an otherwise reflexive Rowbotham lamented the failure of female trade unionists to attend the first WLM conference at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970, in spite of invitations to do so.[606] Reiterating a statement she had made in 1990, Rowbotham recalled in 2010: 'So we contacted every member of NJACCWER, all those trade union women, mostly they didn't come.'[607] One who did, Audrey Wise, offered a possible explanation for the low turnout in the same 1990 interview collection: 'I got this letter saying I would present a paper… Present a paper? I didn't present papers. I spoke. What were they on about?'[608] The languages of class politics and liberation did not always easily correspond, and for some liberationists, neither did the meanings of women's industrial action. Catherine Hall found that this could be true of even hugely symbolic strikes like at Ford in 1968:

> I mean, what about action about women's employment and equal pay, etc., etc. And there weren't that many connections between… the Ford women and was going on in Birmingham [where Hall was involved in setting up a WLM group]… a sense of connection [through demonstrations] but there wasn't a national movement, no.[609]

However, if the question was extended to class politics and socialism more broadly, rather than women's trade unionism specifically, then the link remained. Hall wrote in her partly auto-biographical introduction to her book, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*, that class and socialism were intertwined with

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[604] Interview with O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[605] Ibid.
[606] Interview with Rowbotham, 'Sisterhood and After'; 'Sheila Rowbotham Interview' in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 35.
[607] Interview with Rowbotham, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[608] 'Audrey Wise Interview', p. 206.
[609] Interview with Catherine Hall by Rachel Cohen, 16 April 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/54.

feminist political discourse and 'In the first years of the new Women's Movement… the dialogue with socialism was pre-eminent.'[610]

Whilst class background did not determine a feminist's perception of how trade union struggles related to the WLM, the link was certainly more straightforward for those who had directly experienced class conflict in the workplace – in Brah's terms, those whose primary political community was more directly linked to class. Jenny Lynn, for example, recalled 'coming up against the headmaster' in her time as a young teacher and union representative and thought of him as a 'class traitor'.[611] This experience informed her subsequent political activism and ensured that her feminism was rooted in community and class struggles around Claimants' Unions and female council tenants' access to benefits.[612]

Lynn and others illustrated that throughout the period, women's liberationists, both black and white, had direct involvement with the Labour Movement. Indeed, by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, an important trend was apparent: as the WLM fragmented, many liberationists became active members of trade unions. Lynn was amongst them and recalled that she 'gradually drifted away' from the WLM into trade unionism but emphasised that she took her feminist politics with her.[613] Sheila Gilmore did the same and suggested that 'a lot of the ideas of the Women's Movement people took with them to other activities', before noting trade unions as a common example.[614] This was certainly reflected in the political lives of the Coast Women's Group, the majority of whom became involved in trade unionism, even as the original group continued. Willan was 'very involved in [my] union' in spite of feeling that the sexist attitudes attacked by feminists at the start of the 1970s had 'definitely not' disappeared, and that, at best, male officials paid 'lip service' to feminism into the 1980s and 1990s.[615]

That this direct relationship between feminists and the trade union movement came later in the period seemed to be reflected in the many discussions within the WLM over its failure to engage with the working class, in spite of its efforts to the contrary. In a

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[610] Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 9-10.
[611] Interview with Jenny Lynn by Rachel Cohen, 27 & 28 April 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/16.
[612] Ibid.
[613] Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[614] Interview with Sheila Gilmore by Freya Johnson Ross, 28 and 29 July 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/29.
[615] Interview with Willan.

report on an equal pay conference organised by the Colchester WLM group in 1974, the group bemoaned the lack of this direct link:

> Many, probably most of us there, had had no experience of industrial employment, and few of us had any knowledge of working as a woman in the trade union movement… To be blunt, the women's liberation movement has hardly begun to talk to working-class women, and we need their involvement, support, knowledge and guidance.[616]

Herein lay the paradox of the WLM's relationship with class politics: feminists frequently framed their identities in relation to both class struggle and gender oppression but were unable to build direct links with working-class women within the Labour Movement or the workplace more generally. Those links that did exist, such as exemplified by Audrey Wise's and Judith Hunt's comments above, tended to be between white-collar trade unionists and the WLM rather than amongst manual workers.

Despite this problem, Wise and Hunt were arguably correct in their assertion that the WLM had been able to affect some attitudinal and practical change in the Labour Movement's treatment of women workers and women's issues more broadly. As briefly discussed in chapter one, the two movements seemed to coalesce around the defence of the 1967 Abortion Act. On three occasions during the 1970s, the Abortion Act came under threat of revision: firstly, with James White's Abortion Amendment Bill in 1974/5; secondly, with a subsequent Abortion Amendment Bill by William Benyon in 1977; and finally from the Corrie Bill in 1979, proposed by John Corrie, all of which have been covered in detail elsewhere.[617] Trade union campaigning on the issue increased with each subsequent attack, culminating in a TUC-endorsed march by 80,000 trade unionists and feminists.[618] However, there are a few pertinent points which contextualise trade union support.

Firstly, as Anne Phillips has argued, support for state funded abortion came at no cost to the Labour Movement and with the increasing number of female members, as noted

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[616] Colchester WLM Group, 'Equal Pay Conference' (May 1974), *FAS: Politics/Policy 3*.
[617] See for example, Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*; Dorothy McBride Stetson (ed.), *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements, and the Democratic State: A Comparative Study of State Feminism* (Oxford, 2001); Phillips, *Divided Loyalties*; David Marsh and Joanna Chambers, *Abortion Politics* (London, 1981).
[618] Wrigley, 'Women', p. 58.

above, it would have been damaging to the movement to ignore the issue.[619] Secondly, it was not until 1976 that the TUC passed a resolution in support of abortion rights and not until 1978 that a motion offering action in the event of an attack on these rights followed.[620] With the uptake at national level relatively slow, it is reasonable to suggest that there would have been large levels of discrepancy within the Labour Movement across the UK. Indeed, this was certainly true within the Labour Party, where 86 male MPs voted in favour of Labour MP James White's original amendment bill and continued to oppose abortion rights in Willan's constituency in North Shields.[621] Thirdly, just as with the 'Industrial Charter for Women', the Labour Movement's commitment to abortion rights was a watered down version of more progressive feminist demands. As Lesley Hoggart has argued, the need to defend existing abortion rights forced the WLM, and its offshoot, the NAC, to build coalitions with groups and organisations with very different political ideologies and aims.[622] In practice, this meant limiting discourse on women's autonomy over their own bodies towards a more restricted and defensive approach.[623] It was at the point of defensive crisis and feminist compromise that the trade union movement offered its formal support. The sense in which some male trade unionists perceived themselves as 'saviours' was evident in the marching order of the 1979 demonstration as women's groups were relegated to the back and only one NAC speaker was invited to speak from the platform.[624] It was not hard to recognise the persistence of sexist attitudes in these events.

In some respects, it may therefore be argued that it was the WLM which adapted its ideology to meet the Labour Movement rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, whatever the motivations behind the of passing of the 'Industrial Charter for Women', 'Aims for Women Workers', TUC support for abortion rights in principle and action to defend them, each represented an important change in trade union practice and highlighted how the Labour Movement could aid the struggle for women's rights and equality in the period. Thus, it should not be surprising that, like Willan, all six of the women I interviewed from the Coast Women's Group, as well as McIntyre, a member of the Durham WLM group in the early 1970s, and Joan Whitehead, a Women's Aid worker

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[619] Phillips, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 118.
[620] Ibid., pp. 117-8.
[621] Socialist Worker – Women's Voice Pamphlet, 'No Return to Back Street Abortions' (1975); Interview with Willan.
[622] Lesley Hoggart, 'Feminist Principles meet Political Reality: the case of the National Abortion Campaign', http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk/al6.php (accessed 01/12/2014).
[623] Ibid.
[624] Phillips, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 118.

in Newcastle, joined trade unions whenever they entered the workforce and saw it as a fundamental aspect of their political outlooks.[625] Elsewhere, Beatrix Campbell has argued similarly that by the 1980s, feminists had even started to 'gravitate' towards and influence the Labour Party, something which also applied to around half of the Coast Group.[626] Moreover, for McIntyre, Labour Party politics came to dominate her political engagement much earlier and highlighted that regardless of sexist attitudes within both the trade union movement and the Labour Party, most women who defined themselves as feminists were also comfortable moving into other fields of struggle.[627] The relationship remained difficult and required the wearing of a 'feminist hat' but the Labour Movement and WLM were deeply interconnected.

For Torode, this connection extended into the existence of the WLM and social movements like it. Torode suggested that in spite of the WLM's strong – and necessary – critiques of the trade union movement, its existence was vital to the proliferation of social movements in this period as it provided a large and powerful form of resistance to capitalist economic and social relations from which other movements could be built.[628] Interestingly, Torode brought up the relationship with the trade union movement not in response to a direct question but in discussing her view on the differences between contemporary feminism and the WLM, implying, as Brown et al. have contended, that she perceived this as an important agenda of the interview.[629] This was reflected more generally in her willingness to discuss her feminism with a male researcher in spite of initial reluctance. Class politics served as a shared subjectivity between that made the interview possible. To underline this point, she went on to argue: 'I think that the trade union movement was integral to what we were doing. We were always kind of referring to it, involved in it, but then I belonged to the socialist centre so I was very active in socialist politics as well at the time'.[630] This was a sentiment shared by Sue O'Sullivan, who reflected that women's workplace struggles, whilst having 'a very women's liberationist perspective… it was still connected to that history and it wouldn't have happened without a union – a trade union history, and consciousness, a certain

[625] Interview with Torode; Interview with Penny Remfry 27 June 2014; Interview with Jill Hardy, 10 July 2014; Interview with Cathy Bream, 17 September 2014; Interview with Willan; Interview with McIntyre; Interview with Joan Whitehead, 23 October 2014.
[626] Interview with Beatrix Campbell by Margaretta Jolly, 6 and 7 September 2010, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/01.
[627] Interview with McIntyre.
[628] Interview with Torode.
[629] Brown et al., *University Experience*, p. 258.
[630] Interview with Torode.

consciousness among everybody.'[631] This chimed strongly with *Red Rag*'s original 'Declaration of Intent', which situated the Labour Movement as 'the decisive force in the country for social progress and for socialism.'[632]

This was certainly also true for another of the Coast Group, Penny Remfry. Whilst accepting many of Selma James' critiques of the masculine attitudes and behaviours within the trade union movement, and referencing the way in which these led to the need for an autonomous Women's Movement, Remfry also asserted that the Labour Movement and WLM shared a political culture which was concerned with 'solidarity' and collectivism. On whether the Labour Movement affected the vitality of the WLM, she reflected:

> I think it was really important and I think it's one of the reasons why the movement, kind of, disappeared a bit, because I think that – it wasn't that – in many respects the Women's Movement kind of developed in opposition to the formality of trade unions and male domination of trade unions and so the whole kind of structure, the whole, you know, things about not wanting to be, anti-leadership stuff and the lack of formality, insistence on people listening to each other and talking to each other rather than at each other and taking on board what people say. All that cultural stuff was very much in opposition to women's experience in the trade unions and the Left groups, which were very similar *but* I think a lot of the values were in common, like the understanding about solidarity and cooperation and working together and the importance of together we're strong, all that kind of thing, all those cultural kind of values I think we shared, which I think was really really important.[633]

Much like Torode, it is clear from her repetition of 'really' that Remfry saw this shared politics as fundamental to her feminism. In so doing, she exemplified how the exclusionary practices of the Labour Movement did not determine individual feminists' attitudes to class politics. Indeed, continuing on this theme, Remfry suggested that if the respective strength of the two movements was not directly symbiotic, then at the very

[631] Interview with O'Sullivan Interview, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[632] 'Declaration of Intent', *Red Rag*, 1 (1973), p. 2.
[633] Interview with Remfry.

least they were both equal victims of later Thatcherite attacks on their shared 'ideological base':

> And what happened was, in the 80s, with Thatcher and the smashing of the unions and the whole rise of individualism, that whole language of cooperation and solidarity, and the notions of individuals actually benefit from being together in a group, a lot of that has been eroded really, and so, and I don't know whether it's, it's the weakness, the weakness of the Women's Movement came about because of the breaking of the unions or whether it was just, it was the same ideological base that the Tories in the 1980s had onslaught on that, you know, the whole ideological basis of community really, erm, and collective solidarity, so it was hit by that as well.[634]

For Torode and Remfry, socialist-feminism was commensurate with their understanding of what feminism was for and these were far from isolated ideas. Black and white feminists across the country framed their activism alongside class politics and socialism as individuals and groups. This was encapsulated in widespread epithets like, 'No women's liberation without socialist revolution. No socialist revolution without women's liberation.'[635] Or the unequivocal link with socialist class politics in the OWAAD constitution, which called on members: 'To support those struggles of the working class which further the interests of all working people – black and white, female and male.'[636]

However, as with differences of emphasis between Left-aligned and non-aligned feminists on the hierarchy of class and gender oppression at the time, there also remains disagreement about the nature of the relationship between the trade union movement and the WLM, as well as social movements of the period more broadly, in retrospect. When asked about the link, Willan stated that she thought Torode's argument could be inverted: 'I don't know, it might be the other way round. I think a lot of people aren't involved in trade unions because they aren't involved in politics.'[637] Again though, this topic was tied to distinguishing the WLM from contemporary feminism and underlined

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[634] Ibid.
[635] North East Regional Conference of Women's Liberation, 'Statement of Aims' (October, 1972), *FAS: Politics/Policy 9*.
[636] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution'.
[637] Interview with Willan.

that for Willan, as for Torode and Remfry, different types of political struggle were fundamentally linked in their understanding of feminism. Reflecting on the issue, Willan concluded, 'I wouldn't like to say which it is but the two definitely do go together.'[638]

One thing this link enabled was the potential for women to transition between these movements, which McIntyre's experiences in Durham illustrated. Throughout the 1970s, McIntyre had been: involved in the Labour Party; a trade union member; and a member of the Durham WLM group, as well as involved in various left-wing campaigns.[639] In doing so, she was an example of the interconnectedness of these struggles and types of politics and argued that they were all aspects of being a socialist 'in the fullest sense of the word.'[640] She was far from alone – large numbers of liberationists were either concurrently or subsequently engaged in class politics in one form or another. Of the seven women I interviewed in the North East all had been involved in trade unionism at some point in their lives and each saw it as an important aspect of their political narratives. The same was true for women interviewed in larger projects, such as the aforementioned *Sisterhood and After* oral history collection. Of the 50 women active in the WLM in the period who were interviewed for the project, 45 had either been in an explicitly Left group, a trade union, or the Labour Party.[641] These figures demonstrate that feminists of any strand, socialist or otherwise, tended to engage directly with the institutions of class politics.

Moreover, engagement was often inextricable from feminism in their political identities. For Torode, the intersection of these differing types of politics was impossible to separate:

> No, I can't separate it, no. The Women's Movement was hugely important to me but so was everything else but then when I was fighting for all those feminist things I thought I was fighting for socialism. I didn't see it as either or… What I thought is this is what the Left should have been doing all these years…[642]

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[638] Ibid.
[639] Interview with McIntyre.
[640] Ibid.
[641] Data taken from *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement* transcripts.
[642] Interview with Torode.

The last comment reveals a different, ideological aspect to the relationship between feminist and class politics. As noted above, many feminists became directly involved in class politics through left groups, Labour Party politics and most of all, trade unions. This did not imply an unequivocal acceptance of these institutions and Torode's statement again reveals that feminists' engagement with the Labour Movement was always critical. Nonetheless, for Torode, Remfry, Willan, McIntyre, and even the Labour Movement's harshest critics, such as Selma James, class politics was fundamental to their feminism. Indeed, the similarity between James' arguments and Torode's thoughts is striking. Speaking of those concerned only with men's wage rate, she asserted:

> I'm a socialist and a revolutionary and they're not. When you've encompassed the whole thing and understood it all and fought for it, I don't mean you as an individual, I mean as a group, that collective response to imperialism is the revolution, whether it ever actually manifests, but it is, isn't it. That's what the revolution is, not what some partial Left groups, Left men think it is.[643]

This was a point alluded to by McIntyre in discussing her experiences of women's role in supporting the miners' strike. She recalled that miners' wives trying to feed their families during the strike was an equally important part of the class struggle as what was happening on the picket lines and illustrated how gender structured class conflict differently for men and women.[644] Thus, the important thing for most feminists was not to discard the institutions of class politics but to understand them as an important part of a broader class struggle to be challenged, supported and negotiated with in different circumstances. This was a perspective summarised by Torode:

> I just see it all as yeast, you know, the trade union movement is the yeast underneath all these other layers, all reflecting back in, kind of a, what's it, a circle, going in and coming out and 'what do you think of the trade union?' and 'what's happening here?' and going on big demonstrations together about this.[645]

[643] Interview with Torode.
[644] Interview with McIntyre.
[645] Interview with Torode.

Thus, for all of their critiques, most feminists shared a theoretical and practical commitment to 'dual militancy' in the fields of class and gender struggle, which was expressed in statements like Torode's and the many actions of solidarity with women workers involved in industrial disputes.

Conclusions

The reflections of women's liberationists from the Coast Group and across Britain on the relationship between the WLM and the Labour Movement in its many forms bear out Meyer's point that political movements in this period had a 'synergistic effect on each other and on a larger climate of intense participation and possibility.'[646] Whether the Labour Movement underpinned the WLM or the WLM and movements like it bolstered the Labour Movement, as different members of the Coast Group contended, it was certainly true that the two were fundamentally interlinked.[647] The relationship between them was not one of rejection or acquiescence but of a critical engagement which was essential to many women's liberationists' identities. Even for those born outside of the cultures surrounding the British class system, it did not take long for immigrant feminists to assimilate an understanding of the importance of class to British politics and its connection to gender, such as had been the case for Paczuska and Graessle, among others.[648]

Through its critiques, solidarity with women on strike, and direct engagement with the Labour Movement through the WWCC, the WLM and its individual members contributed to changes in the Labour Movement and on the Left. Furthermore, many women's liberationists constructed their own political ideologies and identities in conversation with the Labour Movement and constructed a movement that was fundamentally concerned with women's class and the class struggle. The Labour Movement was 'integral' to the WLM and the two movements shared 'a certain consciousness' and goals around class struggle. Whilst this was truer of socialist-feminists than their radical or revolutionary sisters, the latter were often inclined to accept capitalism as a powerful structure of oppression, even if it sat below patriarchy in their political pecking order. Moreover, the socialist-feminist current within the WLM was undoubtedly dominant for much of the period. Socialist-feminists had become increasingly organised by the early

[646] Meyer, 'Restating the Woman Question', p. 289.
[647] Interview with Torode; Interview with Willan.
[648] 'Paczuska Interview' *Once a Feminist*, p. 149; 'Graessle Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 132.

1970s and pursued their own national and regional conferences shortly after the WLM's formation.[649] The dominance of this ideological strand goes some way to explaining why other voices within the WLM have been harder to recover: most feminists did not think of class struggle primarily in terms of difference but in terms of shared values.[650]

Indeed, this connection was so compelling amongst members of the Coast Group that it trumped concerns over detailing their experiences to a male researcher. Their acceptance of my legitimacy was predicated on demonstrating these shared values and approaching my research from the same 'ideological base'.[651] The research process itself thereby revealed that the three prongs of intersubjectivity in the analysis of oral history are not parallel but intimately intertwined. It was the combination of the interviewees' conversations with themselves, with me, and this shared culture that enabled me to gain access and provided powerful insights into the relationship between individual feminists and the WLM with class politics.[652] The shared goals of the interviews – and the broader research – also mitigated the unequal power relationships in the process. The interviews and analysis became integrated a negotiated but essentially shared subjectivity.[653]

Thus, despite its predominantly middle-class socio-economic composition and evident inability to become a 'mass' movement, the WLM was committed to class politics in word and deed more often than not. This was because, in spite of second-wave feminism being perceived persistently as the progenitor of 'identity politics', most feminists did not practice the 'politics of identity' but what Brah has called the 'politics of identification'.[654] As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the idea of class struggle permeated much of British society, and to an even greater extent in its 'progressive' sections. The WLM, born out of the Left and the industrial disputes of working-class women, was never likely to reject class politics even as it critiqued its institutions and attitudes.

Indeed, it was in the process of this critical engagement with class that the WLM was able to develop ideas which took into account the significance of women's particular

[649] Ross and Bearse, 'Chronology', pp. 14-15.
[650] Browne, 'Women's Liberation' (unpublished thesis), p. 15; Rees, 'All the Rage' (unpublished thesis).
[651] Interview with Remfry.
[652] Abrams, 'Memory as both source and subject', p. 97.
[653] Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 24.
[654] Brah, *Cartographies*, p. 93.

class experience. In so doing, not only did they not reject class, they put great effort into reimagining it, and, from some perspectives, 'advancing' class analysis and class struggle.[655] Rather than invoking 'women' as the only collectivity of political action, as the movement was subsequently critiqued for, the politics of class sat alongside feminism and created the potential for outward-looking politics opposed to 'essentialism'.[656] Whilst the Labour Movement was tied to class struggle in the workplace, feminists sought to reframe class in novel and more inclusive ways that broadened the scope of class politics and showed how it intersected with other types of oppression.

[655] Jenny Clegg and Francis Bernstein, 'Marxist-Feminists and Marxism-Leninism (or from socialist women to Marxist Feminists), Birmingham Women and Socialism Conference 1974, *Feminist Library Pamphlet Collection*.
[656] Phillips, *Gender and Culture*, p. 71.

3. Class struggle in the reproductive sphere

Whilst critical in their perspective, it is clear that many women's liberationists were committed to women's industrial struggles and class politics in the workplace. However, there was also a strong theoretical and activist current within the WLM that was frustrated by the limited horizons of traditional class politics. As a result, many in the WLM aimed to 'advance' class struggle into different areas that the Labour Movement had little interest in or direct responsibility for.[657] This critical position was summarised in a paper by Jenny Clegg and Francis Bernstein at the Birmingham Women and Socialism Conference in 1974, which stated:

> The traditions of the 'left', viewing class struggle simply in terms of labour against capital, have effectively stultified the development of a revolutionary perspective, for, in the relative social peace and material security of post-war Britain, the 'left' has idolized and idealized a working class tied to imperialism, riddled with national, racial and sexual chauvinism.[658]

Feminists argued that class struggle did not take place solely in the workplace but also in the home and the community. This was a widely shared perspective within the WLM and, as Ellen Malos has asserted, underlined the importance of the movement's critique of the Far Left, summarised in feminists' call for 'No socialism without women's liberation'.[659] The concern with struggles in the home and the community within the WLM shared a connection with the 'new left' politics of the late 1960s, which focused on liberation and emancipation rather than the economic basis of conflict between labour and capital.[660] Beyond this, the WLM's interest in the politics of 'everyday life', expressed famously in the mantra, 'the personal is political', was commensurate with community politics, which, in practice, were tied directly to issues of housing and welfare.[661]

However, this was also problematic for a British feminist movement connected ideologically to class politics. The umbrella of 'community action' was, as Cynthia Cockburn has argued, 'linked to ideas of 'consumer protection' which 'tends to cast [those in struggle] in the role of consumers (of capital's products and the state's

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[657] Clegg and Bernstein, 'Marxist-Feminist and Marxism-Leninism', p. 101.
[658] Ibid., p. 100.
[659] Ellen Malos, 'Introduction', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 10.
[660] Marjorie Mayo, 'Introduction', in Marjorie Mayo (ed.), *Women in the Community* (London, 1977), p. ix.
[661] Elizabeth Wilson, 'Women in the Community', in Mayo (ed.), *Women*, p. 2.

services), a position that is economically and politically weak.'[662] Feminists were consequently worried that struggles away from the workplace, and therefore a direct confrontation between labour and capital, could be construed as less radical struggles for 'rights' rather than a class struggle against capitalism. In short, there was an awareness of the need to distinguish between what Erik Olin Wright has described as 'ameliorative reforms' and 'real utopian transformations'.[663] The former demand improvements in existing institutions and structures while the latter 'envision the contours of an alternative social world that embodies emancipatory ideals and then look for social innovations we can create in the world as it is that move us towards that destination.'[664] The solution for feminists involved in 'community action' was to relate these struggles back to capitalism: they were not struggles over production but struggles in the field of capitalist *reproduction*.[665] Thus, as Jan O'Malley has asserted, 'Though under capitalism, production and consumption, work and the home, workmates and family appear as separate spheres of social experience, they are indissolubly linked.'[666] This was a perspective shared by almost all socialist-feminists within the WLM, regardless of whether they had an affiliation to a Far Left group.

Indeed, this remained the case even as a focus on housework provided an inherent critique of traditional class politics. Caroline Freemond and Jane Tate, for example, argued that middle-class housewives should be not seen as 'bourgeois' automatically and had the potential to form coalitions with the working class through their position as reproductive labourers under capitalism.[667] Similarly, a member of a 'Big Flame' group in London – an autonomous socialist-feminist group but identifying with the Far Left – entered factory employment with the motivation to 'understand more about women's struggle as waged workers and to be able to confront the problems of breaking down the separation between women's struggles as waged labourers and as unpaid labourers in the home.'[668] Prominent socialist-feminists like Sheila Rowbotham agreed, arguing that the importance of the WLM was that it was able to 'cut through the separation between home and work, production and consumption, wage earner and dependant,

[662] Cynthia Cockburn, *The Local State: Management of Cities and People* (London, 1977), p. 160.
[663] Erik Olin Wright, 'Socialism and Real Utopias', in Robin Hahnel and Erik Olin Wright, *Alternatives to Capitalism: Proposals for a Democratic Economy* (New Left Project: Kindle, 2014).
[664] Ibid.
[665] Cockburn, *State*, p. 163.
[666] Jan O'Malley, *The Politics of Community Action* (Nottingham, 1977), p. 174.
[667] Freemond and Tate, 'Class Struggle', Women and Socialism Conference, 1974, pp. 82-84.
[668] Big Flame Women, 'Women Against Wage Labour: An Account by a Women's Group Working in an East End Factory' (undated: c. late 1970s), p. 1.

man and women, which has always helped to make capitalism stable.'[669] In attempting to cross this production-reproduction boundary, women's liberationists often constructed themselves in the role of 'revolutionary vanguard' that needed to, among other things, 'bridge the split in the working-class between the home and the factory'.[670]

Whilst rather less revolutionary in their intent, even the Women's Section of the Labour Party discussed the issue and concluded that, 'The service a housewife gives to the home is not adequately recognised in law.'[671] Others associated primarily with the Labour Movement, such as female trade unionist and feminist, Audrey Wise, disputed the centrality of housework to women's class struggles, and argued that 'being a housewife is just a stage in many people's lives' and reasserted the primacy of workplace struggles, but nevertheless critiqued the idea that a woman could be 'just a housewife'.[672]

What was particular significant for those defining as women's liberationists was that a class struggle in the field of reproduction was able to include many working-class women excluded from struggles over production, and could be expanded to cover the politics of *actual* reproduction and maintenance of workers under capitalism or the ideological reproduction of the class system and its relationship to patriarchal structures, roles which were populated predominantly by women.[673] Thus, class struggle in the field of reproduction was a class struggle that was inextricably tied to feminism: it was women's class struggle.

However, whilst many feminists identified with challenging the capitalist mode of reproduction, the methods and theoretical approaches they developed to do so differed greatly. This chapter charts some of those differences focusing on sites of significant conflict. It begins by considering how the 'Wages for Housework' strand of the WLM attempted to reconfigure ideas of class and work into forms that could incorporate the role of women's unpaid domestic labour into an analysis of capitalism and patriarchy. It questions why WFH caused tensions and passionate disagreements between feminists even when a commitment to feminism and class struggle was shared explicitly. It suggests that conflicts over personalities and tactics were crucial and exacerbated existing disagreements around whether WFH's synonymous solution to unpaid labour

[669] Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Carrot, the Stick and the Movement', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 199.
[670] Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas and Hilary Wainwright, 'The Housewife and her Labour under Capitalism – a critique', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 232.
[671] Labour Party, 'Women in Society: Second class citizens today. But what about tomorrow?' (1975), *Feminist Library Pamphlet Collection*.
[672] Audrey Wise in *Shrew*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (February, 1971), p. 8.
[673] Cockburn, *State*, p. 166.

was a regressive or progressive measure. The chapter also considers how effective feminists' *political* constructions of class, whether tied to WFH or not, were in appealing to the socio-economically defined working-class women with whom they sought to build 'sisterhood'. It will argue that working-class women's attitudes towards the home and domestic labour suggested that feminists' had accurately ascertained the roots of the former's political oppression but that the socio-economic class barriers between the two groups, and the absence of an obvious opponent or clear site of struggle, often prevented the development of a shared politics of identification.

It then moves on to analyse struggles situated within the sphere of community action and outlines some of the ways that feminists again attempted to engage with working-class women in this arena through Claimants' Unions and by addressing welfare and housing concerns. It analyses the interaction between the WLM and CUs and argues that in similar ways to class politics in the workplace and the home, even politically active working-class women in these groups tended to use economic and cultural understandings of class to differentiate their political identities from a feminist movement perceived as fundamentally middle class.

This chapter will therefore conclude that, much as had been the case in the workplace, whilst feminists practised the politics of identification in the field of capitalist reproduction, and attempted to reconstruct the meaning of class in the process, this political redefinition was rarely adopted by women who saw themselves as working class in economic and cultural terms. Nevertheless, women's liberationists' approach did enable them to build political solidarities at the point of struggle and feminist sentiments and comments ran through the ideology, attitudes and practise of working-class women engaged in housework and community action.

Feminism, Wages for Housework and working-Class women

Early liberationists' strong links to the 'left' but dissatisfaction with the Labour Movement's focus on the productive sphere of struggle to the neglect of unpaid labour and the reproductive sphere, made women's often subordinate position within households a key concern of the WLM. For feminist scholars of Marxist theory, there was a desire to redefine the role of labour in capitalism in ways which took account of women's position.[674] Feminists noted that Marx, in contrast to many in the Labour Movement, had understood production and reproduction in capitalism as interlinked. In *Capital Volume One* he stated: 'The maintenance and reproduction of the working class

[674] Malos, 'Introduction', p. 21.

is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital.'[675] However, he was less clear on the exact nature of this relationship and as a result, various interpretations were possible. Within the WLM three positions emerged.

The first, associated with Margaret Benston, was that housewives served an ideological function within capitalism by reproducing the family unit and capitalist social relations in ways that enabled it to function.[676] Thus, household labour constituted a 'huge amount of socially necessary production' but since it existed outside of trade and the market place, it could not be commodified under capitalism without massive wealth redistribution – in effect, the payment of a wage.[677] Conversely, the second position understood housework as not only *reproducing* capitalism but also producing a commodity for capital via a housewife's husband and children; thus, in contrast to Benston's position, housewives were engaged in *productive* labour in the Marxist sense.[678] As a result, those taking this perspective argued that housewives should receive a wage. The third position straddled its two counterparts in agreeing with the WFH perspective that the housewife served an economic role within capitalism through the reproduction of labour power, but concurred with Benston's view that this was not 'productive' labour.[679]

Of these perspectives, it was the second which came to dominate discussions within the WLM and its political expression, 'Wages for Housework', was to become a highly controversial and infamous section of the WLM. The theory and political ideology behind WFH was laid out originally by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James in their pamphlet, 'The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community', in which they applied an interpretation of Marxist theory to argue that housework was 'productive labour' because it served 'an essential function in the production of surplus value'.[680] However, at the theory's embryonic stage, they warned against the use of a 'pension' for housewives due to its potential to 'institutionalize women as housewives and men as wage slaves.'[681] Nonetheless, by 1972 their perspective had altered. At the National Women's Liberation Conference in Manchester that year, Selma James presented

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[675] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, Chapter 23, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch23.htm (Accessed 20/07/2014).
[676] Malos, 'Introduction', pp. 23-24.
[677] Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), pp. 121, 128.
[678] Malos, 'Introduction', p. 24.
[679] Ibid.
[680] Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, 'The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community' (1972), https://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james (Accessed 15/09/2014)
[681] Ibid.

another paper which developed some of the earlier ideas entitled, 'Women, the Unions and Work: Or What is Not to be Done', in which she suggested that the four original demands voted on at Ruskin College in 1970 should be replaced by six alternatives.[682] These were:

1. We demand the right to work less.
2. We demand a guaranteed income for women and for men, working or not working, married or not… we demand wages for housework.
3. We demand the right to not have children.
4. We demand equal pay for all.
5. We demand an end to price rises.
6. We demand free community-controlled nurseries and childcare.[683]

The key demand was the second, which framed the demand for guaranteed incomes alongside 'wages for housework', which, whilst noting that this would also apply to male housekeepers, appeared to ignore the enormous concentration of women in that role.[684] James had moved from the theoretical position of seeing housework as productive labour to the concrete political demand that it should therefore carry a wage.

James' intervention caused immediate splits as feminists lined up along the three positions outlined above, with those associated with the Wages for Housework strand increasingly emphasising their demand as the only expression of the theory it was based on.[685] One key attraction of Wages for Housework for some Marxist-feminists within the WLM was that it offered, as Costa and James had argued, a 'material foundation for "sisterhood".'[686] James consistently emphasised the WFH's direct relationship with class struggle, and, more than that, its ability to use feminism and class to bridge the 'totality of exploitation… and therefore grasp[s] the totality of working-class struggle'.[687] In her words, '*No working-class organization has ever done that before*.'[688] For James, class was not only central to WFH's feminism; women's unpaid labour was the true foundation of class struggle. This was linked strongly to James' understanding of class identity, which

[682] Selma James, 'Women, the Unions and Work, Or What is Not to be Done', https://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/selmajamesra.pdf, pp. 67-8 (Accessed 16/09/2014); Malos, 'Introduction', p. 22.
[683] James, 'Women, the Unions', pp. 67-8.
[684] Ibid., p. 68.
[685] Malos, 'Introduction', p. 30.
[686] Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, 'The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community (1972)', in Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class: The Perspective of Winning* (Pontypool, 2012), p. 45.
[687] Selma James, 'The Perspective of Winning (1973)', in James, *Sex*, p. 80.
[688] Ibid.

she asserted was based on her political perspective rather than sociological in nature.[689] Whilst this self-definition was reinforced in her arguments against the Industrial Relations Act and unwavering focus on the oppression of sociologically defined working-class women, there was also an obvious political expediency to this identification. Fundamentally, it enabled criticisms of the WLM's class composition to be dismissed: if *all* women were responsible for domestic labour then it followed that *all* women were inherently working class.[690]

There are a range of interesting implications in this approach for how 'class' should be defined, including a relationship between the ideology of WFH and theories of intersectionality around political identity. In some important respects, WFH challenged the primacy of class exploitation and oppression through discussions of its blindness to race and gender. Writing in 1974, James argued: 'Yet if sex and race are pulled away from class, virtually all that remains is the truncated, provincial, sectarian politics of the white male metropolitan Left.'[691] And furthermore: 'And so we have learnt by bitter experience that nothing unified and revolutionary will be formed until each section of the exploited will have made its own autonomous power felt.'[692] There are parallels in these points with the problems of intersecting oppressions and identities raised by Collins and Scott whereby the lived experience of a black working-class woman is different from an individual situated alternatively along the axes of class, gender and race.[693] However, James in fact shared more similarities with 'Structure-Consciousness-Agency' approaches to political identity and action than intersectionality. This is because James emphasised the direct relationship between economic position and political action: housework is productive labour (structure), therefore all houseworkers are working-class (consciousness) and should consequently engage in class struggle (action). Thus, intersecting differences are recognised but then combined and collapsed to form a reconfigured but still totalising construction of 'class' that strips away sex and race differences in the light of a unified class struggle. Despite linking economic role to class so directly, this is a fundamentally *political* construction of class because it dismisses socio-economic differences between women, who, through their domestic labour, become working class. Nevertheless, the political expediency of a definition of class which erased Far Left critiques of second-wave feminism's 'middle-class' composition would surely have been met with sympathy?

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[689] Selma James, 'Women, the Unions and Work, or What is Not to be Done', in James, *Sex*, p. 74.
[690] Ibid.
[691] Selma James, 'Sex, Race and Class (1974)', in James, *Sex*, p. 92.
[692] Ibid., p. 100.
[693] Collins, *Feminist Thought*; Scott, *Gender*, p. 25 and *Fantasy*, p. 36; Anthias, 'Social Stratification'.

In practice, a combination of theoretical disagreements, and the political problems around organisation and ideology they were seen to lead to, and sharp social divisions between supporters of WFH and those rejecting its approach put paid to any chance of political cohesion. Beginning with the theoretical disputes and their political implications, many feminist critiques of WFH were as embedded in Marxist approaches to class as WFH itself. As a result, many of the discussions revolved around Marx's definitions of 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour and ambiguity enabled common ground. As noted above, Marx did see production and reproduction as interlinked and an acceptance of this broad connection created shared ground between those for and against WFH.[694] Many feminists noted how the debate was both necessary and fruitful for developing a Marxist-feminist theory of women's domestic labour, such as Ellen Malos' comment that Selma James' interventions on the issue were 'vital' to the WLM, or Caroline Freeman's point that discussions could develop women's liberation theoretically and practically.[695] Most common was the position taken by Ros Delmar, who agreed with WFH proponents on 'some points' but was in 'fundamental disagreement with her [James] conclusions and with many of her theoretical positions'.[696] Freeman, for example, suggested that the WFH strand were correct to see housework – and reproductive labour more broadly – as essential to capitalism, but asserted that it was a mistake to see it as 'productive' in the Marxist sense because it did not produce surplus value.[697]

What was more important to many of WFH's critics, though, were the political implications of the 'Wages for Housework' demand itself. For Malos, the changing of the demand from a 'guaranteed income for all' to 'wages for housework' would result in 'institutionalising' women's domestic role, just as Dalla Costa and James had argued in their original formulation.[698] This critique was shared across the WLM. Rowbotham noted that a wage would not socialise domestic labour but 'confirm the isolation of the houseworker' from the productive labourer whilst Joan Landes agreed on both points, asserting that WFH would 'freeze' women into those jobs and could also divide the working class further as the demand ignored that a wage for housework would likely be paid for by increased taxation on the male wage, which wives already shared at a

[694] Marx, *Capital*.
[695] Malos, 'Introduction', p. 22; Caroline Freeman, 'When is a Wage not a Wage?', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 209.
[696] Ros Delmar, 'Oppressed Politics', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 210.
[697] Freeman, 'Wage', p. 203.
[698] Malos, 'Introduction', pp. 22-23, 32; Dalla Costa and James, 'The Power of Women'.

household level.[699] As Freeman argued, 'If we want wages for housework, we must accept that it would be tied to *doing* housework.'[700] Fundamentally, a wage would not alter the relations of production and would still leave women disadvantaged politically.[701] Indeed, it is the critiques that have endured in later feminist histories of the period, such as Valerie Bryson's conclusion in 2003 that WFH was unable to take account of class and racial differences between women, or, like the wider reserve army of labour theory of women's oppression under capitalism, why it was women performing domestic labour in the first place.[702]

However, the key problem for socialist-feminists outside of WFH lay elsewhere and was that rather than attempting to link the productive and reproductive modes of class struggle, it seemed to reject completely organising at the point of production – the formal workplace. As discussed in the previous chapter, James' paper, 'Women, the Unions and Work', was not only an effort to place domestic labour at the centre of any future class politics, it was also a visceral critique of the Labour Movement and implied a total rejection of traditional class politics (although as the previous chapter also demonstrated, this was more of a rhetorical stance than political reality). Nevertheless, this severing of the productive and reproductive was extremely problematic for socialist-feminists like Rowbotham who valued women's workplace struggles alongside a commitment to ending domestic exploitation. Her response to James was emphatic in this respect: 'Simply because some boneheaded Marxist men have been dozy enough to stress only economic organising doesn't mean that we have to rush off in the opposite direction.'[703] She continued by asserting that one type of organisation should not come at the expense of the other and tied this to the very purpose of the WLM:

> The importance of Women's Liberation is that it makes it possible to cut through the separation between home and work, production and consumption, wage earner and dependant, man and woman, which has always helped to make capitalism stable. That is why working-class women are such an important group – their class and sex situation makes the connection *necessary*.[704]

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[699] Rowbotham, 'Carrot', p. 199; Joan Landes, 'Wages for Housework: Political and Theoretical Considerations', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), pp. 266, 272.
[700] Freeman, 'Wage', p. 206.
[701] Landes, 'Wages for Housework', pp. 266, 271.
[702] Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction 2nd Edition* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 207.
[703] Rowbotham, 'Carrot', p. 199.
[704] Ibid.

The problem was summarised by Freeman, who noted that 'opting out' of production was not a route to revolutionary struggle against the capitalist mode of production and reproduction.[705] It was around the idea of 'revolution', and the distinction between what Wright has called 'ameliorative reforms' and 'real utopian transformations', that the debate hinged. For many socialist-feminists who were committed to a dual class and sex militancy, revolution would be impossible without struggle in both the productive and reproductive spheres. Thus, to focus on wages alone – either in the formal workplace or the home – would be at best a reformist measure, and at worst, when it came to domestic labour, a formalising of the sexual division of labour.

However, for proponents of WFH, this conflation was 'absurd'.[706] Silvia Federici, for example, argued that: 'The waged worker in struggling for more wages challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages *we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role*.'[707] Thus, the demand was not simply reformist but also a transformative demand that would inherently challenge women's domestic exploitation. This was an important corrective to the dismissal of WFH as a reactionary demand, which even some of WFH's critics, such as Benston, took on board, arguing that because there was a material basis to women's exploitation in the home, 'Pressure created by women who challenge their role will reduce the effectiveness of this exploitation.'[708]

What was clear above all was that regardless of whether women's liberationists supported WFH or not, the debates it raised once again illustrated the centrality of both class and class politics to the British WLM. The debate was fundamentally concerned with the definition of productive and reproductive labour within Marxist theory and how this related to a definition of class that could take account of those both in and outside the formal workplace. Moreover, the reason that this was not important was not to develop an abstract, academic theory of class, but to contribute to how actual class struggles took place in the workplace and the home and how women's experiences problematised the traditional 'economic socialist' argument which focused solely on production. As Rowbotham argued, women's liberation's importance was in unifying class and sex struggles; this is what made it '*necessary*'.[709] She was not alone. Others,

[705] Freeman, 'Wage', p. 207.
[706] Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', in Ellen Malos (ed.), *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 257.
[707] Ibid.
[708] Benston, 'Political Economy', p. 128.
[709] Rowbotham, 'Carrot', p. 199.

such as Coulson, Magas and Wainwright were equally explicit about the WLM's 'vanguard' role, which they argued:

> Must bridge the split in the working class between the home and the factory, that will take up the inequality of women in production, that will fight for women's right to work, that will fight for equality of women within working-class organisations in a society as a whole, that will fight against the sexual division of labour, that will fight for free birth control and free abortion on demand, that will combat sexual repression, and so on… This is a difficult task, but not an impossible one; for precisely, it is rooted in the needs of the proletariat, both male and female.[710]

Thus, the discussions over theoretical differences concealed a crucial political commonality: that feminism and class struggle were innately intertwined.

Nevertheless, despite sharing a focus on the intertwining of feminism and class struggle, and recognition from its critics that WFH raised important points regarding the definition of class and socialist-feminist political action, supporters and detractors seemed to be divided into distinctly separate camps.

However, this may have owed as much to social divisions between the women identifying with the different strands as to the theoretical disagreements. Indeed, members of WLM groups across the country reported on the difficulties of dealing with proponents of WFH, including James, who were seen as very 'divisive' within the movement.[711] Members of Big Flame, for example, were irked by WFH proponents' frequent usage of derogatory terms to describe those who disagreed with them, such as 'sham socialists'.[712] Relations were particularly fraught in Bristol where one liberationist, writing as a representative of Bristol Women's Centre, noted that WFH was an 'important issue' but suggested the problem with its supporters was that 'they take the position that unless you agree with them 100% you are intrinsically evil and should be destroyed.'[713] She added that 'basically we don't trust them' and warned feminists of their 'disguises' as Wages Due Lesbians, Wimvisible, English Collective of Prostitutes et al.[714] Things reached their nadir when the Women's Centre took the unusual position of

[710] Coulson, Magas and Wainwright, 'The Housewife', p. 232.
[711] Bristol WLM Group, 'Discussion Bulletin No. 1' (1977), *FAS: Politics/Policy 3*.
[712] Big Flame Women (Leeds and London), 'Women's Liberation as a Mass Movement and its Relationship to Class Struggle', *FAS: Politics/Policy 9*.
[713] JDH for Bristol Women's Centre, 'The Bristol Women's Centre Position on the Wages for Housework Campaign' (1979), *FAS: Politics/Policy 44*.
[714] Ibid.

banning WFH from the centre despite a number of shared views on housework and other issues.[715] It was also telling that one of the Coast Group feminists in North Tyneside – detached from day-to-day interactions with WFH campaigners and James specifically – made an almost identical point. Penny Remfry recalled:

> It's that she was seen as very factional so I would think, would be kind of, would be seen then as a very male kind of way, so rather than listening to each other and kind of, having discussion, they would talk at you, tell you that their line was the right line and if you didn't agree with them then you were obviously wrong and beyond the pale kind of thing. So again, I think it was the way they operated.[716]

WFH documents suggest that this 'comply or die' approach to interaction with other feminists was not overstated. WFH campaigners did not shy away from antagonising the rest of the movement, as a statement on the nature of the WLM at the end of the 1970s demonstrated: 'There seem to be a number of tendencies in the Women's Movement. In fact there are only two: those who are for women's work and those who are against it.'[717] In short, those who disagreed were siding with capitalism and patriarchy. It was therefore to be expected that those tarred with this brush, such as Sue O'Sullivan, have argued that the uncompromising approach of WFH activists undermined their theoretical perspective in a way that should prohibit any revision of their contributions. She recalled that they were such 'divisive, sectarian people' that some feminists 'thought that they were maybe plants by the CIA [laughs] to sow the seeds of division in the Women's Movement.'[718] While her laughter indicated that this was understood to be preposterous, the suggestion highlighted how powerful the split between the two camps became. Even those sympathetic to WFH's analysis, such as Gail Chester, were critical of their methods and activities, although she noted that they were more successful in reaching black and ethnic minority women, which 'can't be said of large swathes of the rest of the Women's Liberation Movement.'[719] This was also a point picked up on by Remfry, who, when discussing class and racial differences within the WLM, brought up the re-issue of Selma James' collection of essays, *Sex, Race and Class*, in 2011.[720] In her statement, the first time James is mentioned in the interview, Remfry, in

[715] Ibid.
[716] Interview with Remfry.
[717] Power of Women Collective, 'Women's Liberation Means the End of Women's Work' (undated: c. 1977-78), *FAS: Politics/Policy 44*.
[718] Interview with O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[719] Interview with Chester, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[720] Interview with Remfry.

contrast to her later critique of WFH's tactics, was complimentary towards James' contributions to seventies feminism:

> It's interesting, they've just reprinted Selma James', *Race, Class and Sex*, and er, you know, that was a brilliant book back then, and it's interesting that it's been reprinted now because, she deals with all those issues, and of course, there's lots of black women writers, feminists, that have dealt with those class and race issues, erm, but I think Selma James, as far as I know, certainly back then was the only one who addressed those, those three issues together, yeah, being all three of those herself, a black woman, a working-class woman.[721]

Remfry's narrative composure was disrupted in this section of the interview but her repetition of the tension between WFH and other feminists as being tactical and behavioural rather than ideological indicated that she thought this distinction was important to make. On two further occasions in remarks on James and WFH, Remfry commented on the organisational tension but also the ideological respect:

> I organised a whole series of public meetings, we used to have them at Tyneside Cinema, and one of them was when we had Selma James come up and talk about WFH, yeah, yeah, outrageous (laughs) but er, she, I think it was her way of organising as much as, more than what she said actually that was contentious, and er, English Collective of Prostitutes was part of that, and still seen as very factional I think and that's what generated animosity I think to Selma James and to WFH, not what she said so much, because I think, you know, it's a discussion to be had around that and some people would definitely agree with her, and it certainly generated really interesting discussion when we had her up here.[722]

And:

> You know, if you read *Race, Class and Sex*… it made sense to me then and it would probably make sense to me now actually. So WFH, there's a good argument, a good discussion to be had around that really but again, she has a reputation even now, I mean amongst younger women because, you know, there's the North East Feminist gathering, and I remember the first one I

[721] Ibid.
[722] Ibid.

> suggested bringing Selma James up to get a discussion going and er, and the two women I was talking to were in their early 40s, and they said "ooh, Selma James, ooh" (laughs).[723]

Another of the Coast Group, Anne Torode, shared in this view although was keener to emphasise James' theoretical contributions than the organisational discord with other feminists, of which she stated only of the general factor that the London experience was distinctive from elsewhere, 'if we were in London God knows what we would have thought about anything, you know what I mean, cos it's a maelstrom, a "femaelstrom" down there of different views'.[724] Torode's account instead focused on how WFH had drawn attention to women's economic contribution to capitalism through domestic labour and how this 'underpins capitalist production'.[725] She added: 'I've got a great deal of admiration for her [James]. I don't necessarily agree with her but then if women did get wages for housework we could refuse to do the work, which is what she was saying, she wasn't saying "Oh, I'm going to have wages for housework so I can enjoy hoovering", she was saying once you get wages for work then you can say sod it'.[726] There was also a sense that Torode felt that while WFH's critics did not misunderstand its theory, then they perhaps misjudged its motivations: 'and I think – no, they didn't misunderstand her but where she was coming from I thought it was spot on in her analysis.'[727] Thus, away from the 'femaelstrom', sisterhood between James and other feminists remained strong.

Nevertheless, the dual-sided nature to WFH's intervention in the WLM – the positive spotlight on domestic labour and the intersection of sex, race and class but extremely divisive political organisation – played out in the view of many feminists, including the black and Asian feminists WFH was apparently able to reach. Prominent Asian Marxist-Feminist, Amrit Wilson, for example, agreed with the principles of WFH but shared many others' critique of the group's tactics, suggesting also that racial differences in experiences could not be easily defined.[728]

Equally common though was an outright dismissal, with James the subject of particular dislike in a large number of oral histories, in which she was described as 'outrageous,

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[723] Ibid..
[724] Interview with Torode.
[725] Ibid.
[726] Ibid.
[727] Ibid.
[728] Interview with Wilson, 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'

and mad, and bad', as well as being 'despise[d]'.[729] Sympathy for WFH or not, James was framed frequently as a destructive sectarian force against sisterhood. Indeed, Selma James was not interviewed as part of the *Sisterhood and After* project, implying that the disjuncture in the 1970s has seen her position as part of the WLM come into question. This is particularly odd when WFH was discussed by nearly half of the 60 participants.[730] Moreover, James has been interviewed before about her role in the WLM as part of Michelene Wandor's 1990 collection, *Once a Feminist*, which situated her alongside many of the same interviewees for *Sisterhood and After*.[731] However, this contemporary detachment from the movement may owe as much to James as her detractors. In her interview with Wandor, James reiterated her belief that women's issues were inherently working-class issues and that this political definition of class was what distinguished her, and WFH, from the rest of the WLM.[732] Discussing the 1970 Ruskin conference, she recalled:

> I was disturbed at the conference, but I was never able to verbalise until last year about what precisely disturbed me. Most of the women were what you would call middle class or upper middle class, and they attacked the lack of access of women to power. After turning it over and over in my mind… what bothered me then was the difference between being against injustice and being jealous of other people's power to perpetrate injustice. There's a lot of the latter in the Women's Movement, women angry with men for having the power they want.[733]

The antipathy, then, was mutual, but not, in James' eyes, built around tactical or personality conflicts. Instead, it was women's liberationists' failure to incorporate class into their analysis effectively, or to be prepared for the revolutionary outcome of doing so that shaped the divide. However, James' ire for the picket line crossing feminists of Detroit could not be so easily applied to their British counterparts, who, as the previous chapters have illustrated, were more likely to be found on picket lines than crossing them.[734] Moreover, as the views of Remfry and Torode in Tyneside, and a range of feminists based in London and elsewhere, demonstrated, WFH's contributions to feminism have not been disregarded, nor has the strand itself been retrospectively

[729] Interview with Campbell, 'Sisterhood and After'; Interview with O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[730] *Sisterhood and After Oral History Project*.
[731] Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*.
[732] 'James Interview', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 194, 196.
[733] Ibid., p. 196.
[734] Ibid., p. 192.

banished from the WLM. It was the social, not the ideological component of WFH that damaged relations.

However, one aspect of WFH's theory was particularly troubling for socialist-feminists and jarred with their political experiences. For many feminists, the universalising of the role of housewives to be commensurate with the working class through a purely *political* definition of class was problematic. Class is not only a political category. It also has socio-economic and cultural dimensions that cannot be collapsed into a totalising political approach. As Coulson, Magas and Wainwright noted at the time, 'revolutionary strategy does not flow spontaneously from the immediate economic conditions of working-class existence under capitalism.'[735] In this context, as Ellen Malos made clear, socio-economic and cultural distinctions between women undertaking domestic labour meant that the wives and mistresses of the capitalist class, though oppressed as women, clearly occupied a different class position to the wives of the proletariat, a socio-economic class difference which could not – and should not – be collapsed by a solely *political* definition of class.[736]

The problem of ignoring the socio-economic and cultural aspects of class was made clear by a study conducted by the North Tyneside Community Development Project (CDP) in 1978. The study, carried out by the female members of the CDP – who were also active in the Coast Women's Group, such as Remfry – focused on women's experiences in North Shields. The researchers carried out interviews with 107 women in the area, all working-class in socio-economic terms, and living in an economically deprived area with a high unemployment rate amongst men.[737] Unlike some of the other post-war studies, such as the *Affluent Worker* study carried out by John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, and revisited by Mike Savage and Jon Lawrence, respectively, the full interview transcripts are unavailable.[738] Nevertheless, this project follows Savage's and Lawrence's work in terms of asking similar questions as the original research being reconsidered. However, whereas Savage and Lawrence sought to apply an alternative analytical framework to the material and reached substantially different conclusions from the original researchers, this would be more challenging in my reappraisal of the CDP data. This is because, as the CDP researchers made explicit in their introduction, their study quickly transformed from an exercise in data collection to a politically

[735] Coulson et al., 'The Housewife', p. 231.
[736] Malos, 'Introduction', p. 28.
[737] North Tyneside Community Development Project, *North Shields: Women's Work – Vol. 5*, *Final Report* (Newcastle, 1978), p. 4.
[738] Savage, 'Working-class identities'; Lawrence, 'Social-science encounters', and 'Class, "affluence" and the study of everyday life in Britain, c. 1930-64', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:2 (2013).

charged analysis: 'This study, then, which started out as a relatively simple explanation of the work that women do in North Shields, has turned into a socialist-feminist analysis of the oppression of women in general.'[739] This presents two inter-related problems: firstly, the possibility of repeating any original selection bias in the material is inevitable, and secondly, is made all the more likely by my own sympathy for a socialist-feminist analysis. Nevertheless, sympathy is not congruence and there is an important distinction in our interpretations of the respondents' relationship with feminism and the WLM, which is returned to below. Moreover, the vast amount of material in the eighty-two page report still provides an important insight into the lives and views of working-class women in the North East, particularly on the issue of feminism and women's liberation, of which they were asked about directly. The study is consequently a rich source for uncovering the relationship between working-class women outside the workplace and feminist politics in the period.

On this point, the study revealed that feminist ideas around financial independence, the recognition of domestic labour as 'work' and the desire for autonomy and liberation from the patriarchal familial role were as prevalent in working-class women's attitudes as middle-class feminists. Many of the 107 women interviewed were keen to have financial independence, recognised domestic labour as just that, and wished for the opportunity to 'live for [themselves]' rather than their husbands and families.[740] Respondents frequently discussed their regrets at getting married early and their desire to have lived different lives free of domestic responsibilities.[741] One, Marjorie, reflected:

> I never had a life… I worked hard and I never really had any pleasure, so I think I would make a life for myself where I could, you know, do something to help people where you could say – well, that was good… Then I could say I had a good life and I had helped others.[742]

This sense of disillusionment with the ideals of domesticity was felt even more painfully by others, such as Eva, whose perception of imprisonment within her role had resulted in depression and suicidal thoughts:

> I'm a very, er, sometimes disturbed person. Now you might not believe it, many a night I feel like running away or on the other hand I feel like killing

[739] NTCDP, *Women's Work*, p. 5.
[740] NTCDP, *Women's Work*, pp. 9, 33, 82.
[741] Ibid., p. 82
[742] Ibid.

> myself because I've got the next day to come to. And then when I snap out of it I think I'm a really horrible person for thinking these things.[743]

The commonality of these feelings amongst the respondents punctured any assertion from the Far Left that it was the only productive side of capitalism that impacted on working-class lives. Furthermore, they highlighted that the double oppressions of class and sex were felt more deeply for those detached from the at least social function of the workplace, which many of the women commented on as important for general emotional wellbeing.[744] However, whilst the WLM's focus on these issues should seemingly have resonated with working-class women in these positions, class and gendered oppression had instead combined to produce fatalistic responses and disassociation with political action of any kind. Feminism in particular, it seemed, was seen as separate to the respondents' experiences. When asked about their views on the WLM, Eva told the researchers, 'I don't know, I don't know what it's about really. I'm not really interested. Actually, to be quite honest, I'm not really interested in anything. I've got no hobbies, nor nothing. All I'm interested in is my home and my children.'[745] Similarly, Hazel had little interest in discussing the topic: 'I don't, I don't agree with it. I've got no particular reason, I just don't.'[746] Indeed, national statistics on the usage of anti-anxiety drugs suggested that women were far more likely to turn to medication than liberation, with 19.1 per cent of women taking sedatives in 1971 compared to 8.9 per cent of men.[747] Whilst this oppression was primarily located within their experiences as women, disaffection was amplified by a class position which prevented respite from reproductive labour or the pursuit of independent interests.

Experiences were notably different for respondents who had entered the workplace, despite being only part-time. In addition to the already noted social benefits, there was also the opportunity for a degree of financial independence and even the development of class-consciousness.[748] In terms of the latter, June was cited as an example, as she became involved in a unionisation struggle in small privately-owned firm and through this process came to understand herself as a 'worker'.[749] The motivation also had parallels with the Grunwick dispute, where disrespect played a potent role in creating

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[743] Ibid., p. 20.
[744] Ibid., p. 35.
[745] Ibid., p. 82.
[746] Ibid.
[747] Mitchell Balter, Jerome Levine, and Dean Manheimer, 'Cross-national study of the extent of anti-anxiety/sedative drug use', *New England Journal of Medicine*, 290 (April, 1974), pp. 769-774.
[748] NTCDP, *Women's Work*, pp. 33, 54-55.
[749] Ibid., pp. 54-55.

antagonism between the employer and workers, highlighting Thompson's point that it is experience rather than simply the structure of production which is the spark of class-consciousness.[750] June recalled that 'after the union had come in he [the boss] gave us an ultimatum that if any girl joined a union they wouldn't work for his factory – I think it was that that decided us'.[751] From these beginnings, June went on to invert the traditional critique of women's lack of militancy that she asserted should have applied to the men who 'didn't have the guts, you know. I know they have responsibilities, I know they've got their homes and their families and everything you know, but they were the biggest moaners of the lot, they wanted everything done for them'.[752] Another who had gone out to work, Betty, was also one of the few to criticise patriarchal society overtly, stating:

> I think women should have taken over in this country. Too many women let men get away with it, they let them beat them down to the floor… I mean you look at all the greatest men, there's always somebody behind them. Every man needs a woman – but I don't think every woman needs a man![753]

However, such attitudes were rare and even for those like June who had been politicised by an antagonistic dispute within the workplace, the outcome was unlikely to spark a socialist-feminist revolution. Instead, her conclusions on her experiences resonated with some of the more famous disputes discussed earlier, dealing as they did, with trade union betrayal. She recalled:

> I had a few rows with the union as well. I found they were making agreements behind my back that I didn't think they had any right to make, you know. I always understood that a union made agreements between the workers, the boss and the unions, but I found it was just between the unions and the boss in this case… after that I've had very little to do with the union at all.[754]

Her experiences were not unusual in the area; women workers in Tyneside clothing factories were not represented by a branch, which was based eight miles away in Newcastle, thereby preventing any married women from attending, despite composing

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[750] Thompson, *Making*, pp. 8-9.
[751] NTCDP, *Women's Work*, p. 54.
[752] Ibid., p. 55.
[753] Ibid., p. 82.
[754] Ibid., p. 55.

900 of the 1500 unionised workers in the area.[755] One female worker noted: 'Our union is hopeless. The majority of the workers in the factory are women who work part-time but the men work full-time, so the union always does what the men want.'[756] Thus, when coupled with the reality that women chose jobs that fit in with their childcare and domestic responsibilities, which pushed them into similar paid work to these responsibilities, it was unsurprising that most in the study saw 'housewife' rather than 'worker' as their primary identity.[757] Moreover, the intersection of reproductive and productive labour in women's experiences illustrated the importance of the WLM's commitment to recognising both as fundamental aspects of class struggle and feminist politics. However, the double oppression of class, in terms of economic deprivation and dependency, and gendered expectations of women's domestic roles, allied with a detachment from an overt site of social struggle with an obvious opponent, was more likely to result in political paralysis than to act as an ignitor of consciousness or action. The CDP researchers seemed to agree, writing: 'The Women's Liberation Movement may not have had much impact upon the lives of the women we interviewed in North Shields.'[758] It was thereafter, however, where our interpretations split. They continued by arguing that due to their oppression as women in and of itself, the respondents their 'struggles and victories are the struggles and victories of both the feminist and the working-class movements.'[759] In the case of women's industrial action and development of political consciousness of class and gender, such as June, this was true.[760] But in other instances, even when women expressed feminist sentiments, class or gender consciousness should not be seen as equivalent to class or gender struggle. For the researchers, there was an understandable desire as socialist-feminist activists in these communities to understand the respondents as agents of these struggles, but this conclusion was arrived at regardless of their actions and attitudes. As a result, the inhibiting power of class and gender oppression on the many is lost in favour of emphasising the resistance of the few. Shared sentiments are significant but should not cloud the potent effects of economic deprivation on attitudes and behaviour.

Feminism and Community Action

In contrast to the faceless oppression of housework, women's involvement in community action did provide a more overt arena of conflict. The definition of struggles

[755] Ibid., p. 42.
[756] Ibid., p. 55.
[757] Ibid., pp. 45, 52.
[758] Ibid., p. 82.
[759] Ibid.
[760] Ibid., pp. 54-55.

over welfare and housing was again of great importance to the WLM, which, as outlined above, focused on framing community action as part of the same struggle in the field of capitalist reproduction as housework.[761] The theory was matched by practice in many areas of Britain. Women's liberation groups supported squatters, nursery campaigns, and women involved in welfare and housing disputes around the country. All members of the Coast Women's Group, for example, as well as Pat McIntyre and the Durham WLM group, had been involved in local nursery campaigns and the setting up and development of women's refuges in the North East, each of whom mentioned how these activities took precedence over consciousness-raising.[762] In common with feminists elsewhere, they sought to build political links based on this solidarity but also around shared experiences of oppression as women.[763] The women's liberationists who set up the Essex Road Women's Centre in Islington, for example, sought to engage working-class women with the dual struggles of class and sex, inside and outside the workplace:

> Our aim is, as part of the attempt to stimulate and further self-organised struggle of the working-class, to address ourselves primarily to women and to try to stimulate struggle around all areas of our lives. Not only the areas where they are specifically oppressed as women (which is where our struggles connect and which is the driving force behind this whole enterprise) but also where they share in the conditions of exploitation of the whole working class.[764]

Moreover, as was indicated above, reaching housewives who were not participating in any explicitly political action was extremely difficult due to, as the Islington liberationists put it, their isolation into 'small units' where 'it is not so easy to see who's boss'.[765] The political implications of this for many women's liberation groups was that interaction with working-class women tended to be with those who were already involved in political action. Indeed, in Islington, local women – alongside the women's liberation group – had organised and campaigned around various issues relating to the reproduction of capitalism, including barricading roads to provide play-spaces for children, setting up a market for wholesale price food, demanding a new laundry with common room and coffee-making facilities, and getting a local factory removed from the

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[761] Cockburn, *State*, p. 177.
[762] Remfry interview; Torode Interview; Hardy Interview; Willan Interview; Bream Interview; McIntyre Interview.
[763] ERWC, 'Islington Women – Essex Road Women's Centre', p. 3.
[764] Ibid.
[765] ERWC, 'Women in the home: your own front door' (c. 1974), *Women's Library, LSE: 5ERC/2/3 – 'Housing'*.

list of employers offered by the Social Security offices due to its exceptionally low rates of pay.[766] For local WLM groups, these struggles were as much a part of the class struggle as strikes, and they shared the perspective of those emphasising the significance of women's domestic labour that trade unions were mistaken to match 'key areas of working-class struggle to what capitalism has hived off as key areas of production and profit', which 'merely serves to reinforce capitalism's own hierarchy, and entrenches the sectional interests within the working class.'[767] The women of Big Flame agreed, noting how the distinction between 'work' and 'community' struggles reinforced the traditional division of labour and acted as a means of 'social control' for both sexes.[768]

Furthermore, much like women's industrial disputes, struggles in the field of capitalist reproduction were sites of cross-class political action which brought together working-class and middle-class women across Britain. In North Kensington, for example, women's liberationists worked with local mothers to set up a nursery and play group, a process that the secretary of the playgroup described as 'working with a women's group in the best possible way', whilst in Glasgow, tenants, women's liberationists, social workers and trade unionists pressured the Glasgow Corporation into providing a tenement refuge for battered women.[769] Moreover, the playgroup secretary also suggested that shared action of this type had a consciousness-raising effect: 'Because we work alongside each other, attitudes rub off on each other, and we see people questioning their personal situations. Sharing experiences like the nursery struggle leads people to question authority and the system.'[770] Here, as well as in Glasgow we can see how the WLM's politics of identification with class could be successful in bridging socio-economic differences between women and other political actors not usually predisposed to struggles outside the workplace, such as trade unions.[771] In addition, the playgroup example demonstrates how the process of struggle could result in the development of a broader political consciousness, in line with the Thompsonian perspectives on class formation.[772] Indeed, there were numerous examples of how struggles of this type were far more likely to ferment political radicalism around class

[766] Ibid.
[767] Notting Hill, Hackney, Tower Hill and Islington Women, 'Housing Crisis, Women's Offensive' (1973), *Women's Library, LSE: 5ERC/2/3 – 'Housing'*, p. 3.
[768] Big Flame Women, 'Struggle Notes, no. 3' (Jan. – Mar. 1975), p. 5.
[769] Big Flame Women, 'Struggle Notes, no. 8, North Kensington Nursery Struggle' (Mar. – May. 1976), p. 11; 'Home from Home', *Red Rag*, 8 (February, 1975), p. 5.
[770] BFW, 'North Kensington', p. 11.
[771] Brah, *Cartographies*, p. 93.
[772] Thompson, *Making*, pp. 7-8.

and gender than the oppression of isolated housewives. One important aspect of this was the development of confidence, which seemed to chart a trajectory from the disaffection of the housewife to the political agent. Jan Kirk, for example, who had become involved in a struggle around housing conditions in Lambeth, argued: 'When you start getting involved you find you're not a cabbage anymore. You've got a mind and can do things.'[773] Similarly, a participant in the Coventry Cross rent strike in 1968/9 told feminist interviewers in 1972 that the experience of winning a dispute organised and led by women had taught her important lessons: 'Don't wait for your menfolk to fight the GLC [Greater London Council] rent increases and then support them. Come out and fight with your friends and neighbours, fighting with women's weapons… with your menfolk backing *you*.'[774]

As is apparent from these examples, one key area of women's cross-class interaction was around housing disputes, and particularly between liberationists, tenants' associations and Claimants' Unions (CU), which often shared certain perspectives with the WLM on the need to take class struggle into areas of welfare and housing and also tended to be dominated numerically by women.[775] As Big Flame feminists involved in the political organisation of tenants during a rent strike in 1975 noted, the 'bigger issues' of women's liberation were best raised in the context of struggle rather than treated as abstract ideological questions.[776] The emphasis the newly politically conscious women quoted above placed on the particularity of struggle illustrates how abstraction was not always a useful tactic. Indeed, this is further exemplified by the contrast between housewives' attitudes to the WLM and political action in North Tyneside and the playgroup secretary in North Kensington.

However, there were occasions when working-class women activists and middle-class feminists went beyond political solidarity during struggle to working together to articulate ideology and demands. CU activists, for example, sometimes worked directly with women's liberationists to produce demands that were commensurate with the WLM's understanding of the link between class struggle and feminism. In one example, the Colchester Claimants and Unemployed Workers' Union and the Bristol WLM group collaborated to produce a paper entitled 'Women versus the State' in 1971, which featured a call for women-specific demands to be added to the Claimants' Union

[773] Cynthia Cockburn, 'When women get involved in community action', in Marjorie Mayo (ed.), *Women in the Community* (London, 1977), p. 67.
[774] The Tough and Tender Collective, 'A Plan for Action' (1972), *FAS: Politics/Policy 2*, p. 10.
[775] Big Flame Women, 'Struggle Notes, no. 5, Tower Hill – Women's Struggle' (Jun. – Aug. 1975), p. 46.
[776] Ibid.

Charter.[777] This cross-fertilisation was not unusual and the connection was felt in both directions. In the early 1970s, women from the North London CU found common cause with the WLM after the latter had passed a resolution in support of a 'Guaranteed Minimum Income' at a national conference.[778] With this shared perspective, the group decided to launch their 'Smash the Cohabitation Rule' campaign at the national WLM conference, so as to 'involve as many women as possible and attempt co-ordinated nationwide activity.'[779] Moreover, the *Claimants Newspaper*, reported favourably on the WLM's adoption of the demand for 'Legal and Financial Independence' in 1974, which was seen as a crossover demand for both movements.[780]

Indeed, this was just one area of political common ground between CUs and the WLM. In addition, female claimants' demands fit sweetly with the ideas of women's liberation, particularly around the recognition that working-class women's oppression and exploitation could not be solved solely in the workplace. As the Big Flame women asserted, for socialist-feminists, 'Housing is a major arena of the class struggle.'[781] Meanwhile, the Swansea WLM group was set up by women who were involved in the local CU, giving it a more working-class demographic than others across Britain, even compared to its geographically comparable Cardiff counterpart, which was composed of middle-class women predominantly.[782] The direct crossover evident in the Swansea group demonstrated how closely tied the perspectives of the two movements could be. It was in the integration of capitalist reproduction and women into narratives of class struggle that the parallels in analysis were often uncanny. One example, from a paper prepared for the CU conference on unemployment in 1971 by a female activist, insisted, 'WOMEN ARE NEVER OUT OF WORK' due to responsibility for 'working at home, feeding, clothing, cleaning, looking after kids, supporting our husbands, or we're working outside the home in the same kind of service jobs'.[783] It went on to argue that women's independence from men was vital, suggested critical engagement with the trade union movement, and asserted that gender roles needed to be changed so that the

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[777] Monica Sjoo, 'Unsupported mothers and the C.Us – my experience' (August, 1975), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*.
[778] North London Claimants' Union, 'Smash the Cohabitation Rule!' (c. 1972), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*.
[779] Ibid.
[780] *Claimants Newspaper*, no. 2 (Autumn, 1974), p. 2.
[781] BFW, 'Struggle Notes 3', p. 5.
[782] Avril Rolph, A Movement of Its Own: The Women's Liberation Movement in South Wales', in Helen Graham, Ann Kaloski, Ali Neilson and Emma Robertson (eds), *The Feminist Seventies* (York, 2003), p. 47.
[783] 'Women and Unemployment: A Paper for the Claimants' Union Conference on Unemployment' (October, 1971), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*, p. 1.

strength of the working-class was not weakened.[784] The author was also conscious of the links between these arguments and the WLM's similar discussions and named the WLM as one of the other political organisations that CU struggles and ideas should be disseminated to, whilst other 'Left' groups were not mentioned.[785]

The ideological connection endured and developed throughout the 1970s and was apparent in a range of CU material. In 1976, CU women's demands included political framing that appeared undeniably feminist, such as understanding Family Allowance payments as 'the mother's income, not the unemployed man', calling for financial independence because 'Housewives are the only people who are never unemployed', and arguing for the removal of the head of the household rule due to its role as the 'lynchpin of the Social Security System and its oppression of women.'[786] Indeed, publications produced at the end of 1975 and early 1976, the first by women's liberationists, entitled, 'The Demand for Independence', and the second by CU women entitled, 'Women and Social Security', featured remarkably close understandings of women's oppression.[787] The WLM document focused on the passing of the demand for legal and financial independence at the 1974 national conference and explained its importance in terms of challenging how the state 'forces women into a position of dependence on men.'[788] The CU document concurred, arguing that the key fight was against the state's understanding of women as 'dependants' of men and that they would 'stop all this nonsense now and stand up to demand financial independence for all women.'[789] In addition, the authors called for the collectivisation of childcare and housework which 'might mean the liberation of millions of women. Liberation from the drudgery of housework and childcare.'[790] The WLM authors similarly called on feminists to work with CUs directly on the campaign.[791] Thus, the two movements shared a political perspective, suggested working together directly, and even utilised the language of women's liberation. Furthermore, the focus on women's specific oppression remained present in a CU report to the TUC in 1977, which argued that women should 'always be regarded as equal to, and financially and legally independent of a man ifliving in the same household.'[792] Moreover, the 'sexual and economic oppression of women' was described as 'incompatible' with their demands.[793] Thus, it is clear that CU ideology had many similarities to dominant socialist-feminist strand of the WLM, particularly in focusing on economic and sexual forms of women's oppression, or as the WLM framed

[784] Ibid, pp. 3-4.
[785] Ibid., p. 5.

them, class and sex, thereby demonstrating Meyer's point regarding the 'synergistic effect' political movements were able to have on each other in this period.[794]

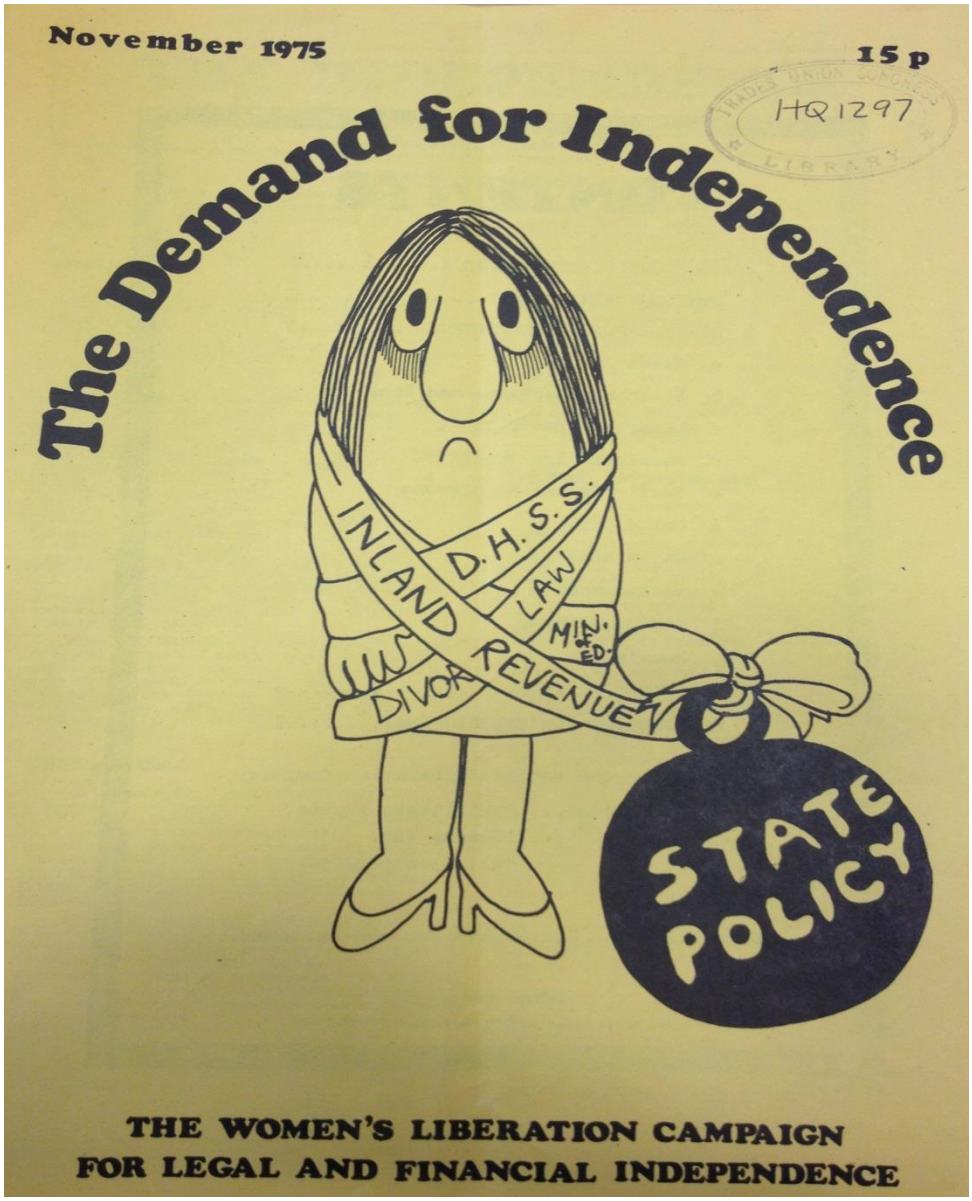

Figure 5: The Women's Liberation Campaign for Legal and Financial Independence, 'The Demand for Independence' (November, 1975).

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[786] 'Notes from the Claimants Union Movement: Sex Discrimination' (1976), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*, pp. 1-2.
[787] Claimants' Union Women, 'Women and Social Security: A Handbook from the Claimants' Union Movement' (1976); The Women's Liberation Campaign for Legal and Financial Independence, 'The Demand for Independence' (November, 1975).
[788] Women's Liberation Campaign, 'Demand', p. 1.
[789] CU Women, 'Social Security', pp. 2-8.
[790] Ibid., p. 27.
[791] Women's Liberation Campaign, 'Demand', p. 8.
[792] Claimants' Union, 'A Guaranteed Minimum Income: Claimants Union Report to the T.U.C.' (January, 1977), p. 5.
[793] Ibid.
[794] Meyer, 'Women's Movements', p. 289.

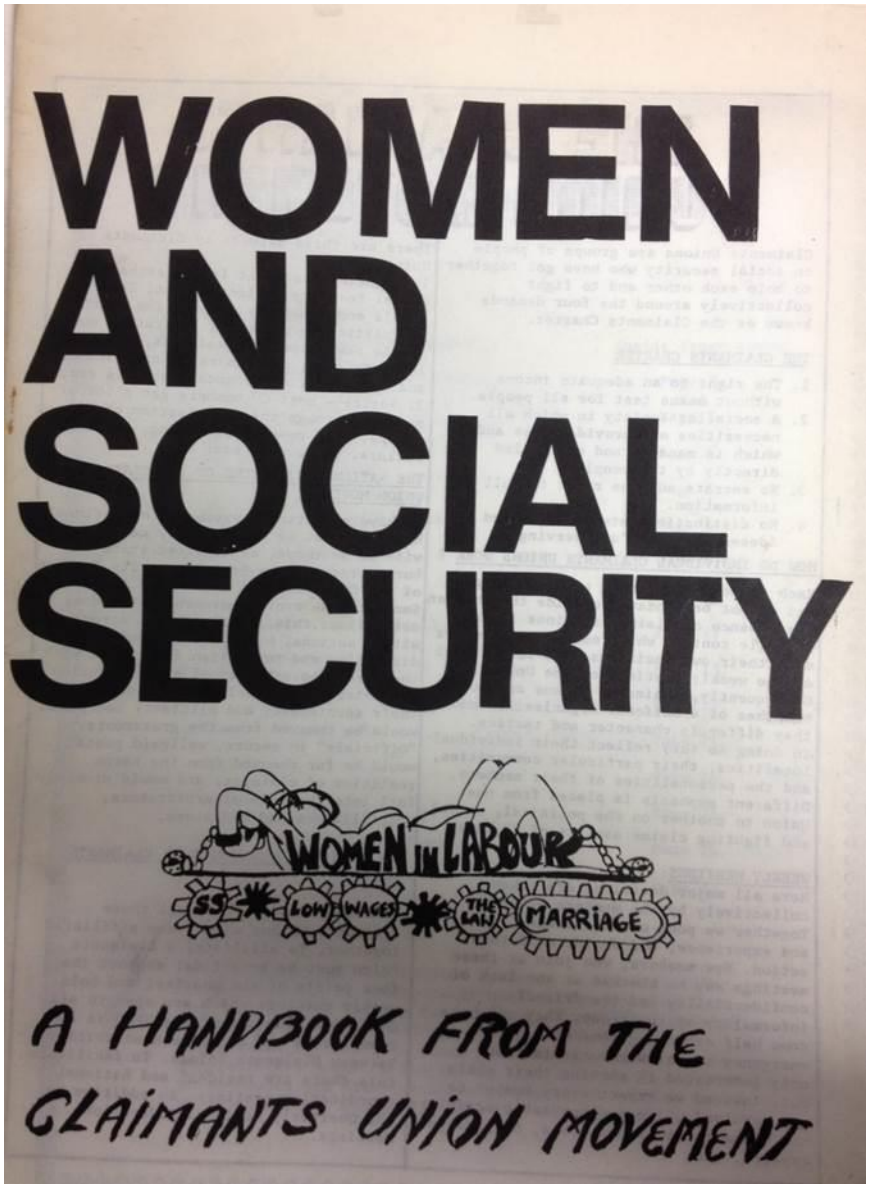

Figure 6: 'Women and Social Security: A Handbook from the Claimants Union Movement' (1976).

Moreover, this shared political perspective meant that CU struggles could be a unifying force within the WLM, such as in Bristol, where despite huge divisions around WFH, those on both sides of the issue were supportive of the local CU and the movement more widely. Monica Sjoo, for example, was not a proponent of WFH but argued that feminists should become involved in CU struggles as a matter of political urgency.[795] Similarly, the Power of Women Collective (an offshoot of WFH), addressed an open letter to all CU women asking for a meeting over their similar calls for an independent wage.[796]

[795] Monica Sjoo, 'Women in the Claimants' Union' (1970), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*.
[796] Power of Women Collective, 'An open letter to all women in Claimants' Unions' (c. 1971), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*, p. 3.

However, whilst there were clear political similarities between the two movements, the production of separate ideological material, as outlined above, illustrated that the two movements tended to act in parallel rather than unison. Indeed, just as political similarities in attitudes and political solidarity between women's liberationists and striking workers and socially isolated housewives had not resulted in the widespread adoption of feminist political consciousness from the latter groups, female working-class activists in CUs and other reproductive struggles maintained reservations about identifying as women's liberationists or mentioning feminism explicitly. There were consistent reports that even during struggles, the differences in approach and cultural attitudes between working-class activists and women's liberationists were significant. Feminists from Big Flame noted how approaching tenant activists about issues of 'liberation' rather than the concrete struggle being faced, had to be framed in a material manner so that they did not become 'too enormous and frightening to cope with' for those without the luxury of time for abstract ideology.[797] The failure of women's liberationists to do so on a frequent basis was seen by the Big Flame feminists as 'a big reason why a lot of women here are suspicious of "women's liberation" when it seems detached.'[798] This seemed to reflect Martin Pugh's argument that the WLM's 'radical potential' was undermined by factors which included working-class women's failure to 'share the broader ideological objectives of middle-class feminists.'[799] However, as the discussion of the class and gender analysis of the CUs above demonstrated, the dismissal of working-class women's potential for 'broader ideological objectives' or political abstraction is an extremely unsatisfactory explanation alone. In fact a closer reading of some of the material relating to legal and financial independence indicates that it may have been the WLM that shied away from a revolutionary position rather than CU women.

Returning to the separate documents produced by each movement in late 1975 and early 1976, it is possible to outline a small but significant distinction in CU versus WLM analysis. In 'Women and Social Security', CU women emphasised how the local and national state was the direct opponent but was fundamentally linked to the interests of capitalism.[800] In effect, if not explicitly, this situated the authors' perspective in line with Marx and Engels, who asserted in the *Communist Manifesto* that 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole

[797] BFW, 'Tower Hill', p. 46.
[798] Ibid.
799 Pugh, *Women's Movement*, pp. 329-330.
[800] CU Women, 'Social Security', p. 26.

bourgeoisie.'[801] As a result, the demand for a guaranteed income was a revolutionary position that challenged the entire system of wage labour. On the other hand, 'The Demand for Independence', focuses on the state as the cause of women's oppression outside the workplace and does not mention capitalism.[802] Whilst this did not reflect many of the socialist-feminist perspectives outlined above surrounding the significance of reproductive labour to class struggle, it did demonstrate that the *demands* of the WLM were more reformist than those of the CU. Indeed, this was a point picked up by 'The Demand for Independence', which suggested that the demands were 'lowest common denominators' for all groups to organise around but that nonetheless left 'some crucial areas… virtually untouched.'[803] Nevertheless, CU women concluded that they were the 'only organisation to consistently oppose wage-slavery and to demand the abolition of the wages system', while they also distinguished their movement from feminist strands like WFH by arguing that 'we do not demand entry into the capitalist treadmill of wage-slavery which… the "wages for housework" campaigns seem to imply.'[804] Thus, even at a political level, where many ideological aspects were shared with the WLM, the construction of class struggle and its link to working-class women's oppression could still cause divisions between the movements. What is more, CU women more commonly identified with women's workplace struggles overtly, even as they maintained a gendered critique of the Labour Movement, than with the WLM, suggesting that sex was a strong unifying force for CU women, but only with those they perceived as within the class struggle.[805] Interestingly the link also extended in the other direction, as Labour MPs like Jo Richardson and Audrey Wise, both associated with women's industrial struggles, had also campaigned with CUs on changes to Social Security.[806]

However, if we turn to the experiences *in struggle* of CU women and women's liberationists, we can see that class was also important for different reasons than only subtle political distinctions. Whereas the playgroup secretary in North Kensington had found sisterhood with liberationists easy to come by, CU women reported different experiences. For them, it was clear that cultural and economic class distinctions shaped their interactions with feminists. Some of these distinctions were pointed out in a comparative report on the movements' national conferences for the *Claimants Newspaper* in 1974. In the report, a female activist suggested that the WLM was

[801] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 2005), p. 9.
[802] Women's Liberation Campaign, 'Demand', p. 1.
[803] Ibid.
[804] CU Women, 'Social Security', p. 26.
[805] 'Women and Unemployment', p. 3.
[806] CU Women, 'Social Security', p. 30.

composed of 'many well educated, middle-class women' whilst the CUs were 'dominated by university drop-outs, young unemployed, and single parents.'[807] Whilst this did not create a simple definition that the WLM was middle class and the CUs working class, particularly in shared cultural experience, the socio-economic class position of many CU activists, regardless of their point of class origin, served as an important means of a political identity that was distinct from the WLM. This was underlined by the reporter's sense that 'the Women's Movement seems to be fairly wealthy'.[808] Indeed, the importance of class as an economic relationship between individuals to CU was further illustrated by the reporter's critique of how the WLM used other women's labour at the conference: 'The women's conference used and exploited other women's labour, e.g. cooks, cleaners and barmaids. CUs tend to do everything for themselves and rarely if ever rely on this even for crèche facilities.'[809] This chimed with Selina Todd's general point on the WLM that potentially exploitative economic class relationships between working-class and middle-class liberationists developed within groups, where the former could be employed by the latter.[810] For Todd, this was part of a pattern which enabled 'some middle-class women's fight for liberation… to be eased by the labour *of less privileged women*.'[811] It was apparent that the CU reporter shared this disdain, arguing as she did that the politics of CUs were at a 'higher level' than the WLM, due to their disinterest in working-class women's concerns which seemed to have 'little meaning' to feminists.[812]

For some of the feminists that did become involved in CU struggles, these criticisms were not unfounded. Monica Sjoo recalled how despite developing some of the ideological underpinning for specific CU demands, such as the anti-cohabitation rule campaign, when the campaign was launched at a women's liberation conference: 'I found to my disappointment that there wasn't much support forthcoming, this time, from the Women's Movement itself.'[813] For Sjoo, the apathy was linked to the class of women involved in both movements, and her frustration was amplified by a parallel critique of how male trade unionists, the Far Left, and even those within CUs tended to

[807] 'C.Us and Women's Lib: Conferences Compared', in *Claimants Newspaper*, No. 2 (Autumn, 1974), p. 22.
[808] Ibid.
[809] Ibid.
[810] Todd, *The People*, p. 308.
[811] Ibid.
[812] 'C.Us and Women's Lib', p. 22.
[813] Monica Sjoo, 'Unsupported mothers and the C.Us – my experience' (August, 1975), *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*, p. 3.

reject issues which related to the specific oppression of working-class *women*.[814] To support this point, she cited an internal IMG document which stated that effort should not be wasted on 'the powerless and politically irrelevant.'[815] Since this view was indicative of what feminists' saw as the Far Left's focus on the productive sphere of struggle at the expense of anything else, Sjoo was disappointed that a political movement based on the alternative had seemingly been shunned by the WLM. For proponents of WFH, this formed another line of attack on the wider WLM, which was accused of 'ignoring' CU women or forcing them to 'forget' that they were claimants if they did engage.[816]

However, at some levels, especially ideologically, this criticism did not hold. Women's liberationists were very aware of women's oppression in areas of housing and welfare, and, as was noted earlier saw the movement's role as being one which took women from challenging the state individually to becoming collectively understood class struggles.[817] Indeed, as numerous London WLM groups agreed in a pamphlet on housing, 'Women are *individually* attacking the system… if they're involved in crime, defrauding the SS, etc… How can we politicise and collectivise crime?'[818] Beyond this ideological commitment, women's liberationists spent time researching and uncovering the experiences of working-class women involved in these types of disputes. Books like *The Local State* and *Women in the Community*, included numerous examples of working-class women's political activism around housing struggles, and for the feminist authors, these examples were seen to illustrate women's desire to organise collectively alongside others in their communities rather than as individuals.[819] Moreover, community action was framed as having roots in common with the WLM due to its link with the politics of everyday life and the making of the personal political.[820] Thus, the disjuncture between the two movements lay more often in the tendency for working-class women's groups, such as CUs, to disassociate from the WLM. For female claimant activists to be 'suspicious' of WLM involvement, to perceive the latter as 'fairly wealthy' and disinterested in the concerns of working-class women, there needed to be interaction between the two groups for these attitudes to be based on. Rather than a lack on shared struggle between the groups, at times it was experience of the reverse that was the problem. One issue drawn attention to by women's liberationists' during the period was

[814] Ibid., p. 2.
[815] Ibid.
[816] POWC, 'An open letter', p. 1.
[817] Cockburn, *Local State*, p. 163.
[818] Hackney Group et al., 'Housing Crisis', p. 11.
[819] Cockburn, *Local State*, pp. 177-8; Mayo, *Community*, passim.
[820] Mayo, 'Introduction', p. ix; Wilson, 'Women', p. 2.

the tendency for struggles involving working-class and middle-class women to reflect wider class structures in the organisation of groups. On this point, Elizabeth Wilson suggested that in many areas of struggle in the reproductive field, from CUs to women's refuges, middle-class activists frequently ended up as advisors in positions of power over working-class participants.[821] Similarly, Jalna Hanmer lamented that middle-class women sat on the support committee of refuges whilst working-class women came through the doors.[822] For Wilson and Hanmer, this reflected a broader problem – and one also evidenced amongst working-class strikers – that the WLM could sometimes 'alienate' working-class women, or at the least, create a line of distinction based on class.[823] The Arsenal Women's Liberation Group drew attention to this problem in noting that working-class women's groups sometimes 'deliberately disassociate themselves from women's liberation, although involved in the same campaign as us.'[824] The problem was recognised by the WLM, such as at a 1971 conference in Birmingham, where recognition of class difference could become a self-fulfilling prophecy of inaction. For one of the speakers, the 'essence' of the movement's 'problems' was:

> The gap between the members of the movement and the women in the country whom we wish to change and activate; many of our sisters either feel paralysed into inactivity by their awareness of their unrepresentativeness of relatively privileged women or rush into action and are disillusioned and disarmed when confronted with incomprehension or hostility.[825]

This paralysis went some way to explaining why women's liberationists could feel more comfortable publicising working-class women's struggles than engaging in them directly. Feminists at times participated in a process of reinforcement of class distinction whereby they accepted that overcoming socio-economic and cultural class barriers was a lost cause, even if they shared a great deal of political common ground with the women they wanted to reach, including around the political construction of class struggle. Thus, despite coming together in struggle, and a shared political commitment to the goal of ending women's oppression and challenging capitalist class

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[821] Wilson, 'Women', pp. 6-7.
[822] Jalna Hanmer, 'Community action, women's aid and the women's liberation movement', in Marjorie Mayo (ed.), *Women in the Community* (London, 1977), p. 96.
[823] Wilson, 'Women', p. 8; Hanmer, 'Community', pp. 96-7.
[824] Arsenal Women's Liberation Group, 'Notes on Class and the Women's Movement' (1972), *FAS: Politics/Policy 2*.
[825] 'Key Problems of the Growth and Political Development of the Movement', Women's Liberation Conference, Birmingham (June, 1971), *FAS: Politics/Policy 2*.

society, the political actions of working-class women and middle-class women remained divided by class in ways that shaped their political identities.

However, that they came together enough to inspire a range of attitudes and experiences – from co-operation and sisterhood to perceived class power and suspicion – illustrated that many women's liberationists were committed to overcoming the barriers of class. That their efforts to do so did not swell the WLM's ranks should not detract from their militancy in working-class women's struggles in the field of capitalist reproduction, nor their theoretical contributions, which undeniably influenced CUs' and others' political constructions of class.

Conclusions

There are two conclusions to be drawn from an analysis of the WLM's experiences of working-class women's struggles away from the workplace and the productive sphere in this period. Firstly, women's liberationists brought class struggle into the field of capitalist reproduction, an area which had been dismissed and ignored by the Labour Movement and Far Left in favour of a total focus on struggles in and around production. The WLM did not dispute the importance of productive labour but attempted to draw a link between productive and reproductive aspects of class experience and struggle under capitalism. The link was crucial to the WLM's theoretical contributions and self-conception and was evidenced in numerous papers, statements and publications that framed it as not only useful but politically '*necessary*'.[826] This illustrated how ideas of class struggle were as vital in shaping the WLM as perceptions of women's oppression, which feminists understood as inextricably linked, regardless of whether an individual subscribed to socialist-feminism or WFH. Furthermore, feminists' attempts to take this analysis into their activism around community action and domestic labour in the form of WFH, nursery campaigns, the development of women's refuges, housing and welfare struggles underline this point. Moreover, the recognition of overlapping arenas of oppression and struggle have also formed the basis of contemporary intersectionality and awareness that analysis of identities and oppression must take account of cross-cutting factors.[827]

However, women's liberationists' political commitment in its myriad forms was – as had been the case in the productive arena – rarely enough to overcome economic and cultural barriers between women, which, despite a mostly shared political analysis, kept

[826] Rowbotham, 'Carrot', p. 199.
[827] Scott, *Gender*, p. 25 and *Fantasy*, p. 36 ; Collins, *Feminist Thought*; Anthias, 'Social Stratification'.

activists' political identities and the movements they identified with separate. Differences in socio-economic position played out in working-class women's critical perceptions of the WLM as economically middle-class, reformist and disinterested in working-class concerns, even when liberationists' were involved in identical struggles. The power of class to inhibit the development of feminist consciousness amongst working-class women was clear in both working-class women's groups' disassociation with the WLM and the attitudes of housewives on Tyneside. Despite the former often sharing remarkably similar analyses of working-class women's oppression within patriarchal capitalism, and the latter desiring autonomy and stating disdain for their unpaid domestic labour, attitudes towards the WLM remained sceptical, often without explanation beyond a general distrust of what the movement was seen to represent. This problem was encapsulated in Hanmer's overview of the WLM's efforts in struggles of this type. She argued, 'While in principle… women of all classes have more in common with each other than with men… in practice it is often difficult for these women to work closely with each other.'[828] Class, then, as Gordon Marshall et al. have noted, can at times 'structure people's lives' and their beliefs, values and behaviour both consciously and unconsciously more powerfully than other social cleavages.'[829]

However, although the WLM's politics of identification and realignment of class and class struggle towards working-class women's experiences were not able to develop second-wave feminism into a mass movement, its influence on working-class women's attitudes and political perspectives was clear. Embodied in housewives' desire for autonomy and recognition of domestic labour as just that, and in working-class claimants' revisions of class struggle to emphasise women's oppression at the hands of capitalism and the state, was a socialist-feminist heart that, at least at the fulcrum of these struggles, refused to accept a class-gender binary. Indeed, at times, these shared struggles did result in working-class women overcoming the barriers of class to identify overtly as women's liberationists and it is their experiences within the movement that are turned to in the next chapter.

[828]Hanmer, 'Community action', pp. 96-97.
[829] Gordon Marshall, David Rose, Howard Newby and Carolyn Vogler, *Social Class in Modern Britain* (London, 1993), pp. 140, 267.

4. Struggling with 'sisterhood' – class within the WLM

In the preceding chapters, the analysis has posited that although the WLM was infrequently successful in expanding from its predominantly middle-class demographic, class remained fundamental to the movement's politics and ideology through a commitment to the politics of identification. However, the politics of identification was predicated on the perception of working-class women as important but distinct from the 'liberation' arm of feminist politics. The prevalence of this narrative of the WLM as fundamentally middle-class, exacerbated by the undeniable numerical dominance of middle-class women, resulted in the concealment of working-class women's presence. Working-class feminist, Marlene Packwood, described this invisibility as one aspect of the 'classism' in the WLM that denied working-class feminists a language or recognition.[830]

This chapter will consider how pervasive 'classism' was within the WLM and its consequences for both working-class women within the movement at the time and in subsequent historical accounts. It will begin by outlining how class relations between women's liberationists have been understood in existing historiography, and argue that there are two main interpretations. The first, the 'traditional' perspective, presented by participant-historians and black and Asian feminists, sees 'class' as one of a range of irresolvable differences between women that eventually led to the WLM's fragmentation. The second interpretation takes a revisionist approach that argues that tensions resulting from differences between women in the WLM have been overstated and the concept of 'sisterhood' was more flexible than the traditional narrative's critique of its 'essentialism' have made out. This chapter will then assess these perspectives against examples of cross-class interactions between women's liberationists and consider the extent of class divisions and tensions in the movement. It will argue that middle-class women's demographic dominance of the WLM and desire to reach out to working-class women universalised their characteristics as 'feminist' and often saw them ignore working-class women already in their midst. Cultural understandings of class developed dichotomies between feminists' political practice and personal interactions that challenged the notions of 'sisterhood' and 'solidarity' present in the historiography and evidenced in the WLM's wider interactions with class politics analysed.

[830] Marlene Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady – sisters under the skin?', *Trouble and Strife*, 1 (Winter, 1983), p. 11.

The chapter will therefore consider how 'radical' women challenging narratives of gender oppression and identifying with class politics were sometimes unable to challenge narratives of class oppression within the WLM, or resist the internalisation of patronising discourses surrounding working-class people. Bourdieuean theories of cultural capital will be used to reveal how informal power relations and structures were developed along class lines. This will be linked with an analysis of Jo Freeman's critique of the American Women's Movement, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', to argue that Freeman's points had equal validity to the British movement and the informal structures that developed were tied up in cultural class power. As a result, this chapter will assert that from the perspective of working-class liberationists, it was not only white women that needed to 'listen' but middle-class women, too.[831]

However, it will also analyse these tensions against counter-examples of class harmony and reflections on the value of 'sisterhood' in individual accounts of the WLM from women of all classes. In so doing, it will consider whether, much as was the case in interactions between the WLM and class politics more widely, but unlike between women inside and outside the movement, similarities between women's liberationists outweighed class differences more often than not. By focusing on the experiences of oral history participants in North Tyneside, and other similar accounts from elsewhere, it will argue that whilst class tensions existed between liberationists across Britain, they could be overcome in some groups. Nevertheless, it will conclude that these instances remained specific and conditional as class constituted an important power relation between women.

The historiography of class interaction in the WLM

An analysis of class interactions within the WLM immediately encounters two competing narratives surrounding the concept of 'difference' within the WLM. On one side, the 'traditional' view has contended that the movement's predominantly socio-economically middle-class and white composition left it unable to recognise differences between women relating to class, race or sexuality.[832] White middle-class feminists like Rowbotham and Segal have accepted that, despite efforts to the contrary, they had contributed to constructions of feminism that ignored the different and particular

[831] Carby, 'White women listen!'.
[832] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*.

experiences of black and working-class women in the movement as gender 'started to gobble up all other relations.'[833] Indeed, it was this 'essentialisation' of white middle-class women's experiences as representative of all women's experiences that was the central critique of the 'traditional' perspective. It was only possible to speak of the existence of 'sisterhood' in relation the select group of women it applied to, a group from which black and working-class feminists were excluded.[834] Thus, these differences – and the failure of the dominant group to address them – made the eventual fragmentation of the WLM inevitable as the binds of selective 'sisterhood' simply could not hold.[835]

Conversely, the 'revisionist' view has suggested that whilst it was true that differences between feminists existed, and took many different forms alongside class, race and sexuality, including over ideology and strategy, the inability of the WLM to address them has been exaggerated.[836] For the revisionists, differences between women were not swept away by an essentialised understanding of feminism but discussed and recognised within local groups.[837] Moreover, strands within the WLM developed that attempted to address tensions over identity more explicitly, such as those involved in Women Against Racism and Fascism and Women Against Imperialism, who sought to challenge their own racism.[838] Thus, these divisions were in fact indicative of the strength of the movement's inclusive and reflective practices rather than the foundations of its demise.[839]

There is a clear distinction between these two perspectives that could be summarised as 'outcome' vs 'intent', whereby the 'traditional' view focuses on the fragmentation of the movement that many of its proponents experienced directly, whereas the 'revisionists' emphasise the efforts that were made to prevent this fragmentation from occurring, sometimes successfully. An assessment of these perspectives in relation to class through the accounts of working-class women within the WLM is therefore relatively straightforward.

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[833] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*, pp. 45-46, 197; Rowbotham, *Women in Movement*, p. 285; Segal, 'Jam Today', p. 160.
[834] Carby, 'White woman listen!', p. 49; Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', p. 54; Thane, 'Women', p. 182; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 268; Holloway, *Women*, p. 207; Bruley, *Women*, p. 152; Webster, *Imagining*, p. 149; Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 4.
[835] Rowbotham et al, *Fragments*; Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 13; Hemmings and Brain, 'Feminist Seventies', pp. 14-15.
[836] Radford, 'History', p. 43.
[837] Radford, 'History', p. 43; Graham, ''New' 1970', pp. 160, 163; Setch, 'Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66.
[838] Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4.
[839] Setch, 'Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66.

However, in another respect, these perspectives share a fundamental similarity that exhibits exactly the type of invisibility outlined in Packwood's definition of classism. It was noted in the introduction to this thesis that the participant-accounts of the WLM argued that cross-class alliances between women workers fighting for equality in the industrial arena and middle-class women fighting for 'liberation' from domesticity provided the impetus for the development of the Women's Movement in 1968 and onwards.[840] Working-class women were therefore seemingly recognised as feminists from the Women's Movement's inception and incorporated into the historical narrative. However, working-class women's role is then made distinct by emphasising the power of 'difference' to splinter the WLM as its implication is that it could not be a movement for working-class women.

By contrast, revisionists' focus on 1969 as the key year for the second wave Women's Movement's formation ignores the industrial struggles by working-class women at Dagenham and elsewhere in 1968, thereby deleting the latter from the origin narrative.[841] However, the experiences of working-class women are then seen to be incorporated into the WLM due to its ability to overcome class differences through a flexible concept of 'sisterhood' that recognised difference without losing the primacy of sex in political identities.[842]

Thus, in the revisionist perspective, working-class women are invisible at all stages of the Women's Movement's development and existence: there is no formative role from strike action by those fighting for equality and the specific experiences of working-class women within the WLM are lost in a view that privileges the recognition of similarities ahead of difference. In the traditional narrative, working-class women are present in the broader Women's Movement of the period but their struggles for equality are distinguished from middle-class women's struggles for liberation. Women's industrial actions were inspiring for future women's liberationists but they were not *lived* – a politics of identification not of primary identity.

Thus, despite their differences in emphasis, both perspectives share an important

[840] Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Segal, 'Jam Today', pp. 153-4; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10.
[841] Setch, 'Metropolitan Feminism', p. 171.
[842] Radford, 'History', p. 43; Graham, ''New' 1970', pp. 160, 163; Setch, 'Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66.

implication: the women's *liberation* movement was either the middle-class arm of the broader Women's Movement or was so dominated by middle-class women that working-class contributions and experiences could be so easily incorporated to be insignificant. Working-class women could be feminists but they were not women's liberationists. This implication, as we shall see, reflected influential perspectives within the WLM and had damaging consequences for working-class women within the movement.

Class and the undermining of 'sisterhood'

It has been detailed in previous chapters why socio-economically working-class women declined to formally identify as women's liberationists, whether they were politically active in other ways or struggling with the oppression of the home or workplace in relative silence. Nevertheless, whilst the WLM's social composition was never able to accurately reflect the society it existed within, some working-class women *did* join women's liberation groups and formally identify with the movement. However, as the Arsenal WLM group lamented, to 'join' the WLM was not as straightforward as joining a political party due to its informal structure.[843] Jalna Hanmer noted how membership of the WLM was instead a 'statement of psychological identification, not that of a card-carrying paid-up member of x organisation.'[844] Since many working-class women seemed to reject this psychological identification, such as respondents to the North Tyneside CDP study, and the inclusion of working-class women was seen as a fundamental goal for the WLM, it seemed that those working-class women who did identify with women's liberation would have been welcomed and celebrated as examples of the power of 'sisterhood'.[845] In practice, though, many working-class liberationists encountered damaging class tensions in their interactions with their middle-class counterparts.

One important area of tension was over how women's class position within the movement should be defined. The problems of defining class politically, such as the approach of WFH, were discussed earlier, but within the movement cultural understandings of class caused just as many problems. As American feminist Rita Mae Brown argued in 1974, class within the WLM and society more widely went beyond

[843] Arsenal WLM Group, 'Notes on class'.
[844] Hanmer, 'Community action', p. 92.
[845] NTCDP, 'Women's Work', p. 82.

political and socio-economic definitions when it came to individuals' experiences.[846] Instead, class involved:

> Your behaviour, your basic assumptions about life, how your experiences (determined by your class) validate those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act. It is these behavioural patterns cemented in childhood that cause class conflict in various movements.[847]

That this had equal significance to the British movement was illustrated by the fact that this article had been reprinted by British feminists and donated to a British archive.[848] Moreover, there were a number of direct parallels with British feminists' experiences. Evelyn Farrer, for example, wrote a similar piece, entitled, 'You Don't Need a Degree to Read the Writing on the Wall', in which she emphasised importance of class to her identity: 'My class is basic to who I am, how I think, talk, respond, behave, my aims (or lack of them!), standards, what I expect, what I see, what I eat, what I drink, what I do.'[849] There was also a parallel to one of the key issues highlighted by Brown, 'the idea that a working-class woman with a college education escapes their class background', which she described as 'sheer arrogant blindness' on the part of middle-class feminists.[850] Farrer agreed, citing her frustration at this notion because it disregarded experiences prior to university, 'Too bad about the twenty years that went before'.[851] This common irritation was illustrated again in Val Turner's account in the *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter*, where she recalled being told by middle-class women she couldn't set up a working-class liberation group because she had been to university, thereby implying in Turner's eyes that education equalled losing 'all your WC [working-class] values and attitudes gained during the years before.'[852]

There was a more general problem that underpinned the issue of education, which was a sense from those who identified as working class that it was extremely difficult to

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[846] Rita Mae Brown, 'The Last Straw', in Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron (eds), *Class and feminism; essays from the Furies* (Baltimore, 1974).
[847] Ibid.
[848] Reprint in *FAS: Social Relations 16*.
[849] Evelyn Farrer, 'You Don't Need a Degree to see the Writing on the Wall' (1977), *FAS: Politics/Policy 4*, p. 1.
[850] Brown, 'Last Straw'.
[851] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 10.
[852] Val Turner, 'Divide and Rule', *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July, 1979).

prove their authenticity to self-defining middle-class women due to the latter's preconceived classist notions. Gail Chester, for example, recalled how once she accepted the importance of her working-class background and position, despite her university education, she found that she had to 'defend' it within the WLM.[853] In a note published in the *Women's Information Referral and Enquiries Service* (*WIRES*) in 1976, for example, a working-class woman angrily challenged middle-class feminists' assumptions that the WLM was entirely middle class, and detailed the impossibility of convincing them otherwise because they would always provide a reason why a working-class woman was *actually* middle-class: 'They'll smile at you with glazed eyes and pat you on the head … or they'll just pretend they heard what they wanted to hear and leave you believing you actually got through.'[854] This chimed with Farrer's opening sentence, where she wrote: 'We all know the women's liberation movement is middle class because middle class women are always telling us it is.'[855] She explained that some in the movement 'call themselves classless, they say we are too… assuming that their values, standards, their ways of behaving and talking and even their experience are the norm we should all measure up to.'[856] Comments like these reveal that the perceived centrality of middle-class women's experiences within the WLM, amongst women of both classes, could serve as a similar exclusionary force as the centrality of maleness to definitions of 'worker', albeit with the sex and class intersection inverted. Here we also see how the first meaning of 'essentialism' in Phillips' definition could manifest in interactions between women's liberationists where the 'essential' characteristic of 'middle-classness' was attributed to all women in the WLM.[857] Moreover, this process of de-individualisation through an 'essentialist' category, shows, as Elizabeth Spelman has argued, how 'positing an essential "womanness" has the effect of making women inessential in a variety of ways.'[858]

Paradoxically, one potential reason for the dismissal of working-class identity within the WLM was the movement's expressed desire to *reach* working-class women. Implicit in that aim was the assumption that working-class women were absent, and thus, any feminists who claimed to be working class were mistaken. This was tied to patronising

[853] 'Gail Chester Interviewed by Margaretta Jolly', 26, 27 July and 25 August 2011, 'Sisterhood and After Oral History Project', C1420/27, *British Library*.
[854] Note in *Wires*, no. 23 (November, 1976).
[855] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 1.
[856] Ibid.
[857] Phillips, *Gender and Culture*, p. 71.
[858] Elizabeth V. Spelman, 'Woman: The One and the Many', in Diana Tietjens Mayers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader* (London, 1997), p. 177.

discourses around the distinctions between working-class and middle-class women, which could be found even when middle-class activists sought cross-class solidarity. This was demonstrated in the words of one liberationist in an interview with the *Observer* in 1971, who stated: 'Any middle-class intelligent woman who can't get her own problems sorted out as things are ought to be kicked up the knickers … It's the grey dreary workhorse lives of ordinary women who've always had a rotten time that we want to get to.'[859]

Whilst dismissive of middle-class women and supportive of working-class counterparts superficially, the language betrayed a perception of working-class women as 'dreary workhorse[s]' who, unable to liberate themselves, required middle-class women to act on their behalf. It was a perspective echoed by another London liberationist, who, when discussing the WLM's ideology, stated: 'The only thing Women's Liberationists are accomplishing is scaring off the real enemy. And it isn't men. It's women. The enemy lies within. Those among us who don't want to be liberated. The legion of lost domestics. The housewife.'[860] These assumptions extended across the decade and were present when attempting to take account of the problem of class difference, such as the North London Socialist Feminists' strategy document in 1979, which worried about how they could be involved in working-class women's struggle from 'a position of privilege.'[861] This 'privilege' was stated as having 'more education or money' or being 'more articulate and confident.'[862] Although these points reflected genuine causes for complaint from working-class feminists, the framing of the problem was from a position of superiority and was also a conversation between middle-class feminists rather than with the working-class women they intended to work with. This was another area of cross-class interaction that Farrer's critique took issue with. She argued that the internalisation of working-class stereotypes prevented middle-class feminists from being able to recognise working-class liberationists in their midst. This was because in middle-class eyes,

> "Real" working class women wear iron curlers, we have a bottle of stout hanging out of our pinny pockets, like Florrie Capp. And we're all the same, too, which is nice, means they can see us coming a mile off. If we're standing

[859] *The Observer*, 14 February 1971.
[860] Ruth Bachelor, 'Wanted: New Image', *Sunday Times*, 10 June 1973.
[861] North London Socialist Feminists, 'Strategy and Direction', *FAS: Politics/Policy 11*.
[862] Ibid.

> there next to them and talking about feminism (or classism!) – well, we can't be working class, can we, feminists are middle class.[863]

Although Farrer's view was undoubtedly exaggerated, her outline of middle-class women's views on the 'real' working-class woman bore a close resemblance to the notions of the 'dreary workhorse' or the 'legion of lost domestics' and should not therefore be easily dismissed. Moreover, when seen in conjunction with the similar sentiments of the other working-class feminists quoted above, it is clear that the consequence of viewing working-class women as perpetually external to the WLM did result in their invisibility, both as individuals and in wider narratives surrounding the movement as a whole. It seemed that in a number of instances across Britain, the WLM had internalised the Far Left's critiques of the movement's 'bourgeois' attitudes and composition in understanding itself as entirely middle-class. Rather than reject critiques that constructed the WLM as mostly 'petit bourgeois', some working-class feminists felt that their middle-class 'sisters' had accepted this position in its totality, even if they sought to change it.[864] In so doing, they reflected Phillips' second aspect of 'essentialism' by attributing middle-class characteristics to the category of 'feminist'.[865] Moreover, they reinforced a narrative of the Women's Movement that ignored working-class women's struggles for gender equality in favour of the middle-class as the heroic liberators of the downtrodden masses. Working-class women's agency, their status as feminists, and their very existence within the WLM, became absent even from the histories of socialist-feminists who confirmed the 'typically' middle-class 'strata'.[866] This invisibility within even a Women's Movement contributes to the historiographical accounts which portray working-class women as politically conservative, apathetic and individualistic.[867] Fundamentally, they are not agents of social change.

Moreover, this issue was exacerbated within the radical and revolutionary strands of the WLM, where class differences between women were often dismissed more overtly in the focus on maintaining 'sisterhood', once again overtly silencing the potentially alternative experiences of working-class feminists. If 'sex struggle' was understood as 'the struggle'

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[863] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 10.
[864] Marshall, *Real Freedom*, p. 102.
[865] Phillips, *Gender and Culture*, p. 71.
[866] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*; Rowbotham, *Women in Movement;* Segal, 'Jam Today'; Pugh, *Women's Movement*.
[867] Pugh, *Women's Movement in Britain*, pp. 329-330; Benson, *Affluence*, p. 418; Steven Fielding, *The Labour Governments, 1964-1970, Volume 1* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 224-5; Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters', p. 234.

and class a 'minor difference' between women, as asserted by Revolutionary Feminism, then to focus on class tensions within the WLM was to distract from the real cause.[868] These tendencies were evident from the early 1970s, such as in the passing of resolutions to abolish the usage of 'working class' and 'middle class' in relation to the WLM at a one day workshop in London.[869] Nor had they disappeared by the end of the decade as the Rad/Rev Feminist Conference in 1979 illustrated. The topics of the papers ignored any problems of class difference and focused on 'Political Lesbianism', the lack of inequality between men and women and the role of 'academic women' in the WLM.[870] When class tensions were mentioned, they were framed in terms of the problem of 'Personal attack[s]' in the movement, with one paper arguing that accusing a woman of 'middle-classness' or 'elitism' – both associated with working-class women's critiques – should be prohibited in the interests of 'sisterhood'.[871]

One interesting factor around the radical and revolutionary feminists' focus on sex and sexuality to the detriment of class was that a number of working-class liberationists also identified as lesbians. This was true of Farrer, for example, who noted that the dismissal of working-class women's existence within the WLM was amplified for working-class lesbians who were 'already outsiders' from their class due to their sexuality.[872] Indeed, this reflected a point raised by working-class feminists in Liverpool during an interview with *Spare Rib*. In an article, entitled, 'I'm a working class woman, OK' – an indication of the anger present in the piece – one of the participants, Tasha, suggested that 'It's being a working-class lesbian that is difficult', implying that sexuality doubled the existing class oppression within society.[873] Another interviewee, Les, also followed this by adding, 'It's fucking difficult enough being half black and half white and a lesbian and working class.'[874] Here we can again see the development of intersectional analysis in the experiences of individuals who have experienced multiple axes of oppression, illustrating that the intersectional approach of Collins and Scott was grounded in women's identities.[875] Another of the interviewees argued that the intersection of class and sexuality made the Women's Movement necessary for working-class women: 'If you're a lesbian you need the Women's Movement cos [sic] you're socially ostracised,

[868] 'Revolutionary Feminism: First Year'.
[869] Notting Hill Group, 'After Two Years' (March, 1972), *FAS: Politics/Policy 2*.
[870] 'Rad/Rev Conference Papers' (October, 1979), *FAS: Politics/Policy 13*.
[871] Ibid.
[872] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 1.
[873] Anny Brackx, 'I'm a working class woman – OK', *Spare Rib*, 63 (1977).
[874] Ibid.
[875] Collins, *Feminist Thought*, *passim*; Scott, *Fantasy*, p. 36; Scott, *Gender*, p. 25.

working-class people are very hostile to lesbians, there's not even the spot of token liberalism-alternative-society-bisexuality-is-the-latest-trend, what you get in the middle classes.'[876] This final speaker, Evelyn, was almost undoubtedly Evelyn Farrer, but although she was the one to make the double exclusion for working-class lesbians explicit, the comments of the other members of the group illustrated that she was far from alone in these sentiments. Indeed, two of the other interviewees noted that the working-class women's liberation group they and Farrer were members of was the first WLM group they had not felt oppressed in.[877]

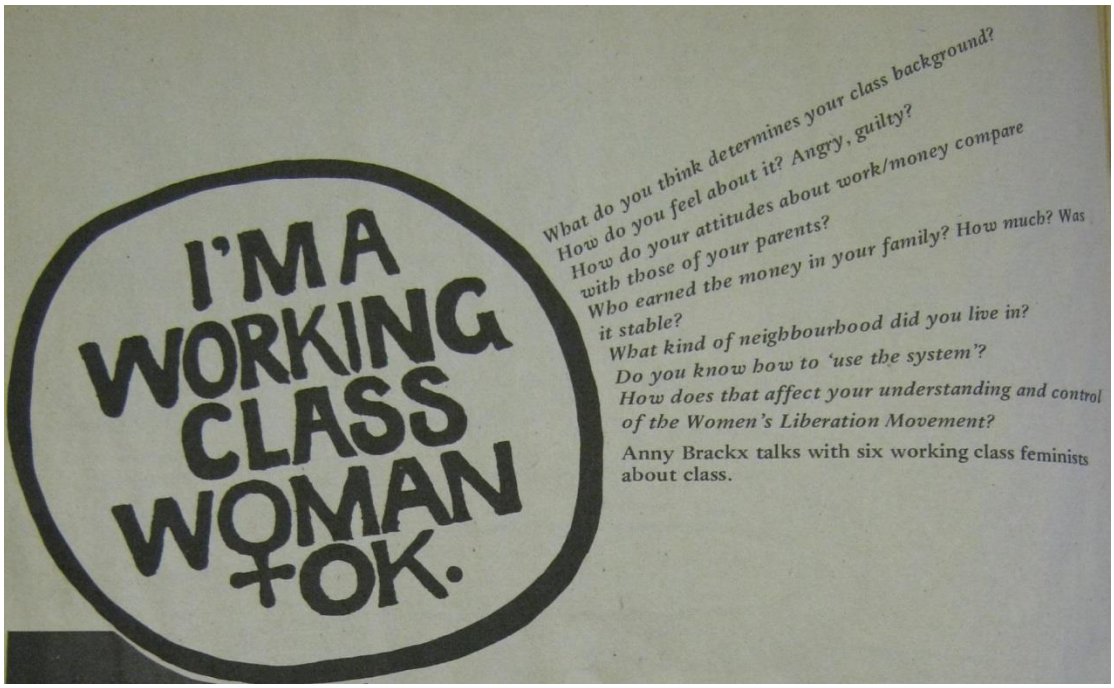

Figure 7: Title image for 'I'm a working class woman, ok' article by Anny Brackx. Taken from *Spare Rib*, 63 (1977), p. 14.

However, such oppressive attitudes towards the issue of class within the WLM were not universal. The socialist-feminist Notting Hill group, for example, criticised the resolutions that dismissed class differences between women, offering a very similar argument to Farrer in the process: 'When a middle-class Women's Movement talks about abolishing the words middle class and working class, the inevitable result is that working-class women are excluded from its programme and membership.'[878] Indeed, the same group had argued that its members needed to understand and 'overcome the way class divides us' as early as 1972, indicating the bubbling tensions around the issue

[876] Brackx, 'Working-class woman'.
[877] Ibid.
[878] Notting Hill WLM, 'Two Years'.

and a will to address them.[879] Moreover, it is clear that other groups were keen to bring issues of difference to the surface, such as in Winchester, where Jill Radford recalled that tensions surrounding class, race and sexuality were frequently discussed in consciousness-raising sessions.[880] She also asserted that unlike the exclusionary nature of 'sisterhood' implied by some radical or revolutionary feminists, for many other liberationists it pointed to similarities and closeness between women and offered the potential to explore tensions.[881] These points sit within the 'revisionist' histories of the WLM, which have argued that the power of 'difference' in destroying the cohesiveness of the movement has been overstated.[882] These examples tell us is that there was a strong awareness of the exclusionary potential of essentialising a particular construction of who a feminist was.

Nevertheless, the silencing of alternative voices and experiences within the WLM cannot be ignored. Whilst the problems of class difference may have been discussed widely in local groups, at national level the issue did not gain prominence until 1976, when it appeared on the programme for the National WLM Conference in Newcastle.[883] The Bradford Women's Group commented at the time that divisions between working-class and middle-class women were one aspect in a range of 'very real splits in the Women's Movement', suggesting that local C-R work was not dealing with the issue effectively.[884] By the 1977 conference, 'classism' had emerged as a concept that needed to be discussed and the theme of the acrimonious and final national conference in 1978 was ironically 'How are we oppressed and how do we oppress each other?'[885] Subsequent regional conferences continued to focus on the tensions that erupted at the 1978 conference, with class among them, such as workshops on the issue at the London WLM conference a couple of months later.[886] Prior to this, discussions of tensions between women had been considered through the lens of ideological disagreements or between 'intellectual and inexperienced activists', such as at a conference in Birmingham in 1971, rather than mentioning class or other identity axes overtly.[887] On the former, Eve Setch has argued that the existence of ideological differences within the movement

[879] Notting Hill Group, Women's Liberation Workshop, London, 'A Suggestion for the Agenda' (November 3, 1974), 5WSC/01, TWL.
[880] Radford, 'Women's Liberation Movements', p. 44.
[881] Ibid., p. 49.
[882] Graham, ''New' 1970', pp. 159-63; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16; Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4.
[883] Ross and Bearse, 'Chronology of the WLM', p. 26.
[884] Ibid.
[885] Ibid., pp. 31, 37.
[886] '2nd London Women's Liberation Conference' (June, 1978), *FAS: Politics/Policy 4*.
[887] 'Women's Liberation Conference, Birmingham, 1971'.

demonstrated that it could overcome problems of difference but tensions around identity were often more painful than ideological splits, as the theme and outcome of the 1978 conference attested to.[888]

Thus, whilst the 'revisionist' histories are correct to suggest that the WLM attempted to deal with problems around class and other differences between women, these efforts began in greater earnest well into the 1970s – not at the movement's inception – and remained flawed enough to require constant attention from 1976 onwards. Indeed, Radford agreed that even in her Winchester group, white middle-class feminists did not always deal 'effectively with differences in terms of our power and privilege within the group.'[889] In the eyes of some working-class feminists, this was a large understatement and the raising of the issue was not in itself a solution. For Farrer, the middle-class emphasis on 'being nice' and not undermining 'sisterhood' meant that disagreements either went unmentioned or could not be dealt with appropriately if they were.[890] If this tension was met with anger from working-class women then they were likely to be dismissed as 'unreasonable' and, as Marlene Packwood agreed, met with 'passivity, or passive retaliation… none of which are conducive to discussion and debate.'[891] Continuing on this theme, Packwood argued: 'Such a state of affairs shows that these are not open discussions where new direction is formulated but, at best, dull affairs… entrenched in sullen resentment from working class women and guilt-laden nervous stomachs from middle class women.'[892] Another of the *Spare Rib* interviewees, Judy, recalled that joining the WCWLG, or even wearing a badge indicating her class definition, was extremely difficult: 'you had to be fucking brave to come out as working class.'[893] In addition to the emotion described, the usage of terminology associated with sexuality rather than class indicated the power of class identity to inflict trauma on working-class liberationists due to its contentious position. The trauma of coming to terms with an individual's working-class culture and background in a predominantly middle-class movement was developed by Les, who recalled being angry at first seeing the badges 'because it was a question I had to face myself with, I had to define myself then', while Judy noted that many women had been 'hiding' their class until then.[894] The suggestion that working-class women had concealed their class identities or their

[888] Setch, 'Women's Liberation Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66.
[889] Radford, 'Women's Liberation Movements', p. 44.
[890] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 9.
[891] Ibid.; Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.
[892] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[893] Brackx, 'Working-class woman'.
[894] Ibid.

frustrations with middle-class liberationists until the late 1970s illustrates both the dominance of middle-class culture within the WLM but also offers an explanation of why the issue of class *within* the movement was neglected in the earlier period.

However, although class pervaded individual women's encounters and experiences, it is not surprising that racial divisions have taken precedence in the 'traditional' histories of the WLM due to the generally more overt nature of racial difference, which could not be rendered invisible by culture. Indeed, the problems of 'difference' have been more frequently linked to the issue of race rather than class, such as Carby's argument that 'sisterhood' could only be maintained through ignoring black feminists, or Amos and Pramar's contention that the movement's essentialised understanding of 'woman' privileged whiteness.[895] This is amplified by many black feminists' decisions to predominantly organise separately from white feminists, which has been discussed in earlier chapters and at length in other histories of the movement.[896]

However, to separate race and class differences in this way and to position them into a hierarchy of oppression conceals the complexity of both race and class in the WLM in three particular ways. Firstly, black feminists rarely critiqued the WLM on the basis of race alone with attacks on the movement's 'whiteness' almost always accompanied by similar criticism of its middle-class focus. A black member of a WLM anti-racist group demonstrated exactly this in a paper entitled, 'Is Racism Dividing the Women's Movement?'. In it she stated: 'To be brutally direct, women's groups, in all their various forms, are generally made up of **white middle-class women** [my emphasis]. Such groups are not overly attractive to black women.'[897] It was not only the whiteness of the movement that was problematic for black feminists, but its class composition. Indeed, the same paper asserted exactly this: 'Class is an issue that cannot be ignored here.'[898] Indeed, for other black feminists, such as Femi Otitoju, it was the class difference between herself and white feminists that first caught her attention when she attended the 1978 national conference as a seventeen year old.[899] Otitoju recalled how her 'working-class mentality' was 'appalled' by the other attendees, and '[could not] believe

[895] Carby, 'White woman listen!', p. 49; Amos and Pramar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', p. 54.
[896] Carby, 'White woman listen!'; Amos and Pramar, 'Challenging imperial feminism'; Thane, 'Women', p. 182; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 268; Holloway, *Women*, p. 207; Bruley, *Women*, p. 152; Webster, *Imagining*, p. 149; Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 4.
[897] W.E.P.G, 'Is Racism Dividing the Women's Movement?' (1983), *FAS: Social Relations 17*, p. 1.
[898] Ibid., p. 2.
[899] 'Femi Otitoju interviewed by Yepoka Yeebo', 13 March 2009, in 'The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement', BCA.

the state of these women'.[900] She continued by saying that she and the friend who accompanied her felt 'out of our depth class-wise, because the Women's Movement is so middle-class.'[901] Another activist in the BWM, Donna Jackson, also coupled whiteness and 'middle-classness' when suggesting that Asian feminists were more 'natural allies' who helped to counteract the 'white, middle-class movement'.[902] For Jackson, there was a similar sense of linked identity in her trade union politics, again emphasising how both a cultural and political identification with class was easier to achieve than one over gender and it was often the combination of class and race that underpinned the separation between black and white strands of the Women's Movement.[903] Indeed, in certain cases, such as the use of Depo-Provera and the dangers of forced sterilisation, sisterhood between black and white working-class women was easy to build due to their shared experiences of oppression. Stella Dadzie recalled of the Depo-Provera campaign: 'It was something that, kind of, made us very aware of the connections between black women, working-class black women and working-class white women because I think tests were being done on women in Glasgow and women in Zimbabwe.'[904] This connection was absent when it came to middle-class white women although the addition of 'no forced sterilisation' to the Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign's original demands implied that the disjuncture between white and black feminists over these types of issues owed as much to socio-economic and cultural differences and political *emphasis* as to fundamental political differences.[905]

However, there was a second element to this intersection. If white and middle class were synonymous with the WLM, then the linking of black and working class were equally so in the BWM. This was evident in the OWAAD constitution, which emphasised support for 'those struggles of the working class which further the interests of all working people'.[906] Similarly, prominent black feminists like Stella Dadzie framed black women's experiences as triply oppressed 'as women, as workers and as black people', indicating that black women were inherently working class.[907] The identification with the working class and against middle-class feminists illustrated Stuart Hall's point that

[900] Ibid.
[901] Ibid.
[902] 'Leeming and Jackson Interview', 'Heart of the Race'.
[903] Ibid.
[904] 'Stella Dadzie Interviewed by Ego Abiawe', 10 March 2009, in The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement', BCA.
[905] Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 177.
[906] 'OWAAD constitution', BCA.
[907] Dadzie, 'Untitled article'.

race can be 'the modality in which class is "lived", the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and "fought through"'.[908]

However, whilst the intersection was clear, the reality was far more complex as the definition of the BWM as working class was based on the political definition of class identified with Selma James in earlier chapters, rather than recognition of socio-economic and cultural class differences between women.[909] In much the same way as the white strand of the Women's Movement could render class differences invisible through an internalisation of itself as fundamentally middle class, the working-class narrative concealed class differences in the BWM. These differences were mostly felt in cultural terms around educational achievement, such as Mavis Best's contention that educated black feminists sometimes felt they were more sophisticated than others.[910] Others were more damning and argued that class differences were clearly apparent. Martha Osamar, for example, laughed off the idea that the BWM was 'classless': 'No-no-no-no-no there is, oh there is [laughter], yeah, yeah, yeah.'[911] Working-class black feminists who had not been to university, such as Judith Lockhart, were keen to bring up these differences in their narratives of the BWM. Lockhart recalled:

> One of the things that fascinated me about the women that I met was that there were a lot of them very different from me. A lot of them had already been to university, a lot of them, as I said, were like professionals, a lot of them sounded as though they went to very good schools, they sort of seemed a class apart, sort of, you know?[912]

She added that the BWM was influenced by the creation of a black middle class in Britain in the 1970s because prior to that 'everybody saw themselves as one class in the black community', but it was soon apparent that 'divisions [had] arrived'.[913] Lockwood suggested that women did not discuss these divisions in the early stages of the movement for fear of divisiveness but she felt those tensions were there, both points

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[908] Stuart Hall, 'Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance', in Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg (eds), *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (University of Chicago, 1996), p. 55.
[909] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', p. 74.
[910] 'Mavis Best Interviewed by Ego Ahiame', 20 February 2009, in 'The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement', BCA.
[911] Martha Otito Osamar Interviewed by Hayley Aud', 27 March 2009, in 'The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement', BCA.
[912] 'Lockhart Interview', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'
[913] Ibid.

that seemed to parallel the silence on class within the WLM more broadly.[914] Moreover, patronising attitudes towards working-class women were not only found amongst white feminists as the views of Lindiwe Tsele illustrated. Speaking on the issue of class, Tsele recalled how the influx of working-class black women into the Camden Black Sisters group resulted in the group's funding being spent quickly and thoughtlessly.[915] She stated: 'It was class because none of the original women would have done that, absolutely not.'[916] The implication was that middle-class women had superior levels of intelligence and conjured up a similar dismissive stereotype to those critiqued by white working-class women. It seemed the problem of class was able to cut across racial divides.

The third layer of complexity concealed by emphasising the separation of the BWM is that by the end of the 1970s, a number of working-class liberationists had also splintered into specifically working-class liberation groups that produced their own theoretical contributions and newsletters, which often focused on their frustrations with middle-class feminists. One of these, the *Working Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (WCWLN), set up in January 1978, was outlined by the 'Directory of Women's Liberation Newsletters, Magazines, Journals…' as the following: 'Set up Jan. '78 because they were pissed off with middle class crap. Appears 6 times a year, and their circulation is higher than any middle class feminist would expect.'[917] This 'middle class crap' took many forms but all could be found under Marlene Packwood's definition of 'classism' in the WLM:

> Middle class women, whether inside the movement or not, do play a part in the rendering invisible of working class women… Classism today is the culmination of this situation. It represents a specific oppression where the rules, values, mores and ideals of one class are imposed upon another, within the hierarchy of class values. Within feminism it filters through from middle class to working class women, denying them a language, banning them from self-expression, labelling them ignorant, stupid, coarse, bombastic, rough, uneducated, ineffectual.[918]

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[914] Ibid.
[915] 'Lindiwe Tsele Interviewed by Verusca Calabria', 20 November 2009, 'Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project', *Lambeth Archives*.
[916] Ibid.
[917] 'Directory of Women's Liberation Newsletters, Magazines, Journals…', *FAS: Politics/Policy 4*.
[918] Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 11.

The rendering invisible of working-class women in the movement has been demonstrated but there was also evidence of many other elements of Packwood's concept, not least of which was the existence of WCWLN, which illustrated that working-class liberationists felt a need to create a separate political space within the movement. Furthermore, the newsletter quickly became the site of class anger and frequently touched on the problem of working-class women's invisibility within the WLM. A letter from Chris Joyce in 1979, for example, noted how socialist-feminists were equally guilty of forgetting working-class women's existence as agents for their own liberation: 'These assumptions are apparent in all areas of the Women's Liberation Movement … socialist feminists who cry 'we must get more working-class women into the movement' yet refuse to acknowledge those of us who are already here.'[919] Indeed, Joyce's argument was consistently borne out by WLM conference programmes prior to 1976, such as the Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference in 1973, in which three of the five workshops were concerned with theoretical issues of how class should be related to the WLM or how to engage working-class women with the movement, but all were framed from the perspective of middle-class women 'looking in' rather than utilising the experiences of working-class women already in the movement.[920] Thus, we can again see how the politics of identification with women outside the movement could be detrimental to the identities of those already within it.

In the view of Jo Freeman, an American socialist-feminist, this invisibility and the inability of middle-class feminists to address it, could be largely explained by the WLM's devotion to independent, autonomous groups. This argument contradicted entirely the ideal behind structurelessness, which was based on inclusivity and the desire to, as Hilary Wainwright argued in *Beyond the Fragments*, discourage 'forms of procedure and of leadership which make others feel inadequate or uninvolved'.[921] Alongside this, as Caroline Moorhead noted, was the principle that it was 'axiomatic that you must not deflate a sister by putting her down'.[922]

However, Freeman argued that this 'structurelessness' was a 'tyranny' that had become

[919] Chris Joyce, *Working Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (Summer, 1979).
[920] 'Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference Schedule' (1973), 5WSC/01, TWL.
[921] Hilary Wainwright, 'Moving Beyond the Fragments', in Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: feminism and the making of socialism* (Merlin Press: London, 1979), p. 251.
[922] Caroline Moorhead, 'Women's Movement: The road to liberation', *The Times*, 16/06/1975.

an unchallengeable 'goddess in its own right', regardless of its outcomes.[923] In spite of this critique being aimed at the American movement, it was widely circulated in Britain and provoked both support and criticism in the British WLM. One aspect of Freeman's argument that resonated with some British feminists was her theory of domination and elitism within overtly independent, structureless groups. Freeman contended that contrary to arguments by many feminists that independence encouraged democracy, the reverse was true – structurelessness was a 'myth' that ignored the potential for confident individuals to dominate and impress their views and interests ahead of other members of the group.[924] Thus, the lack of formal structure only prevented the existence of *formal* hierarchies while in reality informal hierarchies developed that controlled the ideology and practice of the groups.[925]

This was a point picked up on by Scottish feminist, Esther Brietenbach, who suggested that one of the negative effects of C-R within the structureless groups was that discussions became shaped by personalities rather than principles, something that was particularly problematic if the dominant personalities emphasised introspection over action.[926] Sally Alexander and Sue O'Sullivan offered a similar perspective in a contribution to *Shrew*, where they contended that Freeman's work 'lucidly' described the increasing tensions within the movement, particularly around the difficulty of collective organising.[927] Written in 1975, the article reflects earlier points regarding the absence of class from these discussions, with the article focusing on the growth of separatism and division over political ideologies rather than identity structures.[928] However, the drift away from political action to introspection, particularly in relation to C-R, was raised regularly as a problem for the movement. Chester felt her experiences of C-R in a number of groups showed that the move from discussion to practice was rare.[929] For Catherine Hall, this was a key tension with her view – 'consciousness-raising versus activism' – placing the two as oppositional rather than complementary positions.[930] Elizabeth Wilson has argued that the tendency for C-R to become solely introspective reflected the potential for an 'individualistic' approach to feminism to

[923] Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', reproduced from *The Second Wave* (Female Liberation, Inc., 1972), in CP/CENT/WOM/01/3 in LHSA.
[924] Ibid.
[925] Ibid.
[926] Esther Brietenbach, 'How WL is reacting to the crisis', 'Scottish Conference Document, October 30/31' (1976), *FAS: Politics/Policy 11*.
[927] Alexander and O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood under stress', p. 19.
[928] Ibid.
[929] 'Interview with Chester', 'Sisterhood and After'.
[930] 'Interview with Hall', 'Sisterhood and After'.

prosper against the collectivism of its origins and political action.[931] This 'individualistic' approach reduced the concept of 'liberation' - and by extension, the cultural, economic, political and social challenges the Women's Movement provided to oppression and exploitation in the period – to a project of personal development.[932] This resulted in an alienation of working class and non-white women who tended to be have greater and more immediate material concerns.[933] Indeed, this tension was made explicit by Agnes, a working-class attendee of the 1977 national WLM conference, who condemned 'yoga, consciousness-raising and music' classes at the conference as 'rubbish' and not for working class women.[934] Similarly, Val Charlton remembered how the first WLM group she attended seemed 'terribly middle-class', partly due to the emphasis on C-R, which she found 'so indulgent, awful.'[935]

Farrer was even more damning of what de-politicisation could mean for the WLM, arguing that it could 'become – if it isn't already – a pleasant retreat for those women who are already best off in this society.'[936] The conditional premise, 'if it isn't already', illustrated that working-class feminists saw this as a notable tendency within the movement. In addition to this, Sheila Rowbotham recalled that many of the working-class feminists she encountered struggled to see the usefulness of C-R when their time commitments to children made 'actually doing things' more appealing.[937] Aberdeen-based Sandie Wyles, felt similarly, associating C-R with 'very middle-class Edinburgh women' and the 'flaky end' of the WLM.[938] Furthermore, Rowbotham suggested 'it was also a problem actually that the consciousness-raising groups, because they had such an informal structure, it was very difficult to come as a total outsider.'[939] Indeed, in her view, the same was also true for women the more formal structures of the Labour Party or CND.[940] When coupled with Selma James' point that inexperienced or inhibited women were more likely to feel comfortable with a large audience than in a small room 'where she might not have enough power to come out', the problems of C-R for working-class women were apparent.[941]

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[931] Wilson, *Halfway to Paradise*, p. 201.
[932] Ibid.
[933] Ibid.
[934] 'Report on National WLM conference', *Spare Rib*, No. 58, 1977.
[935] 'Interview with Charlton', *Once a Feminist*, p. 162.
[936] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 1.
[937] 'Interview with Rowbotham', 'Sisterhood And After'.
[938] Interview with Sandie Wyles by Rachel Cohen, 8 and 9 July 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/22.
[939] 'Interview with Rowbotham', 'Sisterhood And After'.
[940] Ibid.
[941] 'Selma James Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 198.

However, regardless of whether structurelessness led inevitably to individualistic feminism, the fundamental point was that it did provide great potential for personalities to control the movement. Here, Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' is useful in explaining how power relations can be constructed within explicitly non-hierarchical groups, through class distinctions in the 'social order'.[942] He argues that these distinctions are 'progressively inscribed in people's minds' through systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life leading to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies.[943] In this context, class, just as it had been in women's experiences with class politics, served as part of a 'classification struggle' over who a feminist was in which working-class women within liberation groups may have developed, or brought an existing understanding of, 'a sense of one's place' that led to self-exclusion from decision-making and the formation of ideology.[944] Moreover, a 'sense of one's place' exists simultaneously with a 'sense of the place of others' from which a social order is constructed.[945] Thus, working-class women's submission contrasted to the middle-class members of the group, often in possession of greater cultural, economic and social capital who could assume dominance. As a consequence, middle-class women, consciously or unconsciously, could thereby control 'legitimacy', in terms of which issues, and which voices, were important and which were not.[946] Many of these points were reflected in the accounts of the WCWLG or letters to the *WCWLN* above. Packwood asserted that the middle-class 'values and mores' of the WLM denied working-class women a 'language' for self-expression; whilst members of the WCWLG in Liverpool recounted the challenge of reclassifying their class identities against middle-class structures of classification.[947]

The Liverpool women were far from the only ones to experience the oppression of middle-class cultural structures in the WLM. In a letter to the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter, 'Beverley' discussed her dissatisfaction with already confident feminists due to the lack of participation they offered to most women inside and outside

[942] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 471, 141.
[943] Ibid.
[944] Bourdieu, 'Social Class', p. 5.
[945] Ibid.
[946] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Polity: Cambridge, 1991).
[947] Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 11; Brackx, 'Working-class woman'.

of the movement over ideology and strategy.[948] These problems were also felt inside the Dundee WLM group, where although the group had a varied set of members, it tended to be dominated by middle-class students.[949]

Working class women in England had corresponding experiences. Anne Day, a works representative, felt 'disappointed' with the WLM group at Keele University in the mid-1970s and left to form her own group for specifically working-class women, highlighting that those in Liverpool may have simply been the most famous to do so rather than the only ones.[950] Similarly, the group in Doncaster had disbanded in favour of alternative left-wing political organisations by 1971 with former chair, Maureen Douglas, arguing: 'I came to the decision that the Women's Liberation Movement is a middle-class one voicing middle-class ideas and with little, or no, understanding of the working-class.'[951] However, whilst not alone, few working-class groups received as much attention as the one in Liverpool and returning to the women's responses illustrates the classificatory power of middle-class feminists. Evelyn, for example, suggested that 'trying to talk about class in a women's liberation group is impossible and parallels the way oppression of women is made invisible in wider culture.'[952] Hilary added that she was ostracised by the way meetings were held in a 'middle class vocabulary' while all the respondents agreed that many middle class feminists tended to accept dismissive stereotypes that working class people were 'not very bright, don't know how to handle their money, aggressive, embarrassing.'[953] This tension undermined the movement in a way that another of the Liverpool interviewees, Isobel, deftly addressed: 'I feel there are whole areas of brick walls within the Women's Movement that people refuse to look at … You cannot call this movement revolutionary if it's not gonna look at the seeds of these discontents.'[954]

The power to erase working-class women's presence through the definition of class was also apparent in London for members of another working-class group. Having asked middle-class liberationists for educational materials for their group, the working-class

[948] Beverley, 'Letter on the National Conference', *Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), in Glasgow Women's Library.
[949] Sarah Browne and Jim Tomlinson, 'A Woman's Town? Dundee Women on the Public Stage', in Jim Tomlinson and Chris Whatley (eds), *Jute No More. Dundee Transformed* (Dundee, 2011) , p. 120.
[950] Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*, p. 207.
[951] Sheila McNeil, 'Pockets of Resistance: An operational guide to Women's Lib groups', in Women's Liberation in the UK, Vol. 1, 10/52/1, TWL, London Metropolitan University.
[952] Brackx, 'Working-class woman'.
[953] Ibid.
[954] Ibid.

women were frustrated at being labelled 'middle-class' despite disputing this description and thought of this as 'a way of keeping power' by the middle class.[955] Middle-class power was a common theme in working-class women's accounts, such as in a subtitle of Farrer's paper on the issue, 'It's Power We're Talking About', and it is here that the links to Bourdieuean notions of cultural class power are clearest.[956] Indeed, later feminist linguistic theories have highlighted how the control of language and the use of labels that 'gloss over' class differences between women, such as all feminists assuming those they were speaking to were middle class, can reveal the power structures railed against by Farrer and others.[957]

Another contributor to the *WCWLN*, Joyce Fletcher, suggested that denying a woman's working-class status constituted the 'attacking' option of middle-class women's three responses to being challenged on classism, alongside 'defensiveness … (I'm not middle class anyway)' and 'sheer arrogance … (what difference does class make anyway, we're all women aren't we?)'.[958] Furthermore, a later comment by Fletcher perfectly illustrates how Bourdieuean theories of cultural capital granted middle-class liberationists enormous 'symbolic power' over working-class counterparts:

> When I think of the number of meetings I've been to, the women I've tried to talk with, the times I've had ideas but have just clammed up and felt absolutely useless when confronted with their ease and confidence in a situation where they may even know anyone.[959]

The controlling influence of a 'sense of one's place' was also evidenced in an anonymous contribution to the newsletter, in which the author described her feelings of anxiety and depression surrounding her experiences as a working-class woman in the WLM: 'I spent years trying *not* to think about being working class, but in the end I was so confused, and angry, that I had to think about it and wanted to talk about it.'[960]

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[955] 'National WLM Conference Report', *Spare Rib*, No. 58, 1977.
[956] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 14.
[957] Deborah Cameron, 'Feminist Linguistic Theories', in Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (eds), *Contemporary Feminist Theories* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 157.
[958] Joyce Fletcher, 'Part One of our Comprehensive Guide to Understanding the Psychology of the Middle Class', *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July, 1979).
[959] Ibid.
[960] Anonymous letter to *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July, 1978).

For all of the frustration expressed in these newsletters, feelings of anxiety were equally strong and Christine Dubieniec's paralleled some of the Liverpool group members' discomfort amongst middle-class 'sisters': 'Anyone who has not experienced this oppressive 'us and them' feeling within the movement must consider my writing as reactionary and neurotic, but then I am a product of my society. My aim is not to put down the Women's Movement but to find my place in it as a working-class woman.'[961]

Meanwhile, the Leeds Working-Class Women's Liberation Group, who detached from the existing WLM groups in the city, which they saw as being 'predominantly middle-class', experienced what Fletcher had described as the 'sheer arrogance' response to their decision.[962] In a 1979 edition of *WCWLN*, they discussed how their decision had been met with 'disapproval and downright hostility' from other parts of the Leeds liberation community.[963] Having started with only three members, the hostile response to their split from middle-class feminists resulted in this doubling to six as other working-class women expressed their dissatisfaction over the response.[964] Moreover, the group claimed that a 'typical tactic' directed at working-class women in the WLM was to disparage an individual's character behind her back so as to weaken their influence and control dissenting voices.[965] This chimed with Packwood's overview of working-class women's experiences in the period, in which she suggested that middle-class responses to confrontation included 'cold shouldering, back-turning, snubs, coy snobbery'.[966] Deborah Withers' study of the Bristol WLM group has supported the narratives of working-class feminists from elsewhere in arguing the structureless nature of social movements like the WLM made 'getting along' vital to their maintenance, with the consequence that informal 'control' became inevitable.[967] Furthermore, in the Bristol group, as elsewhere, it was working-class women who felt unable to speak about classism without being deemed angry and irrational.[968] More generally, they felt that the influence of class inequalities on the group's dynamics was not addressed.[969]

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[961] 'Letter from Christine Dubieniec', *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July, 1978).
[962] Leeds Working-Class Women's Liberation Group (eds.), *Working-Class Women's Liberation Newsletter* (July, 1979); Fletcher, 'Comprehensive Guide'.
[963] Ibid.
[964] Ibid.
[965] Ibid.
[966] Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.
[967] Withers, 'Women's liberation', pp. 82-3.
[968] Ibid., p. 84.
[969] Ibid.

Fundamentally, it seems that working-class liberationists were deeply reluctant to discuss their class experiences because of how poorly they were received. Rather than being spaces where 'recognizing … different views' without discouragement took place, WLM groups were just as likely to be arenas where an informal class structure was created and the subsequent unequal power relations perpetuated. Moreover, although the political concern for working-class struggles outside of the movement distinguished British feminism from its American counterpart, class oppression within it brought the movements far closer. The parallels with Bell Hooks' critique of the American movement's failure to adequately address issues of classism are uncanny. Hooks argued that it was US groups with diverse class compositions that first recognised 'sisterhood' could not emerge until class was confronted, whilst the movement's inability to do so was evidenced in the splintering into specifically class-identified groups.[970] Moreover, her suggestion that a 'victim' mentality of common oppression enabled the abdication of responsibility for other types of oppression mirrored Farrer's that 'In the WLM some women are more powerful than others.'[971]

Later feminist theorists of class, such as Beverley Skeggs, have suggested behaviours like those found in WLM groups serve as illustrations of how middle-class women can inadvertently, and at times, consciously, commit acts of 'symbolic violence' on working-class counterparts, in terms of limiting and concealing their existence within the movement and silencing their voices.[972] Oppressive discourses surrounding class and gender intersected within the Women's Movement, and particularly the WLM, so that rather than being 'liberated', working-class women were instead vulnerable to a 'double oppression' that they could not escape even within an ostensibly radical political movement. While the independent and autonomous nature of the local WLM groups was successfully designed to prevent the construction of oppressive formal power structures, it created equally oppressive *informal* structures.[973] As a result, the 'habitus' of some women's liberation groups became social orders in which middle-class women dominated and tended to control ideology, strategy and discourse at the expense of working-class feminist voices.[974] Furthermore, that examples of these outcomes were

[970] Bell Hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (London, 2000), p. 103; Bell Hooks, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women', in Diana Tietjens Mayers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader* (London, 1997), p. 497.
[971] Hooks, 'Sisterhood', p. 487; Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 7.
[972] Beverley Skeggs, 'Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'', in Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs (eds.), *Feminism after Bourdieu* (Oxford, 2004), p. 90.
[973] Freeman, 'Tyranny'.
[974] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, and *Language*.

apparent in women's liberation groups across Britain and that they led to working-class women either leaving to join alternative political parties or even forming their own specifically working-class WLM groups, indicate that class oppression was relatively commonplace.[975] Class was therefore not only a description of difference but an axis of power.

Class inequality within the WLM was also present in its more traditional form of an exploitative relationship between a worker selling their labour and an employer.[976] Selina Todd has noted that working-class liberationists sometimes ended up working as cleaners for middle-class members of a group, thereby creating a distinctive class relationship with consequences for social and political interaction.[977] Moreover, the class relationship created between women who employed other women, inside or outside of the movement, was an issue that received little attention. Rachel Langton, for example, criticised the WLM for failing to address why some women could pay others to work in a report highlighting the horrific levels of exploitation and oppression faced by migrant women working as au pairs.[978] A powerful illustration of this missing analysis of this problem came from Ann Oakley's autobiography. Oakley wrote about a list she had made in 1968 of 'all the things I most wanted in the world but didn't have', which included various domestic appliances alongside 'a cleaning lady'.[979] What is important here is not Oakley's classist and colonialist attitudes in 1968 prior to her feminist 'awakening' but that her commentary on the list in 1984 focused on the fact that she had achieved or attained most of the things on it, rather than any considerations of the classist and colonialist discourses that had become associated with the aspiration of having a cleaning lady by the time of the book's publication in 1984. Moreover, the issue of socio-economic class relationships between women at a national WLM conference had been one of the dividing lines between the movement and the Claimants' Unions they supported, highlighting that this lack of reflexivity had political as well as social consequences.[980] For Jenny Lynn, the disconnection between middle-class feminists and the employment of working-class women was symbolised at the 1978 national conference, where the subsequent mess left her feeling sorry for the cleaners.[981] Indeed,

[975] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*, p. 197; McNeil, 'Pockets of Resistance'; Brackx, 'Working Class Woman'.
[976] Hennessy, 'Class', p. 63.
[977] Todd, *The People*, p. 308.
[978] Rachel Langton, 'Home not so sweet home', *Spare Rib*, No. 76, 1978.
[979] Ann Oakley, *Taking it like a woman* (London, 1984), p. 67.
[980] 'C.Us. and Women's Lib', p. 22.
[981] Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood and After'.

dismissive attitudes of those carrying out work at conferences were even extended to other liberationists, regardless of class background. At the 1974 national conference in Edinburgh, one of the organisers, Sheila Gilmore, was incensed by other women's treatment of the crèche as 'theirs'.[982] According to Gilmore, they 'came along, didn't supply anything, dumped babies and ran and we thought, hmm, is that what sisterhood's about? We didn't think so, thank you very much.'[983]

Moreover, although many working-class feminists like Farrer framed their critiques on the cultural rather than economic structures of class, the latter were never far from the surface.[984] Indeed, Farrer made the link between the two explicit, stating how cultural class power was a product of 'class supremacy, of time, money, space gained by one section of the population at the expense of another.[985] Similarly, whilst Packwood suggested that issues surrounding money did not cause the same 'feelings of inferiority and loss of confidence' as the dominance of middle-class cultural attitudes, socio-economic differences could still be alienating for working-class women.[986] In Packwood's view many middle-class feminists were 'unable to recognise the everyday struggles for money to pay the rent, to find a decent place to live without being able to afford a mortgage, finding a job – any job, paying gas, electricity, phone bills or finding the price of a bus fare into town.'[987] The problem of personal economic behaviour conflicting with political ideals often came to the fore when women with different socio-economic positions attempted to live communally. One working-class feminist who tried such an arrangement, Penny Holland, recollected that working-class women 'needed to make it clear middle-class feminists that parting with privilege included parting with cash.'[988] Zoe Fairbairns' overview of the responses to these contradictions between the personal and the political was an insightful summary of middle-class feminists' responses to class differences within the WLM: 'a lot of people really did try to live their beliefs, but some tried harder than others [laughs]. And when that proved impossible, some people reneged on the beliefs, some people reneged on the privilege and some people just put them into separate boxes and pretended it wasn't happening.'[989] The parallels with the contradiction between many feminists'

[982] Interview with Gilmore, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[983] Ibid.
[984] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. i.
[985] Ibid., p. 12.
[986] Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.
[987] Ibid.
[988] Holland, 'Still Revolting', p. 139.
[989] 'Interview with Fairbairns', 'Sisterhood and After'.

identification with class struggle outside the movement and their oppression of some working-class women within it are striking.

The power of 'sisterhood'

It was clear from the accounts of both working-class and middle-class feminists that divisions around class identity and power were damaging to the ways in which women's liberationists interacted and in many cases were not successfully addressed. The implication of this is that 'revisionist' perspectives emphasising the ability of the WLM to construct an inclusive and flexible politics of 'sisterhood' were not supported by the perspectives of those involved. However, as Jill Radford has pointed out, the autonomy of local groups and the subsequent variations in women's experiences problematise the writing of a definitive history of the movement and this is applicable to a class analysis due to the counter-examples of class harmony.[990] One of the most important themes in these counter-examples is the defence of 'sisterhood' in local groups, if not the movement as a whole. In North Tyneside, for example, the Coast Women's Group was composed of women from varying socio-economic backgrounds but rather than descending into fractious disagreements as the 1970s wore on, the members maintained both a collective politics and their personal relationships.[991] Indeed, the relationships have lasted well beyond the period to the present day.

The reason a number of the group gave for this persisting 'sisterhood' was that, as Setch has suggested, historical narratives focused on tensions and divisions by the 'traditional' school were based on their authors' experiences in London, where the relatively large number of feminists encouraged splits and fractures alien to smaller regions.[992] Torode felt that the group and the WLM in the North East more broadly 'missed a lot of the carry on in London', whilst Remfry contended that provincial groups were distinguished from London, 'where there [was] a group for everything really' and the possibility to have 'huge factions'.[993] Conversely, away from the metropolis, ideological or identity differences could be overcome through the need to come together to campaign: 'If we're concerned about an issue then we have to get together with people we don't agree with one hundred percent.'[994] For others, like Willan, there were so few disagreements that

[990] Radford, 'History of Women's Liberation', p. 40.
[991] Interviews with Torode, Remfry, Hardy, Bream and Willan.
[992] Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16.
[993] Interview with Torode; Interview with Remfry.
[994] Interview with Remfry.

this was a part of the interview that received very little discussion with only a brief mention that any that did occur never got 'nasty or anything'.[995] Indeed, the absence of class tensions in the Coast Group women's narratives was significant in itself, as it implied that this was not an important aspect of their experiences. This illustrated the problem of a research frame contrasting with respondents' memory frames and could have constructed the 'particular form of class relation' I had intended to avoid in the oral history process.[996] However, being sensitive to this absence prevented the projection of my conceptions on to the narratives, as Caunce warns against, and analysed intersubjectively, highlighted that class was not always internally problematic in the WLM.[997]

There were also many attempts made to address the problem of class within the movement. Middle-class feminists were conscious of how their cultural capital and numerical dominance could have ramifications for the power relationships between women of different classes. The North London Socialist Feminists noted how their class gave them a 'position of privilege' that required reflection on preventing thinking 'we know best how to do things because we may have more education or money or are more articulate and confident, without trying to control things because of this.'[998] This awareness was also present in the pages of *Red Rag* in 1977, when a contributor argued that problems arose in the movement 'Because we cannot proceed as a movement without a clear understanding of the various class/cultural/sexual/economic histories of the women who make our movement.'[999]

Moreover, C-R, was sometimes utilised as a solution to class tensions. Brenda Jacques argued in 1973 that the informal structure of the WLM and the practice of C-R had 'encouraged women to speak and therefore develop as activists' in ways that were not possible in the male hierarchies of the Far Left or trade union movement.[1000] Indeed, even those who had criticised the potential for structurelessness and C-R to lead to personalities dominating politics also emphasised their countervailing potential to address power relations and class differences in a setting that fostered empathy over anger.[1001] Similarly, Breitenbach qualified her criticism of the personality politics of C-R

[995] Interview with Willan.
[996] P. M. G., 'Popular Memory', p. 85.
[997] Caunce, *Oral History*, p. 145.
[998] North London Socialist Feminists, 'Strategy and Direction' (1979), *FAS: Politics/Policy 11*.
[999] Biddy Crewe, 'feministsocialistfeministsocialist', *Red Rag*, 13 (Winter, 1977/8), p. 6.
[1000] Brenda Jacques, 'What the Women's Movement Means', *Red Rag*, 1 (1973), p. 8.
[1001] Alexander and O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood under Stress', p. 19.

by outlining its strength in encouraging confidence and awareness of women's issues and opening up the possibility of involvement in other areas of struggle, such as class.[1002] It was on these grounds that Freeman's 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' was savaged by some feminists, such as Cathy Levine, who argued in 1974 that 'the article is destructive in its distortion and maligning of a valid, conscious strategy for building a revolutionary movement' that was a 'solution' the problems of dominance and hierarchy in formal structures.[1003]

A number of working-class feminists have also provided positive accounts of their experiences in the WLM, such as Jo Stanley. Stanley was conscious of class differences, pointing out how a meeting she attended in London was populated by middle-class women entirely, whilst another meeting in Liverpool was dominated by middle-class voices in which many women 'didn't speak at all.'[1004] The memoir her reflections originate from was also written precisely to address the absence of working-class voices in histories of the WLM: 'I myself was aware of the lack of Northern working-class accounts of the start of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).'[1005] Thus, there was no motivation to present class differences in a sympathetic light.

Nevertheless, Stanley's overriding narrative theme was of belonging and inclusion. She described her discovery of the WLM as a moment of 'completion': 'I'd always longed for but didn't know could exist; the thing-that-had-to-be. It completed the bits of me that were left untended/made uneasy by the radical left and underground movements.'[1006] The WLM 'offered me [Stanley] a place where MY issues – as woman – were on the agenda at last.'[1007] For Stanley, this shared sense of gender oppression was more significant than the class differences that existed between her and many other feminists she encountered, thereby demonstrating that the WLM was able to overcome the problem of working-class engagement at times. There are strong parallels with Sue Bruley's personal account of the revelatory nature of C-R despite her background as 'a working-class girl from a council estate'.[1008] In her article on the subject, Bruley tackled the association of C-R with 'middle-class lifestyle politics' directly, and noted that her own views had shifted from rejection to 'enthusiasm and evangelising zeal' for the

[1002] Breitenbach, 'the crisis'.
[1003] Cathy Levine, 'Tyranny of Tyranny', *Black Rose*, 1 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 1, 4.
[1004] Jo Stanley, 'Being a Feminist in Liverpool: 1969-71', (July, 1992), pp. 3, 5.
[1005] Ibid., p. 1.
[1006] Ibid.
[1007] Ibid., p. 6.
[1008] Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising', p. 718.

technique.[1009] Discussing her own experiences in the Clapham WLM group, Bruley recalled that C-R had been almost universally positive for those involved, even in a group with a relatively large concentration of working-class women defined by occupation and social background.[1010] Moreover, the members of the group Bruley was able to interview had all maintained their commitment to feminism and saw C-R as an important part of their lives and political experiences, echoing the views of the Coast Group in North Tyneside, even within the political tumult of the capital.[1011] This was also apparent in the Swansea group, where Jenny Lynn, who saw her working-class background as fundamental to her identity, recalled how C-R took place alongside campaigning without tension between the two, despite the group being based around a local council estate and composed of working-class women from it.[1012] For Lynn, sisterhood was 'powerful' not because of its potential to silence working-class 'sisters' but because it provided confidence that 'completely transformed' her life.[1013] For others from working-class backgrounds, like Chester, criticism of C-R's political link did not prevent positive feelings about the process, whilst Rosalind Delmar was 'very much in favour' of a much stronger move towards C-R in the movement and supported Setch's argument that the WLM was strengthened by disagreements: 'I thought that one of the strengths of the Women's Liberation Movement was its heterogeneity.'[1014] Indeed, even for feminists who focused on women's class struggle in both their activism and histories of the period, such as Rowbotham, have reflected in interviews that sections of the British WLM 'over-reacted' against C-R to the detriment of the movement's independent strength, which she felt contrasted with the US movement.[1015]

Moreover, if it was possible to overcome class differences in the white strand of second-wave feminism, it was commonplace in the BWM. Almost every former BWM-identified activist has asserted that class differences were overcome by a shared sense of racial identity. Lockhart, for example, who had found her working-class background at odds with many of the black feminists she came into contact with, nonetheless noted the 'great level of cooperation' between black women's groups across London.[1016] This was made easier by the explicit understanding of 'Black' as a political identification as much

[1009] Ibid.
[1010] Ibid., pp. 724-734.
[1011] Ibid., p. 732.
[1012] Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood And After'.
[1013] Ibid.
[1014] Interview with Chester, 'Sisterhood And After'; Interview with Delmar, 'Sisterhood And After'.
[1015] 'Rowbotham Interview', *Once A Feminist*, p. 23.
[1016] 'Interview with Lockhart', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'

as a skin colour and one which was based on the premise, as Jocelyn Wolfe suggested, 'that we were triply oppressed because of our race, our class and our gender.'[1017] Indeed, even for others who had recognised class difference within the BWM, like Best, the sense of shared oppression between women prevented destructive tensions from emerging.[1018] Furthermore, in the view of Gerlin Bean, the focus of black working-class activists like Olive Morris on class struggle alongside race and gender enabled greater cooperation with working-class women, black and white, and Asian women, culminating in the formation of OWAAD at the end of the seventies.[1019] This was a point reiterated by Dadzie, who suggested there was 'real sisterhood, real solidarity' between culturally middle-class women like herself and working-class feminists.[1020] This enabled the BWM to 'organise across class lines as well as across ethnicity' in ways that differentiate it from the white WLM's problems with class and race.[1021] This was also reflected in Otitoju's experiences, for who the sense of class displacement amongst the white WLM was not repeated in the BWM, which Otitoju believed had a wider appeal.[1022] Indeed, even Osamar, who had laughed off the suggestion that the BWM was classless, nevertheless agreed that an understanding of shared oppression meant that class differences could be overcome.[1023] Meanwhile for Tsele, Lockhart and Maria Noble, it was sexuality - not class – that caused the greatest tensions within the groups.[1024]

Thus, across both the black and white strands of the WLM, there is support for the revisionist perspective that 'sisterhood' did have the power to overcome class differences in a way that stood in contrast to the identity barriers it placed between the many female strikers or working-class housewives and women's liberationists discussed in earlier chapters. However, the successes of the BWM in addressing class tensions through a politics that stressed the 'triple oppression' of race, class and sex and built political solidarities around these axes regardless of cultural class differences between women within it, were not so easily repeated in the white WLM. This was because almost every instance of working-class feminist support for the idea of 'sisterhood' was accompanied by a qualifier that undermined its symbolic power.

[1017] 'Interview with Wolfe', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'
[1018] Interview with Best, 'Heart of the Race'.
[1019] 'Interview with Bean', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'
[1020] 'Interview with Dadzie', 'Heart of the Race'.
[1021] Ibid.
[1022] 'Interview with Otitoju', 'Heart of the Race'.
[1023] 'Interview with Osamar', 'Heart of the Race'.
[1024] 'Interview with Tsele', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'; 'Interview with Lockhart', 'Do you remember Olive Morris?; 'Interview with Maria Noble by Emma Allotey', 16 October 2009, 'Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project', *Lambeth Archives*.

Bruley's defence of C-R and sisterhood over class tensions, for example, concludes by accepting Farrer's key critique of the invisibility of class difference within the WLM, noting the group's conscious desire to do so: 'We were well aware of divisions in both class perspectives and class and income differences within the group, but chose to ignore them because we desperately wanted to unite in the cause of women's liberation and did not want anything to undermine that unity.'[1025] That class differences were ignored for a noble political goal does not alter that they were ignored nonetheless. Furthermore, the conscious dismissal of difference nevertheless resulted in the loss of much of the WLM's 'incredible early energy, dynamism and unity' by the 1980s, illustrating that working-class critiques suggesting exactly that outcome may have had more resonance than a repressive construction of 'sisterhood' at all costs.[1026] Indeed, even working-class defenders of the WLM, such as Stanley, moderated her personal sense of belonging by recalling: 'I had no idea I could expect sisterhood **and didn't experience it** (my emphasis), though I did experience support.'[1027]

Moreover, even in groups where 'sisterhood' between members has remained strong in the decades since the 1970s, such as the Coast Group in North Tyneside, the story is more complex than the revisionist perspective would allow. Remfry's reflections assert that despite some crossover, cultural class distinctions between women meant that working-class women campaigned predominantly within the class politics of the trade unions and Labour Party whilst middle-class women were drawn to the WLM.[1028] This was reflected in the actions of two other interviewees in the area with stronger working-class identities, Pat McIntyre and Joan Whitehead, with the former drifting away from the Durham WLM group in favour of Labour and trade union politics whilst the latter never joined an explicitly 'feminist' group, and instead worked in Women's Aid and Women Against Pit Closures during the 1984/5 miners' strike.[1029] Furthermore, Torode broke away from the 'sisterhood' narrative once the interview had ceased recording, implying that there was a political purpose to maintaining its credence rather than a strictly reasoned evaluation of its strengths.[1030] She agreed with Farrer and others that middle-class women did try to define what feminism was and thereby 'caused animosity', whilst classism in the WLM was 'huge… it was there and it was the

[1025] Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising', p. 734.
[1026] Ibid.
[1027] Stanley, 'Being a Feminist', p. 6.
[1028] Interview with Remfry.
[1029] Interview with McIntyre; Interview with Whitehead.
[1030] Conversation with Torode.

truth' and formed a 'hierarchy where women with financial independence and without any children had it made.'[1031] In so doing she reiterated Delmar's point in tempering her own support for sisterhood, who summarised her position as follows:

> I also think it's quite important to say that my view of, as it were, the fragmentation of the Women's Liberation Movement which took place, was that, this fragmentation resulted not from disagreements between women, but that, it was very difficult for women to deal with differences between women. It wasn't a problem of disagreements, but that the, these differences couldn't be medicated or negotiated.'[1032]

In short, it was identity, not ideology, that fractured sisterhood and the WLM, and class, as a primary means of difference with the white stand of the movement, was an essential component.

Conclusions

An analysis of class within the British WLM reveals that both the traditional and revisionist interpretations of the movement's response to 'difference' have some explanatory validity but are undermined by an exclusionary approach to working-class women's experiences, albeit inadvertently. The traditional school's view, that the movement's fragmentation at the end of the 1970s into an unrecognisable form resulted from an inability to move beyond an 'essentialised' view of feminism, is reflected in the anger of many working-class and black feminists who felt excluded from its gaze.[1033] However, this approach conceals two important aspects picked up on by the revisionist school. Firstly, it ignores the many positive experiences women outside of this 'essential' form had within local groups and the WLM more broadly, whether it was through C-R or a sense of belonging in which their sex was primary. In addition, it fails to take account of the efforts liberationists made to address tensions and maintain a flexible form of 'sisterhood' that could evoke 'collectivity between all women without assuming sameness', and utilise disagreements to strengthen the movement through discussion.[1034]

[1031] Ibid.
[1032] Interview with Delmar, 'Sisterhood And After'.
[1033] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*.
[1034] Graham, 'New' 1970', p. 160; 'Radford, 'History', p. 43; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16; Setch, 'Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66; Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4.

Nonetheless, in emphasising the almost limitless powers of sisterhood and incorporation of 'difference', the revisionist school makes the mistake of inverting the narrative in a way that disregards working-class feminists' painful accounts of oppression within the movement. It is also unable to explain the splintering of feminism into 'identity' factions – Black Women's Movement, working-class women's groups, lesbian separatism et al. – let alone the total fragmentation of the movement recognised by its participants. The suggestion that the movement's long-term ability to accommodate *ideological* disagreements makes the mistake of assuming that fractures around identity could be as easily integrated. In presenting the power of sisterhood and the efforts of the white, middle-class demographic to address difference, the revisionist narrative becomes the story of the dominant group – for whom sisterhood did resonate most strongly – at the expense of the agency of other groups in challenging them. Moreover, working-class women's agency within the WLM is also rendered invisible in the traditional narrative as it situates working-class women's political struggles entirely outside of it through a focus on its middle-class character. Working-class women were trade unionists and feminists but not women's liberationists; they were part of the Women's Movement but not part of the WLM. This narrative was founded in precisely the socialist-feminist commitment to a politics of identification that sought to find solidarity with working-class women 'out there' without recognising those already inside. The result was the silencing of working-class voices as the narrative dictated that all women's liberationists were middle-class with some feminists stuck in a constant cycle of bemoaning working-class absence.

The invisibility of working-class women within the WLM was also tied to power relations. The imposition of a certain class identity, values and set of practices sometimes resulted in the exercise of class power by middle-class women. Whether this was through the 'tyranny of structurelessness' that enabled those with greater cultural capital and confidence, *pace* Bourdieu, to dominate the groups, whilst working-class women maintained 'a sense of one's place', or through unequal socio-economic relationships that at times included the employment of one class of women by another, the result was the same: class power was present in the WLM.[1035]

[1035] Freeman, 'Tyranny of Structurelessness'; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 141, 471; Bourdieu, 'Social Class', p. 5.

However, principal to these discussions and tensions within the movement is the problem of how class was defined. For some women, like Farrer, Packwood and others, attending university was not a destruction of class position and to suggest otherwise was a means of middle-class control.[1036] However, for many others from socio-economically working-class backgrounds, education resulted in a 'transitional' class position, such as the accounts that dominate Liz Heron's collection, *Truth, Dare or Promise*.[1037] The next chapter will consider which structures and models of class women's liberationists used to construct their own class identities and the role this played in their personal and political identities, as well as how these contested the collective memory of the movement.

[1036] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 10; Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.
[1037] Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise*.

5. Class, autobiography and collective memory in the WLM

Since its dissolution as a recognisable form in the late 1970s, the WLM has been the subject of many oral history and autobiographical collections. In the 1980s, Amanda Sebestyen collected a series of individual narratives covering women activists' recollections of 1968, 1978 and the interim period, as well as their lives at the time of the book's publication in 1988; in the 1990s, Michelene Wandor edited a collection of oral histories with former liberationists concerned with their motivations and experiences while Liz Heron collected the narratives of some liberationists' childhoods, including her own; and, most recently, the *Sisterhood and After* project, directed by Margaretta Jolly, has created a repository of 60 women's liberationists' life histories.[1038] Add to this a number of regional collections, such as the Bolton Women's Liberation Group oral history project and the 'Women in the Women's Liberation Movement in Leeds and Bradford' oral history project, and it becomes clear that feminists from the period have been successful in constructing their own accounts of the movement they created and participated in.[1039] Personal accounts have consequently been central to histories of the movement as the feminist interest in making the 'personal' into the 'political' has transferred into autobiographical and oral histories.[1040]

As James Hinton has noted, it is generally true that the 'biographical turn' in history focuses on 'the moment in which individuals make their own history', a series of 'epiphanic moments' that create narrative coherence on the road to individual agency.[1041] Nevertheless, these narratives are not constructed through individual memory alone, but through a complex interaction between individual, collective and popular memory whereby 'personal narratives draw on the generalised subject available in discourse to construct the personal subject'.[1042] For women who grew up in the post-war period, the idea of 'liberation' is a key feature in individual life histories, even for those without explicit identifications with feminism.[1043] As Abrams' study of the post-war generation of British women showed, ordinary working-class and middle-

[1038] Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88*; Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*; Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise*; *Sisterhood and After*, http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/index.html (Accessed 27/06/13).
[1039] Both collections are held at the Feminist Archive North in the Brotherton Library Special Collections at the University of Leeds.
[1040] Cosslet et al., 'Introduction', p. 2.
[1041] Hinton, *Wartime Lives*, p. 205; Abrams, 'Liberating the female self', p. 21.
[1042] Abrams, 'Memory', p. 94; Summerfield, *Wartime Lives*, p. 15; Sangster, 'Telling our stories', pp. 96-97; Bodnar, 'Power and Memory', p. 1219; Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject, p. 95.
[1043] Abrams, 'Liberating the female self', pp. 16, 35.

class women founded their lives upon 'a liberationist practice, but rarely (or at least not consciously) upon liberationist ideology and movements.'[1044] The liberationist narrative of second-wave feminism has thereby resonated beyond those involved in its groups and political activism and become a dominant collective memory of women's experiences in the period. However, for women outside of the movement, this memory frame can be disrupted by a researcher asking about the WLM directly. When this happened in Abrams' interviews, the participants lost composure and expressed guilt or embarrassment about their lack of involvement in collective feminist struggle.[1045]

By contrast, feminism and the WLM itself are central in feminists' accounts; they are the anchors around which narrative composure is built and experiences are reflected on through their relationship to feminism. The acceptance of a feminist identity and engagement with the WLM are seen as the end destination in a series of 'epiphanic moments' that had led to that point.[1046] Across every collection and every interview, including those I conducted, involvement in the WLM or women's politics more broadly took pride of place in the narratives. This chapter will begin by outlining the important themes in these narratives that have persisted through four decades of memories and suggest this illustrates the power of the collective memory around the WLM. It will argue there is a link here between the WLM's white, middle-class demographic and the challenges posed by other groups in how individual's memories are shaped around differing collective understandings. Thus, despite the centrality of gender and sisterhood in the collective memory of the movement and in recent histories of it, we must be aware of how other social markers contest this narrative.[1047]

Class, as a shaper of identity and as a subjectively experienced oppression, for example, is omnipresent in the narratives of former liberationists, and is expressed in socio-economic and cultural forms, which are sometimes in conflict. Once drawn attention to in analyses of life histories of the movement, it has been relegated in more recent work in a way that conceals its pervasiveness in feminists' narratives. This chapter will address this absence by investigating how class was understood and experienced by individual feminists, the role it played in shaping women's identities, individual and political, and its importance in feminists' narratives. It will develop the arguments of the

[1044] Ibid., p. 16.
[1045] Ibid., p. 34.
[1046] Ibid., p. 21.
[1047] See for example, Browne, 'Women's Liberation in Scotland'; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement in Britain' and 'Anti-violence organisation'; Graham, '"New" 1970'; Rees, 'All the rage'; Jolly et al., *Sisterhood and After*.

previous chapter which asserted class was a cause of tension between women to argue it was also problematic within individual identities. Class, gender, race and other identity structures intersected in the 'epiphanic moments' which affected individual women's routes to feminist consciousness and how they responded to themes in the collective memories of the WLM. Finally, this chapter will illustrate that despite the WLM's socio-economic and cultural composition, individual feminists were as much products of and conscious of class society as the opposition to patriarchy that defined the movement overtly.

The centrality of the movement and sisterhood in autobiographical narratives

The centrality of the WLM and ideas of 'sisterhood' are consistent themes in the life stories of many feminists who were involved. Lynne Segal stated that feminism and the WLM have 'shaped' her life and this identification has been her 'compass and anchor' in the world.[1048] This was often most powerful for middle-class women who felt disconnected directly from class identities, even if, as chapter two illustrated, a politics of identification underpinned their behaviour. Zoe Fairbairns, for example, recalled how the WLM's focus on the system of gender oppression which benefits men was a 'very strong' draw for her.[1049] This chimes with Catherine Hall's conception of the 'classic Women's Movement person' as one of a middle-class background.[1050] Indeed, the importance of the WLM certainly resonated deeply with this group, serving as a 'refuge' in the eyes of Barbara Taylor. However, a working-class background or identity did not prevent similar sentiments. Working-class feminists like Gail Chester, for example, who had felt 'terrified' in some of her early interactions with feminists due to her working-class origins, recalled that overcoming this fear resulted in the WLM being 'the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me in my life'.[1051] Similarly, Alison Fell went from deliberately distancing herself from middle-class girls at school and college to finding her first WLM group in 1969 a 'revelation' that 'saved [her] from a weight of guilt about how badly I fit into my womanly role.'[1052]

Others, like Beatrix Campbell, recalled the WLM as a 'defining and changing moment' in her life and a key focus of her life story in her interview with the *Sisterhood and After*

[1048] Interview with Segal, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1049] Interview with Fairbairns, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1050] Interview with Hall, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1051] Interview with Chester, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1052] Fell, 'Rebel', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 21, 25.

project.[1053] This was despite Campbell's early political involvement being with the Communist Party, illustrating again the tendency for working-class women to be drawn towards class rather than feminist politics at the formation of their political identities.[1054] Indeed, this connection led to the writing of disparaging articles on the WLM before Campbell attended a WLM meeting and 'immediately converted', setting up a group in East London.[1055] Others involved in class politics did not feel the need for a 'conversion' but nonetheless accepted the WLM's life-changing power. Jenny Lynn, as noted in the previous chapter, fell into this category, asserting that the WLM 'completely transformed' her life and enabled her to become a leader in subsequent political involvement in class and feminist spheres.[1056] She agreed with others that 'sisterhood is powerful' and found it provided her with a sense of support from which her later confidence developed.[1057] Even for those like Susie Orbach, whose mixed class and Jewish background drew her between class, anti-imperialist and feminist politics throughout her life and prevented what she called a 'eureka moment' in her consciousness, reflected that the WLM gave her an 'entry point to think about her life'.[1058] These recollections chimed with Michelene Wandor's introduction to *Once a Feminist*, in which she noted all the interviewees 'felt that feminism had enriched and enhanced their personal relationships, their work, their political activity and helped make them surer and more confident in the choices they have made in their lives.'[1059]

This was apparent in the majority of the other collections, too, including *Sisterhood and After*, and amongst my own interviewees. Joan Whitehead remembered how involvement with Women's Aid and a Rape Crisis Centre opened up a 'whole new world' about women's rights, while she also 'gained a lot… politically' from engagement with feminism.[1060] Amongst the Coast Group members, the movement and 'sisterhood' more broadly were referenced repeatedly as significant during the period and subsequently. Jill Hardy and Cathy Bream both mentioned how involvement had brought them 'a lot of support' and friendship, with Hardy also echoing Wandor's summation of gained confidence.[1061] Similarly, Bream emphasised how she had been 'educated' by the

[1053] Interview with Campbell, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1054] Ibid.
[1055] Ibid.
[1056] Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1057] Ibid.
[1058] Interview with Orbach, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1059] Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 9.
[1060] Interview with Whitehead.
[1061] Interview with Hardy; Interview with Bream.

movement and that she 'wouldn't be the same person without it.'[1062] The intersection between personal and political development was explicit in Kate Willan's reflections where the two overlapped in her response:

> Well personally I concentrated in my work on, cos I worked with offenders so I had a big interest in working with women offenders… and I also worked with domestic violence perpetrators, male, which I found very difficult but I think erm would have been even more difficult if I hadn't had, you know, all the experiences I'd had and all the women I'd met through Women's Aid. So politically it kind of, like I said it's one reason I left the Labour Party… and in the trade union movement as well it had quite a big impact on me and in my personal relationships as well, I have to say feminism has had – well, it's had an impact on my relationship with my partner and erm, relationships with women. I still value a lot sisterhood, as it were, you know the friendships I've made and the contacts I've made through the Women's Movement.[1063]

Elsewhere, Jo Stanley described the movement as the thing she had 'always longed for' and entry into the movement as an epiphanic moment of 'completion'.[1064] Thus, regardless of socio-economic background, the WLM had powerful positive effects on the lives of all those involved.

However, this is complicated by another of the interviewees outside of the Coast Group in Durham. Pat McIntyre maintained her working-class identity along Marxist lines of political economy, and for her, feminism was a political 'stepping stone' to helping working-class women suffering exploitation, rather than something that developed from personal experiences of gender oppression.[1065] McIntyre did define as a feminist during the interview – 'I was always proud to be a feminist' – but in summarising her political identity at the end of the interview, it was socialism and internationalism that came to the fore with feminism absent.[1066] The link to feminism and other struggles is implied by defining as 'a socialist in the fullest sense of the word' but this nevertheless

[1062] Interview with Bream.
[1063] Interview with Willan.
[1064] Stanley, 'Feminist in Liverpool', p. 1.
[1065] Interview with McIntyre.
[1066] Ibid.

contrasted with the other interviewees, suggesting that a working-class identity could influence how the WLM is understood within individual memory.[1067]

The crossing of the class barrier into the WLM was made easier if an individual's personal experiences of inequality and oppression were addressed by feminism. Jan McKenley, a black woman with a working-class background, had been aware of feminism after graduating in the mid-1970s but did not become strongly involved until 1978 after her own experiences of having an abortion led her towards the NAC.[1068] After this experience, she became a co-ordinator and 'dived into feminism', exemplifying Thompson's conception of how political consciousness can develop through an awareness of shared and antagonistic interests, respectively.[1069] However, the end of her interview mirrored McIntyre's reflections as class and race returned to McKenley's account. She reflected that it was hard to discriminate between the political movements of the 1970s and 1980s in terms of which had the most influence on her – she was a women's liberationist but not defined by it solely.[1070]

Indeed, what McKenley illustrated over the course of an interview was symbolic of how the move from a class-based identity to a gendered one could be reversed. Feminists from working-class backgrounds often had political 'epiphanic moments' after or during involvement with the WLM that returned them to class. Alluded to in the previous chapter, a number of working-class women rediscovered their working-class identities through the experience of marginalisation within and distance from their middle-class sisters in the WLM. Members of the WCWLG in Liverpool were joined in this experience by Audrey Battersby, who, having described the Ruskin conference as being the moment of 'becoming an active political animal rather than an inactive, passive one' on the one hand, on the other felt alienated from the WLM due to the radical feminist dominance which focused solely on sexual inequality while she chose to take feminism into the workplace.[1071] Thus, she became a political agent through gender-consciousness but became disappointed with what she saw as the movement's focus on only this type of oppression, and instead attempted to synthesise gender and class oppressions in her political practice and personal identity.

[1067] Ibid.
[1068] Interview with Jan McKenley by Margaretta Jolly, 18 and 19 April, 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement*, British Library, C1420/15.
[1069] Ibid; Thompson, *Making*, pp. 8-9.
[1070] Interview with McKenley, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1071] Brackx, 'Working-class woman'; 'Battersby Interview', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 116, 118.

It was not uncommon for those who had entered the movement believing in the universality of sexual oppression and sisterhood to find breaking points with this ideology as a consequence of differences in class experiences and identities. Penny Holland, a revolutionary feminist throughout much of the 1970s, illustrated this in noting that by the end of the decade she had started to recognise her experiences of oppression as based in class as much as gender and found that revolutionary feminism could not absorb this factor into its ideology of oppression.[1072]

What is especially pertinent about Battersby's and Holland's narratives was the way in which having transitioned from working-class to middle-class in cultural, social and economic terms, their political consciousness was aroused by gender inequality rather than class. However, their experiences in the WLM resulted in a *return* to class, in ideology if nothing else. Their class identities, which had been submerged beneath a totalising 'sisterhood' during their early involvements with the WLM, were excavated precisely because the essentialising ideology of 'sisterhood' was not reflected in their experiences. Their stories again reveal both the power of the 'sisterhood' narrative to conceal difference between women at the most personal level – serving as the key reference point for an individual's construction of political identity – and conversely, that its contradictions with women's individual experiences concluded in the destruction of the narrative and with it, the movement.

Class background and experiences then did impact on the importance of the WLM to women's political identities and life stories but this was particularly true surrounding narratives concerning the 'death of sisterhood' and the fragmentation of the movement at the end of the 1970s. Indeed, the rediscovery of class (and race and sexuality) is part of a repeated narrative theme in individual accounts of the movement in the collections from the late 1980s and into the beginning of the 1990s that focus on the 'death of sisterhood'. These narratives correlated with the dominant participant-histories of the WLM at the time and illustrate the construction of a collective memory of the movement's fragmentation.[1073] Battersby described her disillusionment to Michelene Wandor in 1990 while Holland discussed her rediscovery of class difference with Amanda Sebestyen in 1988 and the theme ran through both books. Rose Brennan, for example, recounted the contradictions of the inclusivity and exclusivity of 'sisterhood' in

[1072] Penny Holland, 'Still Revolting', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (London, 1988), pp. 136, 138.
[1073] Rowbotham, et al, *Fragments*.

a deliberately discursive description of the final national WLM conference at Birmingham in 1978:

> I thrill at being amongst so many women: I'm sickened to witness our mistreatment of one another. I relax in the all-female company, rejoicing in meeting up with old friends and starting new friendship… The meetings of working-class women excite and inspire me; the reception we get when we try to communicate 'class matters' to the conference disheartens me.[1074]

Class and other differences between women were cited frequently as the causes of the 'death of sisterhood', even for those who had internalised the narrative of 'sisterhood' most deeply. Asphodel, for example, noted that it was once she became aware of these distinctions between women that: 'I was woken from rapturous dreams of universal sisterhood. I see now that women do still exploit women, that all the particularities are important.'[1075] Gay Jones recounted similar emotions regarding the Birmingham conference, which she described as 'a painful and frustrating event' and suggested: 'I think many of us left in a state of shocked amazement and bewilderment about the 'unsisterly' behaviour. Perhaps that's where our euphoric belief in sisterhood finally died…'[1076] In so doing, Asphodel and Jones illustrated both the power of middle-class women's identification with the WLM and the difficulty of seeing its 'classic' characteristics challenged.[1077]

These feelings were linked to the 'epiphanic' power of feminist analysis to justify the political engagement of middle-class women in any type of struggle. Janet Hadley, whose political involvement began in black politics through her West Indian partner, was 'fantastically relieved to find that *women* were oppressed… it didn't just leave me the out and out villain, an accomplice in the history of white supremacy.[1078] Sally Alexander noted similarly that the movement could be 'exhilirating' and 'empowering' whilst Juliet Mitchell repeatedly mentioned the sense of 'unity' between women in the

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[1074] Rose Brennan, 'You've Come a Long Way', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (London, 1988), pp. 241-2.
[1075] Asphodel, ''1968: Prague Winter, Feminist Spring', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (London, 1988), p. 13.
[1076] Gay Jones, 'Words Are Not Enough', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (London, 1988), p. 235.
[1077] Jones, 'Words', p. 235.
[1078] 'Janet Hadley Interview', in *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 77.

early WLM in her account.[1079] Catherine Hall, the archetypal feminist, also emphasised the emotional turmoil of the WLM's fragmentation: 'It upset us so much partly because of the whole idea that as women we were supposed to be building a movement together, and the notion of deep divisions in it was deeply upsetting.'[1080]

These women's middle-class backgrounds suggested that the 'classic' characteristics certainly resulted in a stronger belief in sisterhood and greater pain at its loss. However, in class terms, an individual's self-identification influenced this relationship more strongly than socio-economic background. Battersby, for example, defined herself as middle-class by her point of involvement in the WLM as a result of education rather than aligning with her working-class origins.[1081] For Battersby, sisterhood was 'so supportive and so powerful' that she 'couldn't help being upset when [the movement] started behaving like male-dominated politics and we started falling out over various issues.'[1082]

For others like Holland, however, the movement's fragmentation was due unequivocally to its failure to incorporate the interests of its widening social and racial base into the all-encompassing ideology of 'sisterhood': 'It was the failure (or inability) of the WLM in the ensuing few years to take class and race on board and make the step from seeing the world as sisterhood versus sexism… which eventually sank the WLM boat.'[1083] Moreover, women outside of the 'classic' category were far more likely to find the undermining of the WLM by issues of class, race and sexuality as necessary. Gail Lewis, a black working-class defined feminist believed this was because the airing of these differences challenged the 'seeming incapacity to think beyond the specific conditions of a particular category of woman, often white, often middle class… unable to think beyond those social horizons.'[1084] Other activists believed further issues, such as disability, also needed to be brought to the surface. Indeed, Kirsten Hearn asserted that sisterhood was only ever for the 'classic' type: 'what they're talking about was the time when nobody recognised the differences, and maybe we were all silenced, maybe we were just putting up with it and struggling as best we can, or we weren't there because we couldn't be

[1079] 'Sally Alexander Interview', *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 92; 'Mitchell Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 111.
[1080] 'Hall Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 179.
[1081] 'Battersby Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 117.
[1082] Ibid., p. 115.
[1083] Holland, 'Revolting', p. 136.
[1084] Lewis Interview, 'Sisterhood and After'.

there, actually.'[1085] Present in both narratives was the sense that the integration of difference into the narrative fundamentally reconstitutes it from a painful disintegration to a necessary contestation from which a new feminist politics could emerge. Indeed, in the cases of some who never connected to this essentialised form of gender struggle, such as the working-class CP member, Maggie Nichols, the fragmentation of the WLM was actually an opportunity to discover and make links with other women with similar experiences.[1086] Compare, for example, Asphodel's and Jones' distress – 'woken from rapturous dreams of universal sisterhood'; 'euphoric belief in sisterhood finally died' – and Holland's or Lewis' matter-of-fact detachment in their descriptions of the same issues. It was those that had internalised the narrative of 'sisterhood' most strongly who felt most disappointed when class and racial differences between women displaced its validity.

However, in hindsight, many recognised the problem of these different perspectives. Anna Davin, a white middle-class feminist who had found the raising of these issues 'distressing' and felt a need to 'calm things down and sort of, prevent that kind of feeling' at the time, altered her view in the decades after.[1087] She suggested her attempt to calm tensions 'wasn't necessarily what those women wanted to hear because that might have seemed like ignoring it… I was probably too emollient in my response.'[1088] Others felt similarly. Hall reflected that the 'absolutes of the seventies are no longer so clear' in the movement that women like her 'belonged' to and 'defined'.[1089] O'Sullivan, who had also thought of the WLM as '[her] movement', later commented that issues of class, race and sexuality 'were important to deal with and had to be dealt with.'[1090] The balance between loss and necessity in middle-class narratives of sisterhood was common across the country. North East feminist, Penny Remfry's lament for the loss of sisterhood in contemporary feminism weighed against the particular characteristics of those who identified with it most strongly was typical: 'I think for those of us who saw ourselves as feminists, and we probably were fairly middle class and white, yes, sisterhood, we could write to each other "in sisterhood" you know, and that's completely gone now… but I am

[1085] Interview with Kirsten Hearn by Rachel Cohen, 1 and 2 February 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/44.
[1086] Nichols, 'Tomorrow', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 178-9.
[1087] Interview with Anna Davin by Rachel Cohen, 9 August, 7 and 28 September, 8 October, 25 November and 16 December, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/02.
[1088] Ibid.
[1089] 'Hall Interview', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 176, 179.
[1090] 'O'Sullivan Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 223; 'Interview with O'Sullivan', 'Sisterhood and After'.

speaking as a white, fairly middle-class feminist and so, erm, that probably was fairly exclusive.'[1091]

However, the attitudes of Coast Group members do indicate that the fragmentation of the movement was experienced differently at national and local levels. Though predominantly middle-class, the groups also included women from working-class backgrounds and at least one who maintained a working-class definition. Amongst this group of women, the disintegration of the national WLM did not result in the dissolution of their own groups or contacts, regardless of class differences, origins or identities. Willan explained:

> We've all stayed very close, you know, since the 70s, the ones of us that are still in Tyneside, you know, a lot of women have left the area but the ones of us who are still on Tyneside, we're all still, erm, you know, we all still have quite a lot of close contact with each other, which is really important.[1092]

This was also something commented on by Battersby, who remembered that her WLM group were still meeting at the time of her interview in 1990.[1093] The implication is that the end of sisterhood resonated with those involved at a national level or in larger urban concentrations of feminists. Outside of these areas, class difference did not have the same impact on how challenges to sisterhood were received. However, this must be balanced against the fact that amongst the women I interviewed who defined as working class – Pat McIntyre, Joan Whitehead, Jill Hardy and the Trico strikers, Anne Fitzgerald, Phyllis Green and Sally Groves – only Hardy stayed involved directly with a WLM group. The others recognised the WLM's contribution to their personal and political lives in multivariate ways but nevertheless did not express, nor did their behaviour evidence, the same level of identification with the WLM as was almost universally apparent amongst middle-class interviewees for this project and others. Thus, the relationship between class identity and feminist identity was not straightforward but middle-class women were more likely to find 'sisterhood' consonant with their experiences of the WLM and were consequently more likely to find its contestation upsetting, whilst the converse was true for working-class feminists. However, regardless of its level of

[1091] Interview with Remfry.
[1092] Interview with Willan.
[1093] 'Battersby Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 115.

influence on feminist identities, class was significant in almost all feminists' life stories and in ways absent from many contemporary histories of the movement.

The omnipresence of class in feminist life histories

In her introduction to *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, a collection of written narratives by former liberationists, Amanda Sebestyen stated she was 'lucky' nearly a third of the participants were working-class women in comparison to the publishing world generally.[1094] Moreover, even in the context of a 'liberating' social movement, she notes that the working class were still not expected to write history.[1095] In short, Sebestyen thought the subject of class was significant enough to feature in the introduction to the collection. This illustrates that at the time of the book's publication in 1988, class was a vital frame of analysis for – and of – the WLM. Moreover, Michelene Wandor noted the 'combination of experiences' – of working-class and middle-class women – as the spark for the WLM in her introduction to *Once a Feminist* in 1990, and class was again emphasised in Liz Heron's introduction to *Truth, Dare or Promise* three years later.[1096] Indeed, Heron criticised the 'scant attention' the 'subjective experience of class' had been given by the Women's Movement to that point, but concluded, 'this is changing as feminism becomes less a narrowly middle-class outlook.'[1097]

However, in more recent interview collections, such as the largest ever in the UK, the *Sisterhood and After* project, the role of class in feminists' life histories is relegated behind other thematic concerns, although this is not clear at the outset. In her introduction to the project, Margaretta Jolly specified a key research question as: 'How should we understand relationships between Women's Movement activists of different classes, ethnicities, religions, sexualities…?'[1098] The question is situated within a broader intersectional approach keen to take account of a range of 'difference and diversity' and the overlapping of political identities and experiences.[1099] In practice, however, the project chose to emphasise a particular intersectional axis: race. Interviewees were selected on the basis of 'diversity of region, nation, age, sexuality and class, as well as ideology and campaigning groups but we have also prioritised the issue

[1094] Sebestyen, 'Introduction', in *'68, '78, '88*, pp. xi-xii.
[1095] Sebestyen, 'Turning Points', in *'68, '78, '88*, pp. 5-6.
[1096] Wandor, 'Introduction', pp. 3-4; Heron, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.
[1097] Heron, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.
[1098] Margaretta Jolly and Sasha Roseneil, 'Researching Women's Movements: An introduction to FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35:3 (May, 2012), p. 125.
[1099] Ibid., pp. 125-8.

of race.'[1100] Like my own research, the project responded to the dominant themes in existing histories of the movement with the issue of race focused on due to the 'widespread acknowledgement that there was tension in the British women's liberation movement over the marginalisation, exclusion and racism faced by black and Asian women.'[1101] This is a valid point. Black feminists' identification with the white WLM was extremely problematic and the BWM did exist in large parts as a separate and distinct movement.

However, an analytical problem arises out of this important and necessary corrective to the representativeness of WLM life histories. Implicit in the desire to redress the ethnic balance of histories of the WLM is an insistence on the significance of race above all other differences; the WLM did feature a hierarchy of difference and race was at the top of it. The problem is that in so doing, race becomes a distinct entity separate from class, sexuality, religion or the other issues of diversity the project intended to consider. The intersection of race with other differences is lost. This is especially damaging regarding the intersection of race and class, which tended to be synonymous in black feminists' critiques of the WLM and its histories.[1102] Moreover, the centrality of race at times impinges on interviewees' narratives, such as the closing down of Gail Lewis' comments on the significance of class in favour of pursuing the pre-determined focus on racial difference in one of the interviews.[1103] Thus, the effort to rebalance unequal power relations through representative methodology creates new imbalances between the interviewer and interviewee as a particular narrative of difference is imposed.[1104] This also comes at the expense of Heron's suggested research agenda focusing on the subjective experience of class amongst feminists in this period.[1105]

The relegation of class is rendered odd by the fact that it is discussed by sixteen of the respondents in *'68, '78, '88*, influences all of the accounts in *Truth, Dare or Promise*, and is discussed in detail by seventeen of the interviewees collected in *Once a Feminist* – and is mentioned by almost all the others – and is present consistently in the *Sisterhood and After* collection, as well as in all of my own interviews.[1106] Indeed, a consideration of

[1100] Cohen, 'Researching difference and diversity', p. 138.
[1101] Ibid.
[1102] See chapter 4.
[1103] 'Interview with Lewis', 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1104] PMG, 'Popular memory', pp. 76-78; Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus', p. 60.
[1105] Heron, 'Introduction', p. 8.
[1106] Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88*; Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*; Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise; Sisterhood and After*.

liberationists' individual narratives suggests that it was often the case for working-class women's involvement with women's liberation was inflected by their class background. Maggie Nichols, for example, came to political radicalism not through gender consciousness but the Communist Party.[1107] She was far from alone: Valerie Walkerdine, another working-class liberationist, was also involved with radical Marxist politics before feminism; Gail Lewis' ideological inclinations were primarily forged in the crucible of class and class struggle; and Audrey Battersby already identified as a socialist before the WLM's existence.[1108] Nonetheless, this route was far from unique to working-class women and its applicability was widespread enough to form a cornerstone of the movement's origin narrative. However, it was women who had experienced class oppression or exploitation directly, and consequently predominantly working-class women, for whom class-consciousness came before gender.[1109]

Personal experience of class inequality differentiated the importance of class in feminists' identities, even if, as chapter three illustrated, it did not prevent the sharing of identifications with class politics. Janet Ree, a middle-class feminist involved with various left-wing groups at school and university, for example, noted that they were not populated by working-class members and it was not until attending the Ruskin Conference that her political consciousness was fully awakened.[1110]

However, direct experience of class oppression is not limited to the life stories of working-class women. Instead, it pervades a host of middle-class accounts and class inequality plays a role in a number of political 'epiphanic moments' within them. Rowbotham is a prime example whose personal experiences of class defied her self-defined and socio-economically middle-class background.[1111] During her childhood, Rowbotham had spent time living with working-class families, which she has discussed as an important formative experience in becoming conscious of class difference and tensions around perceptions of working-class people.[1112] Her awareness of class was amplified subsequently once she attended university in Oxford, where her northern

[1107] Maggie Nichols, 'The Strength of Tomorrow', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (London, 1988), pp. 177-178.
[1108] Valerie Walkerdine, 'Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985), p. 77; Lewis, 'Deepest Kilburn', p. 229; 'Battersby Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 114.
[1109] 'Ree Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 93; Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', p. 210.
[1110] 'Ree Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 93.
[1111] Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay'.
[1112] Ibid; Interview with Rowbotham, 'Sisterhood and After'.

accent led other students to assume she was working class.[1113] It is less surprising in this context that Rowbotham later found it was Marxism that provided her with 'a language for understanding the painful separations of class' and an ideological understanding of class oppression – class was central in epiphanic moments in her political development.[1114] Remfry provided a similar story, finding that having a 'self-made man' for a father gave her a different cultural outlook at boarding school than those from more overtly middle- or upper-class backgrounds: 'One of the things I hated about being at boarding school is that I did feel totally out of place, all these daughters of doctors and stockbrokers and stuff, and you know, I felt completely out of place there.'[1115] She also had an encounter that she perceived in overtly class terms and stood as an 'epiphanic moment' in her political development. This occurred when she was told by her housemistress, '"You can't make a silk purse out a sow's ear"… I understood that very clearly in class terms so, you know, I was quite class conscious in a sense'.[1116]

Moreover, the importance of cultural and geographical markers of class – accurate or otherwise – such as accent is prevalent in a number of women's subjective experiences of class. Susie Orbach commented on this directly when discussing her experiences working in a Women's Therapy Centre in the late 1970s. She recalled that she and other therapists noticed a 'huge amount' of class issues were brought up by the women they spoke to, regardless of class position, and concluded that the women felt comfortable in discussing the issue because Orbach and a number of her colleagues had non-English accents that could not be situated within the British class system.[1117] Detached from its cultural marker, class background became invisible.

Indeed, the absence of a distinct working-class accent could also result in the reversal of Rowbotham's experiences. Rosalind Delmar –'strongly working class… And I was very aware of it' – noted how class and gender intersected in the treatment of boys and girls at her school.[1118] Working-class girls were expected to lose their accents in ways that working-class boys were not, a patriarchal process that, alongside education, smoothed her transition from working- to middle-class identity.[1119] Anna Davin revealed a similar experience of having elocution lessons at her private school, which she suggested were

[1113] Ibid.
[1114] Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', p. 210.
[1115] Interview with Remfry.
[1116] Ibid.
[1117] Interview with Orbach, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1118] Interview with Delmar, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1119] Ibid.

aimed at children of working-class parents, once again illustrating how working-class girls' class characteristics were expected to be shorn in the process of class transition.[1120]

Beyond accent, the experience of social mobility amongst WLM activists is frequently commented on in their accounts and usually understood as complicating factor in assessing individuals' class positions and, by extension, the class composition of the movement as a whole. Indeed, Rowbotham suggested in one interview that class identities and differences were complicated in this respect by the social mobility of many liberationists who had transitioned from working-class to middle-class through education, resulting in a difficulty in balancing class and gender consciousness within the WLM.[1121] This was a sentiment reflected on by Ursula Haws, who felt that the fluidity of her class position caused her difficulty when trying to ascertain her class identity within the WLM.[1122] A similar tension over her class and gender identity was so acute for Carolyn Steedman that, in spite of her involvement, she felt 'a particular distance from both the politics of liberation and the heavy-metal labourism of the late 1960s', a theme she covered in her memoir, *Landscape for a Good Woman*.[1123] Latterly, these narratives led Rowbotham to challenge the usefulness of rigid class categories when assessing the WLM, or other social movements in the period.[1124]

This point is especially pertinent to the issue of how education affected class position and identity. On the one hand, the self-defining working-class feminists angered by their invisibility and marginalization in the WLM, like Turner, Farrer and Packwood, disputed the impact of education on their class position because it failed to erase the preceding years of experience that distinguished them from those women born into middle-class cultural capital.[1125] This contrasted sharply though with a number of women from similarly working-class backgrounds who came to see education as a process of middle-class transition. Jan McKenley, for example, argued that her educational opportunities had been 'transformational' and meant she could not remain working class, thereby

[1120] Interview with Davin, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1121] 'Rowbotham Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 38.
[1122] Ursula Haws, '… And Battles Long Ago', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985), pp. 172-3.
[1123] Carolyn Steedman, 'Landscape for a Good Woman', in Liz Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985), p. 125.
[1124] Interview with Rowbotham, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1125] Turner, 'Divide and Rule'; Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 10; Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.

indicating a view of the class system based in the accumulation of cultural capital.[1126] This fluidity of class identity was also mentioned by Rowena Arshad, who remembered how her class position began to fluctuate after her mother used a lottery win in Malaysia to send her to boarding school in Britain.[1127] Once there, 'class play[ed] with class' and Arshad gained a level of cultural capital that disrupted her class identity.[1128] Moreover, this experience contributed to her struggle to accept the validity of identity politics because such a basis for political engagement was undermined by the fluidity of an individual's identities over their life.[1129] McKenley and Arshad's accounts of class transition also demonstrate how issues of class influenced women of colour's personal and political identities and further complicate the automatic equivocation of working-classness with black and Asian women's groups. Indeed, this was a concern of Stella Dadzie during her *Sisterhood and After* interview, who argued that 'it's increasingly difficult to define people as one or the other, one class or the other', even when working in black political groups.[1130] This perspective had developed from her experience of almost instantaneous social mobility during her childhood, during which she had alternated between living in living in poverty with her mother in Britain and having people as servants at boarding school through the wealth of her father, a Ghanaian diplomat.[1131] Amrit Wilson, in line with recent work on class identity amongst South East Asian groups, argued similarly that ethnic origin clouded an individual's class position as your position in your country of origin may differ from the perceptions and socio-economic circumstances in Britain.[1132] The significance of social interaction in shaping individual class identity was noted by Willan, who recalled that attending grammar school meant losing contact with working-class friends from junior school as part of being 'assimilated' into the middle class.[1133]

With this complexity in mind, Barbara Taylor's frustration regarding questions about the class composition of the WLM is understandable:

[1126] Interview with McKenley, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1127] Interview with Rowena Arshad by Rachel Cohen, 15 and 16 June 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/21.
[1128] Ibid.
[1129] Ibid.
[1130] Interview with Stella Dadzie by Rachel Cohen, 2 and 3 June 2011, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/20.
[1131] Ibid.
[1132] Interview with Wilson, 'Sisterhood and After'; McDowell et al., 'Striking Narratives'.
[1133] Interview with Willan.

> I get so weary of people talking about the WLM as middle class, you know, because what do you mean… by and large, I think it is true to say that radical movements grow up in and tend to be situated in sectors of the population where class status is deeply ambiguous.[1134]

However, ambiguity does not equal irrelevance. Indeed, as the impact of Rowbotham's experiences of class inequality and the consistently felt need for women's liberationists to discuss class identity in their life stories demonstrated, the concept's slipperiness did not prevent its influence. This was not lost on Willan, who concluded her comments on the ambiguity of class by making this point: 'There's definitely a them and us', even if the composition of those groups was difficult to define.[1135] Returning to Arshad, her class transition through interactions with children of middle- and upper-class backgrounds occurred alongside recognising these interactions as sites where her class difference was apparent, and more so in her account than her race.[1136] Similarly, Willan hinted at the dialectical nature of class transition whereby education could lead to 'assimilation' and a forced disjuncture from former schoolmates but in the process revealed the existence of class society.[1137] As she put it: 'So the means whereby you can, er, become, I suppose more middle class was the means whereby I was aware of different classes, yeah, class-consciousness I suppose.'[1138]

This happened in other ways, too. Sheila Gilmore found, like Rowbotham, that regional differences could have the same dislocating effect on class identity. Despite attending a fee-paying school in Edinburgh, Gilmore perceived other students at the University of Kent in terms of class difference; they were 'very southern and very posh'.[1139] In Dadzie's case, reticence over the definition of class was not enough to stop her emphasising her political commitment to putting class 'on the table' in order to challenge simplistic constructions of identity.[1140] Furthermore, she traced her socialism back to flitting between socio-economic class positions during her childhood, showing that class experiences could be as influential in shaping political identity as socio-economic position.[1141] Class also returned to the aspirational Vera Baird, who

[1134] Interview with Taylor, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1135] Interview with Willan.
[1136] Interview with Arshad, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1137] Interview with Willan.
[1138] Ibid.
[1139] Interview with Gilmore, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1140] Interview with Dadzie, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1141] Ibid.

disassociated from the 'working-class' Labour Party at grammar school before redeveloping her class-consciousness in a university environment, a site where many others shed their working-class identities.[1142]

Moreover, Rowbotham and Gilmore were not the only middle-class feminists to have formative experiences of class inequality. Cynthia Cockburn's entry into politics came through involvement with a community project in South London in which she saw first-hand how class oppression was experienced by working-class residents.[1143] Much like Rowbotham, class has maintained an important role in Cockburn's politics and academic work, evidenced for example in her contributions to discussions surrounding the relationship between class and community politics, discussed in chapter three.[1144] Moreover, in reflections at the end of the *Sisterhood and After* interview, her class position was equated with her health in as the key points about her life experiences: 'The second thing is the security that has derived from my middle-class status. I just don't think we can forget that. Compounded by being white in a majority black world… we can't underestimate what a middle-middle-middle-class kind of status gives you.'[1145] Whilst the reference to 'middle-middle-middle-class' conveys the difficulty of class location, Cockburn was categorical in accepting the privileges endowed by hers. This also seemed to corroborate a sense amongst other definitively middle-class women that class mobility was cultural in nature and therefore had only one direction of travel. Ursula Owen, for example, recounted how her middle-class self-definition was retained regardless of her socio-economic circumstances; thus, even when 'struggling for money' in the early 1970s as a single mother, she 'never felt threatened' by poverty.[1146]

However, the theme of 'transition' was another influential aspect of the collective memory of the movement and saw individuals seek connections to the working class in their backgrounds. This narrative, though, came into conflict with individuals' internalisations with another, middle-class dominance of the WLM, and with economic definitions of class. The story of a working-class father 'made good' makes a regular occurrence in the collections, particularly amongst those who defined as socialist-feminists. Three insightful examples came from the Coast Women's Group, Penny Remfry, Anne Torode and Cathy Bream, who each evidenced either a perceived need to

[1142] Interview with Vera Baird by Rachel Cohen, 22 March, 14 May and 20 June 2012, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of Women's Liberation*, British Library, C1420/51.
[1143] Interview with Cockburn, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1144] See for example, Cockburn, *Local State*.
[1145] Interview with Cockburn, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1146] Interview with Owen, 'Sisterhood and After'.

connect with a working-class past, or discomfort at such a definition if this was impossible, but also used 'meta-statements' to undermine ambiguity in their class identities in favour of accepting an undeniable middle-class position based on economics.[1147] Remfry frames her class identity originally as 'very transitional' and links this to the differing experiences of her sister, brother and herself. Remfry and her sister attended a boarding school with contrasting outcomes and her brother was sent to become an electrical apprentice by her successful working-class father.[1148] Thus, although her father had moved out of the working-class in socio-economic terms, his cultural attitudes retained a connection between Remfry and the working class. From her comments about her experience of class inequality at boarding school discussed above, it is clear that this cultural understanding of class did create a subjective link with that identity. However, in her summative meta-statement on the topic, Remfry noted that 'to all intents and purposes I'm middle class really, with a middle-class education.'[1149]

Torode's link with class was more striking. Born into a middle-class household to a middle-class shop-owning father and a formerly working-class mother, Torode described the pain of facing this background in International Socialist meetings: 'I was always told I was petit-bourgeois and that **really** hurt me. It was true but it really hurt me (laughs).'[1150] Her emphasis underlined the strength of the emotion even as her laughter suggested this middle-class reality had been accepted on reflection. Nevertheless, her class identity was complicated by the socialism of her parents, who brought her up to 'know that was my class background' but also made class an essential aspect of political action and topic that 'was always coming up'.[1151] As her narrative continued, the desire to find a working-class identity was reiterated and came to intersect with equally powerful formative experiences of disability, demonstrated in a long and composed response that, as Torode commented on herself, showed a pre-existing level of reflection. She recounted:

> So that was my class background but on top of that I was also disabled. I was born with cerebral palsy and erm, when I was a kid, I was very teased at school but I had gone to, my mum had done these courses on how to look

[1147] Anderson and Jack, 'Listen', p. 167.
[1148] Interview with Remfry.
[1149] Ibid.
[1150] Interview with Torode.
[1151] Ibid.

> after disabled children and the professor who was running them said, "People with CP are" – the charming term – "ESN", educationally subnormal, so mum said you want to meet my daughter. So I went up for an IQ test when I was 6 and it was over 160 so there were all these kind of weird – and the school, because I had CP, they told me I'd never do anything but mum fought to get them to take me seriously and I "passed", in inverted commas, the 11+ and went to a very posh grammar school, which was state-owned but later became private. Then I went to university so you can see how class has played a huge impact in my life. The reason mum could do that was because she knew people in the Labour Party, people who could kind of make sure that I was taken out of the ESM school I was in and put into an ordinary primary school. But the strings she pulled were to do with being in the Labour Party, not to do with being middle class, so I've analysed this over and over again to try and find I've got to be working class (laughs) and I've never managed to swing it that I am.[1152]

Torode's account and self-definition as middle class highlights how she defined class in terms of economic capital rather than social or cultural capital, or in terms of political commitment. She, like Remfry, indicates that social and cultural conflict, and political commitment can make a person aware of class but not change their class position as it is rooted in economic characteristics. This remained the case for Torode even when her mother used social capital gained through class politics – and not unique to middle-class Labour activists – to help her daughter. Indeed, Hardy, another of the group from a different socio-economic but similar political background – mother in Labour Party, father a Communist – talked about the importance of this political network in nearly identical ways to Torode. However, as with Torode, Hardy used economic measures to ascertain her own class identity: 'I would've always considered myself working class because my dad worked in a blue-collar industry and we lived in a council house.'[1153] There are parallels here with Farrer and Packwood's definitions of 'classism', which, whilst focused on culture, were underpinned by an economic basis.[1154]

However, for Bream, a straightforwardly middle-class upbringing, economically and culturally, led to a disconnection from class that made defining class identity more

[1152] Ibid.
[1153] Interview with Hardy.
[1154] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', pp. i, 12; Packwood, 'The Colonel's Lady', p. 7.

complex.[1155] On the division between working-class and middle-class, Bream used the politics of identification to challenge economic or cultural definitions of class: 'I don't like defining myself as either, really. I'd far rather just define myself as a socialist-feminist than I would on a class issue'.[1156] These class structures were not 'particularly helpful' but this was countered by a significant condition, 'except in the purely monetary sense'.[1157] Thus, it was economics that resolved the tension in class identity and situated Bream within the middle class in her perspective.[1158]

From these points we can see how women's experiences of class, self-defined and socio-economic, illustrate both the flexibility and rigidity of class identity. Class, as Jon Lawrence argues, is often used by British people in this 'loose, vernacular sense' and can consequently describe different things at different times.[1159] However, the insistence on an economic definition illustrates how class definition can also become fixed. Cultural and social capital was always important in feminists' subjective class identities but an overarching recognition of concrete socio-economic differences between people continued to underpin their perspectives. This reiterates two fundamental arguments: firstly, though women's liberationists' do not express a clear and consistent economic model of class, they do use 'sociological' definitions in terms of 'structural inequalities in social capital and power'.[1160] Secondly, socio-economic class differences were not insurmountable between women but they did enormously influence interactions between women, with feminism and the WLM, *and* women's liberationists' own identities.

However, the complexity of class identity conveyed in these narratives highlights this was not a simplistic process and exemplifies Scott and Scott's point that 'the narrative structure of the life story is perfectly adapted to capturing the inherent ambiguity of class and status.'[1161] The multifaceted understandings of class in women's liberationists' identities reveal the multiple layers of intersubjectivity between the individual and the social as subjective class identities were tied up in political concerns, the acquirement of

[1155] Interview with Bream.
[1156] Ibid.
[1157] Ibid.
[1158] Ibid.
[1159] Jon Lawrence, 'Review Article: The British Sense of Class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 307, 311.
[1160] Ibid., p. 307.
[1161] Scott and Scott, 'Our mother's daughters', p.131.

social and cultural capital, and the reference to money and economic relations.[1162] Indeed, the integration of political and economic class could erode the importance of individual identity altogether. For Hardy, who felt that involvement in class politics 'externalised' class identity, being working class was less significant than identifying with the working class: 'you don't think how this is going to affect me, just me, you think how it's going to affect **us**'.[1163] This statement echoed the politics of identification amongst middle-class women in the movement and showed how class differences could be overcome through the ambiguous but internalised 'us' political abstraction.

Furthermore, the explicit discussion of class identity in these accounts raises the question of how much my class-based research frame imposed on the narratives. The research frame certainly impacted on how and when the issue arose in the individual narratives and was challenged by Bream, although without any loss of composure.[1164] By contrast, the detail with which class identity was discussed in other accounts and Torode's suggestion of analysing this issue 'over and over again' prior to interview, illustrate these reflections on class identity were elicited by but not imposed by the research frame.[1165] The focus on class did not create 'fragmentary and deflected accounts' but instead revealed that class was a significant formative element of most interviewees' identities.[1166] Indeed, this is underlined by the commonality of middle-class feminists emphasising class experiences in their backgrounds in other collections with different research frames, some of which are outlined above and demonstrated, for example, by O'Sullivan's desire to discuss 'class and culture' as the one of the themes of her life story in her *Sisterhood and After* interview.[1167]

It is also clear that class was an 'organic' topic of discussion amongst interviewees with working- or mixed-class backgrounds, such as Ellen Malos, Susie Orbach and Jenny Lynn, all of whom emphasised the importance of their backgrounds as major features of their narratives and how their political consciousnesses developed.[1168] Moreover, despite the mixed nature of their class backgrounds, class consciousness was still felt directly: for Malos through her family's lack of educational attainment; for Orbach

[1162] Ibid.; Abrams, 'Memory', p. 97; Cosslet et al., *Feminism and Autobiography*, p. 3; Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 70.
[1163] Hardy Interview.
[1164] Bream Interview.
[1165] Abrams, 'Memory', p. 96.
[1166] Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 93.
[1167] Interview with O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1168] Interview with Malos, 'Sisterhood and After'; Interview with Orbach, 'Sisterhood and After'; Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood and After'.

through class tension between her parents; and for Lynn when she felt like 'a fish out of water' when arriving at the University of Birmingham.[1169] This consciousness remained throughout their engagements with feminism and continued into their reflections on the WLM in interviews in 2011. Orbach maintained that class was 'absolutely profound' in the movement, Malos defined as a socialist-feminist, whilst Lynn stated a dislike for being called a 'feminist' at all because of its middle-class connotations, preferring to identify as a women's liberationist.[1170] Revealingly, another from a working-class background, Delmar, expressed the same sentiments in choosing to identify as a women's liberationist.[1171] This was something Michele Ryan, again from a working-class background – and someone who maintained this class definition – also evidenced when getting involved in feminism in the late 1960s. The women's group she helped organise elected to define their group as a Socialist Women's group rather than to emphasise feminism, a point Ryan linked to her class identity.[1172] Moreover, Betty Cook, whose working-class background had led directly into her political activism and identity, developed an empathy for feminist ideas after interactions with feminists during the 1984/5 miners' strike but still rejected the identity for herself.[1173]

It was likewise the case for women from working-class backgrounds like Campbell – who described her encounter with the WLM in transformational terms – that pre-existing class experiences continued to influence her identity.[1174] She noted how difficult the challenge of assimilating gender oppression into a class narrative was for her and other working-class women, particularly issues of sexuality that, if faced, had the potential to destroy marriages, including her own.[1175] Less traumatic but still demonstrating the never-ending link to a class identity was Campbell's excitement that the WLM could be a resource to change Communist Party practices alongside her commitment to the feminist cause.[1176] Thus, whilst the importance of an individual's class background could recede after an 'epiphanic' encounter with feminism, it rarely disappeared altogether and instead continued to influence how feminism was experienced by women within the WLM and how their identities were constructed, then and now.

[1169] Interview with Malos, 'Sisterhood and After': Interview with Orbach, 'Sisterhood and After'; Interview with Lynn', 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1170] Ibid.
[1171] Interview with Delmar, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1172] Interview with Ryan, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1173] Interview with Cook, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1174] Interview with Campbell, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1175] Ibid.
[1176] Ibid.

However, Campbell's decision in 2009 to accept an OBE for her campaign work threw the enduring significance of class in her identity into question. In explaining her decision, Campbell herself noted that her politics were rooted in feminism and Marxism and consequently, 'You ask yourself the question: how can I accept anything from this horrible imperial regime?'[1177] Nevertheless, she asserted that 'getting gonged confers recognition of "citizens" contributions to a good society – in my case equality – and the gesture affirms our necessity; the radicals – not the royalists – are the best of the British.'[1178] The acceptance of an individual honour on behalf of work towards equality within a collectivist movement from the highest symbol of an 'establishment' representing the opposite is undeniably problematic for a socialist-feminist. This is exacerbated by the WLM's belief in the importance of the personal to the political and thereby creates doubt in the sincerity of Campbell's political and personal identifications with class, socialism and feminism.

Nonetheless, any sense of hypocrisy received little attention in the narratives of other feminists when discussing Campbell. Instead it was precisely her role as a committed socialist-feminist activist through the 1970s till the present that structured their impressions. In conversations with the Coast Group women prior to the interviews, there was mild condemnation for her decision but it was Campbell's activism over four decades that was more important. This was a misstep in the political career of an outstanding socialist-feminist activist involved in the Communist Party, the WLM, the support of the miners' strike and later campaigns around equality and child protection. Indeed, Campbell has reasserted her socialist-feminism in more recent work, discussing, for example, the need to challenge the 'neoliberal neopatriarchy' in contemporary global politics in her 2014 manifesto, *End of Equality*.[1179] The 'neoliberal neopatriarchy' is 'an epochal enemy of feminism because it is a repudiation of social solidarities and welfare states without which feminist agendas wither', or simply a new form of the capitalist patriarchy Campbell and many in the WLM defined themselves in opposition to.[1180] Thus, even if the personal and political identities of feminists like Campbell have become detached, the connections are quickly re-established and even honoured by the British

[1177] Beatrix Campbell, 'Why I accepted my OBE', *Guardian*, 16 June 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/16/queens-honours-obe (Accessed 01/07/2015)
[1178] Ibid.
[1179] Beatrix Campbell, *End of Equality* (London, 2014); Beatrix Campbell, 'Why we need a new women's revolution', *Guardian*, 24 May 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/25/we-need-new-womens-revolution.
[1180] Campbell, 'Why we need'.

establishment and far from her working-class social origins, a commitment to the link between class and feminism endures.

Conclusions

This chapter has returned to and expanded Heron's consideration of the subjective experience of class in women's liberationists' lives and identities.[1181] An analysis of autobiographical accounts tell us that whilst gender was the dominant identity structure for activists in the WLM, both personally and politically, it was consistently inflected and challenged by other categories. For the *Sisterhood and After* project, it was racial differences that required the greatest rebalancing in accounts of the movement but this chapter has shown that class was equally important, and cut across race as race cut across it. The stories of feminists from working-class or mixed-class backgrounds, particularly those who continued to identify as working class throughout their lives, convey that class shaped how feminism was experienced and understood, often distinguishing working-class women from their middle-class sisters in specific ways. The painful 'death of sisterhood' narrative in many middle-class accounts was more likely to be seen as a necessary outcome of pre-existing divisions between women that had had gone unaddressed in the movement's early stages of 'unity'. Moreover, it followed that solely gender-based political identity had its greatest resonance with the white, middle-class women who defined the ideology and structure of the early British WLM. The movement provided some of these women with 'fantastic relief' that it was justified to feel oppressed as a middle-class woman or a 'euphoric belief in sisterhood' that dominated other modes of identity.[1182] Women from working-class backgrounds were not excluded from these emotions but remained more likely to find their class experiences as at least equally important in the narratives of their lives and in their political identities. Nichols, Charlton and McIntyre, as examples, asserted that their political ideology maintained its primary relation to class politics rather than gender, in spite of also identifying with the WLM.[1183]

Nevertheless, for others, the WLM was an 'epiphanic moment' in a 'transitional' narrative that took them from working-class origins to middle-class identities. Whether this was through education or socio-economic gain – with the two usually inextricably

[1181] Heron, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.
[1182] 'Hadley Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 72; Jones, 'Words', p. 235; and O'Sullivan, '1969', p. 55.
[1183] Nichols, 'Tomorrow', pp. 177-8; 'Charlton Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 162.

linked – the WLM resonated with this group and offered a social network of support that has lasted to this day in some instances, and also enabled women to develop personal and political confidence. Social mobility of this kind also complicated the issue of class identity as cultural capital challenged economic capital in significance, with some women feeling that education had been too transformational to justify a working-class identity, whilst others saw this as a dismissal of their differentiating working-class experiences to that point. Fundamentally, these opposing subjectivities raised the question of the usefulness of class to define such an ambiguous and transitional group, with interviewees for this project, like Cathy Bream, and for others, such as Barbara Taylor for *Sisterhood and After*, challenging research frames trying to unravel and interpret this ambiguity.[1184]

However, the presence of class in many other narratives suggested that ambiguity did not detract from its significance. Even for the working-class women who did experience the WLM as an 'epiphanic moment' in their lives and political development, or transitioned into the middle-class through the acquiring of cultural capital, class had a tendency to re-emerge in their identities and life stories. Many women rediscovered their working-class identities during their involvement with the WLM and recognising the differences between themselves and women of other classes they thought had been lost. Moreover, 'transition' had a dialectical nature through which the very means of social mobility revealed the existence of class. This did not automatically result in the development of class-consciousness, although it laid the foundations for some, such as Penny Remfry and Sheila Rowbotham, but it made ignorance impossible.[1185] More broadly, working-class and middle-class identifying feminists alike reflected on experiences of class oppression, direct and indirect, as formative influences on their personal and political identities.

Furthermore, the desire amongst middle-class feminists' to find a direct working-class connection in their backgrounds was thematic in a large number of narratives. It was especially important for socialist-feminists to evidence how their commitment to class politics went beyond a politics of identification and was based in at least partial working-class identity, even as an acceptance of class as an economic category tended to prevent this in their final analysis. Collective memories of the WLM class composition and ideas of 'transition' came into conflict with each other, as well as with economic

[1184] Interview with Bream; Interview with Taylor, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1185] Interview with Remfry; Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', p. 210.

understandings of class, to create contradictory and complex accounts. This was prevalent amongst the Coast Group, whose members struggled to find connections to an absent working-class childhood but in so doing highlighted the undeniable importance of class to their lives.[1186] That they could not 'accept' a working-class identity despite experiences of class inequality also illustrated the resilience of economic class categories, even amongst women involved a movement that contested both the rigidity and validity of the very same. Ultimately, it was clear that class, experienced and understood in multifaceted ways, was crucial in women's liberationists' personal identities. At a personal level, class politics was not only a politics of identification with the struggles of others, but a contestation of lived experiences of inequality.

[1186] Interview with Remfry; Interview with Torode; Interview with Willan.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have focused where possible on the voices and experiences of working-class women within and around the WLM. They have also explored the relationship between class, identity and political behaviour in the narratives of women's liberationists. This class analysis has undermined critiques of the WLM as an inherently flawed expression of essentialist identity politics – even by some of its activists, such as the authors of *Beyond the Fragments* – in favour of understanding the fundamental significance of class to the ideology of the WLM, its political practice, and to women's liberationists' personal and collective identities.[1187] Whereas black and Asian feminists' concerns and oppressions were ignored long into the 1970s, and to such an extent that the Black Women's Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement can be considered distinct entities, an engagement with working-class women and women's class politics was a primary concern of the WLM from its origins to its diffusion.[1188] Liberationists saw challenging working-class women's exploitation and oppression as crucial to both the goals of the movement and their identities.

However, this thesis has also demonstrated that to lose sight of essentialist tendencies within the WLM or the significance of alternative identity axes to gender, such as class and race, is equally problematic. Radford, Setch and others taking revisionist approaches to the WLM are right to signal greater complexity in the movement's treatment of 'difference' than essentialist accounts allow.[1189] Nevertheless, this thesis' focus on class as a cultural and socio-economic category of identity and difference has revealed significant barriers between women inside and outside the movement that cannot – and should not – be washed away in the recovery of 'sisterhood'. Moreover, class analysis contests the trend towards recognising racial divisions in the WLM above all others, present, for example, in the research frame of the 'Sisterhood and After' project.[1190] Indeed, analysis of the intersection of race and class in this thesis has

[1187] Rowbotham et al., *Fragments*, pp. 45-46, 197; Rowbotham, *Women in Movement*, p. 285; Segal, 'Jam Today', p. 160.
[1188] Carby, 'White woman listen!', p. 49; Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', p. 54; Thane, 'Women', p. 182; Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 268; Holloway, *Women*, p. 207; Bruley, *Women*, p. 152; Webster, *Imagining*, p. 149; Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics)*, p. 4.
[1189] Radford, 'History of Women's Liberation', p. 43; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16 and 'Anti-Violence Organisation', p. 66; Graham, ''New 1970', pp. 160-3; Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4.
[1190] Jolly and Roseneil, 'Researching Women's Movements, pp. 125-8; Cohen, 'Researching difference and diversity', p. 138.

demonstrated how a solely race-based approach to identity in the WLM conceals the inextricable links between race and class in many black feminists' narratives.

This thesis has also asserted the relevance of class as a powerful analytical tool for the study of late modern history. Class analysis of popular radical politics should not be the sole reserve of historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nor should their contributions to the study of twentieth century radicalism be discarded. Jones' concept of 'history from within' is able to complement 'history from below' as effectively in a study of the political cultures of post-war feminism as those of 'Captain Swing'.[1191] Taken alongside the dominance of the cultural approach to class in studies of twentieth century Britain, exemplified by the work of Devine, Savage and Lawrence and following Bourdieu, these approaches should enhance our understanding of more contemporary radical politics.[1192] Indeed, the discursive construction of class by social actors has been of particular importance in this thesis' analysis of the WLM.[1193]

However, this cultural approach has been coupled throughout with recognition that discursive constructions of class do not take place in social vacuums. Instead, they must be contextualised within the social and economic characteristics and structures of the society individuals exist within. In short, this thesis has followed Marx's conception of history that individuals 'make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'[1194] As a result, we must incorporate Marxist approaches that are better able to explain fundamental inequalities or wealth and power and their effects on the identities and behaviours of individuals and groups. In the workplace or the community, and in the lives of women and men, the relationship between class position, class consciousness and class action remain essential questions in the study of capitalist societies like modern Britain. Moreover, when combined with feminist and postcolonialist theories noting the intersection of sex and race, this approach has enduring analytical significance to analysis of production, reproduction and the individual, all of which have been tackled in the preceding chapters.

[1191] Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing', p. 429.
[1192] Devine and Savage, 'Cultural Turn', p. 15; Anthias, ' Social Stratification', pp. 24-26; Bourdieu, 'Social Class', p. 4; Crompton, *Class*, p. 25.
[1193] Eley and Nield, 'Farewell to the working class?', p, 18.
[1194] Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire'.

The multivalent relationship between class and the WLM

In analysing a multitude of interactions between the WLM and class politics and feminism and working-class women, this thesis has observed Wright's point that class analysis must take different forms to answer different questions.[1195] Thus, the preceding chapters have taken varying approaches to analysing class within the WLM and around the WLM. Chapter one considered the WLM's economic and political context, particularly in relation to growing industrial unrest and detailed working-class women's political agency in the workplace around both 'defensive' and 'political' strikes. The chapter emphasised throughout how the WLM's dual militancy on sex and class was demonstrated in the movement's interactions with women's industrial disputes across the period and reflected a need to address women's changing economic role in the 1960s and 1970s. Between 1968 and 1979, women workers fought for union recognition and improved pay and conditions in a number of disputes but often found that it was local WLM groups and activists who offered the greatest support in these struggles rather than the trade unions designed to represent them. Though ostensibly 'worker' or class disputes, the WLM offered women's strikes publicity in their magazines and newsletters, provided theoretical analysis of women's importance to class struggle, donated to strike funds and perhaps most importantly of all, placed themselves alongside working-class women on picket lines.

The WLM was equally supportive when a gendered component was more explicit in women workers' disputes, such as equal pay strikes, which constituted over 40 per cent of women's reported industrial disputes in the period. Beginning with Dagenham in 1968, and continuing through to the peak of equal pay strikes represented by the longest in British history at Trico eight years later, women workers played a vital role in forcing both the creation of the Equal Pay Act in 1970 and ensuring the implementation of its 'spirit' thereafter. In so doing, they became linked to the WLM through the latter's first organising demand, 'Equal Pay Now'. For women's liberationists, equal pay strikes, such as at Dagenham in 1968, were also seen as 'formative' influences on the WLM's development and symbolic feminist struggles.[1196]

[1195] Wright (ed.), *Approaches to Class*, pp. 180-81, 192.
[1196] Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Segal, 'Jam Today', pp. 153-4; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10.

This consistent level of activism in support of women workers contrasted starkly with that of the trade union movement. At best, trade unions were erratic and unpredictable in their responses to women's disputes, at worst they exhibited apathy born out of sexist discourses which perceived women as working only for 'pin money' and of secondary importance to male workers. Whichever interpretation is chosen, the importance of trade unions to the outcome of disputes meant there were huge consequences for women workers. Where trade unions were supportive, such as at Dagenham and Trico, women's strikes were far more likely to end successfully with a further consequence that the women workers involved felt empowered by their experiences and came to situate their actions within a wider context of both class and gender politics. Conversely, where trade unions were disinterested or dismissive, such as during the Night Cleaners' Campaign, or assumed total control over the tactics or conclusion of a strike at the expense of women strikers' wishes, such as at Grunwick, disputes were more likely to end in defeat and disenchantment, thereby affecting the potential for future political action of any kind. Trade unions were therefore, as Snell has contended, in a 'key position' to address women's exploitation and oppression in the workplace, but this made little difference to whether they cared.[1197] Moreover, although an increased commitment to women workers seemed to be evidenced by the passing of charters and resolutions by the TUC and a strong engagement with the National Abortion Campaign at the end of the 1970s, the reality of Grunwick alongside the testimonies of women active in trade unions, suggest that the problems of inconsistency, sexism and apathy dragged on into the 1980s.[1198] The WLM's provision of an alternative support network was consequently seen as highly significant by many women workers dismissed by their trade union. However, the movement's impact on the outcome of industrial disputes was limited by its relatively small numbers and meagre resources in comparison to the absent Labour Movement it tried to replace. Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of these actions of cross-class solidarity to both women workers and women's liberationists should not be underestimated.

For female strikers, the WLM's framing of their disputes as important aspects of a wider feminism and Women's Movement influenced how they saw their disputes and constructed their political identities. This was amplified in disputes with an explicitly gendered component, whether during equal pay strikes – which became identified as about a broader symbol of gender equality – or in female-dominated workforces, where

[1197] Snell, 'Equal Pay', p. 36.
[1198] Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 57-59; Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316; Interview with Willan.

women workers were very aware their sex contributed to their exploitation. Gender was also more prevalent in women workers' political identities when the trade union movement rejected the legitimacy of their industrial actions but the WLM endorsed them. Fundamentally, the involvement of the WLM either alongside or in the absence of the trade union movement, contributed to women workers' awareness of the gendered nature of their class struggles. However, to the majority of female strikers', it was class struggles that they remained. Gender inflected but class underpinned their political identities.

To understand why we must look to the economic structure of capitalism, in line with Marx, to see that industrial disputes are events within the capitalist system where the economic interests of one class – workers – for better/equal pay or conditions come into conflict with the economic interests of another class – the employer – for higher profits. Thus, though a worker's sex may be the spark for the dispute, such as pay inequality on that basis, the struggle takes place between those who sell their labour and those who own the means of production: the primary antagonism is based in class interests.[1199] However, as Thompson has argued, class consciousness relies on individuals recognizing and articulating their 'common experiences… as between themselves' against others 'whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'[1200] In deciding to take collective industrial action of various kinds against their employers, women workers demonstrated their capacity to do exactly that, and their accounts suggest an internalisation of this understanding of their actions. Indeed, even when rejected by key institutions of class struggle due to their sex, or engaging directly with the WLM, as had been the case for the leader of the night cleaners, May Hobbs, women workers' political identities remained rooted in the politics of class ahead of identifications with feminism. Moreover, class consciousness was rarely transitory; at the end of strikes, women workers would move from their picket lines to others and maintained a shared identity with other striking workers even after their own working lives had ended.[1201] In so doing, they challenged neo-Bourdieuean notions of class politics as no more than a method of tactical differentiation or 'claim for recognition'.[1202]

However, if they did not share the feminism of the women's liberationists who supported them, there was nonetheless a fundamental similarity between the two

[1199] Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire'.
[1200] Thompson, *Making*, pp. 8-9.
[1201] Interview with Fitzgerald; Interview with Green and Groves.
[1202] Devine and Savage, 'Cultural Turn', p. 14; Crompton, *Class*, p. 25.

groups: identification with class politics. Indeed, as chapter two argued, it was not only women's specific class struggles that concerned WLM activists, but class politics more broadly. This was apparent in the reflections of women's liberationists across Britain, from the women of the Coast Group in North Tyneside to feminists in London, Edinburgh and Swansea. A constant theme in women's narratives was the interconnectedness between the WLM and the Labour Movement and discussions amongst my interview cohort situated around not whether there was a relationship between the two but whether the Labour Movement amplified the influence of the WLM and social movements like it or vice-versa.[1203] Moreover, many feminists' political outlooks were informed by both feminism and socialism, never one without the other, as encapsulated in the socialist-feminist aphorism, 'No socialism without women's liberation, no women's liberation without socialism.'[1204] This resulted in a belief in what Cynthia Cockburn described as a 'dual militancy' and evidenced the significance of class politics to WLM activists.[1205] This explicit identification with class politics was particularly striking to American and European feminists active in Britain who were often shocked by the potency of class as mode of political mobilisation. Nevertheless, it did not take long for them to acclimatise to the class-based political culture of the British WLM and these women's reflections on the importance of class to their political identities matched those who had been socialised in Britain.

However, this sense of a shared collectivist political culture did not prohibit feminist critiques of the Labour Movement's sexist attitudes and practices. Feminists engaged with the Labour Movement but did so critically, a perspective best illustrated by the development of the Working Women's Charter Campaign. The Charter called for changes in attitudes and behaviour towards women within the trade unions and was adopted by a range of trade unions at district level but was eventually defeated in a vote at the TUC.[1206] Despite this defeat, the campaign's influence was undoubtedly felt in the TUC's subsequent 'Charter of Aims for Women Workers', which went beyond traditional 'workerist' issues of pay equality to incorporate issues of education, starting work, promotion, sick pay and pensions, maternity, returning to work, health and safety, family responsibilities and care of children, marital status, family planning and abortion, and women as members of the community.[1207] Thus, whilst the rejection of the feminist-

[1203] Interviews with Remfry, Torode, Willan and Hardy.
[1204] North East Regional Conference, 'Statement of Aims'.
[1205] Interview with Cockburn, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1206] 'Working Women's Charter', *Spare Rib*, 41.
[1207] Wrigley, 'Women', pp. 57-8; Whitehead, *Writing*, p. 316.

constructed charter again illustrated the disparate nature of trade union responses to women workers and feminism, the latter two's influence could not be denied.

On top of this, the majority of women's liberationists noted how they were members of trade unions in their workplaces throughout the period, and a significant number 'took their feminism' into trade union and Labour Party politics by the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, suggesting both a maintained identification with the Labour Movement alongside the WLM and that the latter may have diffused rather than dissolved.

For others the relationship was more strained. Selma James, leader of the controversial Wages for Housework grouping, saw trade union politics as a dead end for the WLM, arguing engagement with it was part of 'What is not to be done'.[1208] Although coming from a different theoretical perspective, Radical and Revolutionary Feminists argued similarly, contending that 'sex struggle' was *the* struggle feminists should be concerned with rather than the 'distraction' of class politics.[1209] There was also the problem that many women had come to the WLM through frustration with the wider left's insistence on the overriding centrality of class to all political activism, which, inverted by the Radical/Revolutionary Feminist position, made gender oppression, and women's activism more generally, invisible.[1210] Encapsulated in Juliet Mitchell's seminal essay, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', the rejection of a reductionist class analysis was a prevalent motivating factor in the WLM's formation.[1211]

However, to reject the totalising power of class or the institutions of class politics was not to reject its importance. In contrast to the implication of recent histories of the WLM, which have neglected the significance of class politics to feminists' political identities and behaviour, class politics sat consistently alongside feminist activism as key features of women's liberationists' perspectives. [1212] As a result, what the Labour Movement and the Left represented – a collectivist politics based in class struggle – was part of a shared consciousness situated around ideas of solidarity, of which sisterhood was a descendant. This was especially true for those identifying as socialist-feminists, an ideology that dominated amongst my interviewees, as well as the movement across

[1208] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', pp. 67-8.
[1209] 'Revolutionary Feminism: First Year'.
[1210] Meyer, 'Restating the Woman Question', p. 289; Caine, *English Feminism*, pp. 239, 255-60.
[1211] Mitchell, 'The Longest Revolution'; Bruley, *Women*, pp. 148-9; Rowbotham, *Past*, p. 166; Wilson, *Paradise*, p. 185; Bird, 'Women's Studies', p. 265.
[1212] Jolly and Roseneil, 'Researching Women's Movements', pp. 125-128; Cohen, 'Researching difference and diversity', p. 138.

Britain, but it did not exclude similar sentiments amongst those defining as radical or revolutionary feminists – who, in theory at least, placed sex as the single most important aspect of their political ideology. In practice, attitudes were heterogeneous. Attitudes towards the importance of class within these strands of feminism reflected Meehan's and Setch's respective points that the distinctions between radical/revolutionary and socialist feminism were not as rigid as has sometimes been assumed as many of the former identified capitalism as an important structure of oppression, just one that sat lower in the hierarchy of oppressions than gender.[1213] Similarly, WFH activists, who showed contempt for the Labour Movement's potential for women's liberation, nevertheless situated their ideology around the *idea* of class politics and on an equal footing with sex and race. Indeed, they even criticised the rest of the WLM for not focusing on class enough.[1214] Thus, class politics was almost always present across the ideological and activist spectrum of the WLM.

Moreover, the 'dual militancy' of sex and class crossed the barrier between the WLM and BWM, with feminists in the latter arguing for an approach to political activism that incorporated resistance to racial, gender and class oppression. This was formalised in the OWAAD Constitution, which committed itself 'To support those struggles of the working class which further the interests of all working people – black and white, female and male.'[1215] Indeed, for some black feminists, the detachment they felt from what they saw as the white middle-class dominated WLM was contrasted with a connection to the industrial struggles of working-class women, regardless of their ethnicity.[1216] For both black and white feminists, class politics entailed a set of shared values that were integral to what the British WLM's feminism intended to be.

What made this more significant is that the internalisation of class politics as central in the movement's goals occurred in a social movement composed predominantly of socio-economically middle-class women. This shows that the theoretical line between second-wave feminist critiques of class politics and the identity politics of contemporary social movements and post-structural analysis should not be taken for granted. In placing class alongside gender, the British WLM illustrated that it did not practice a straightforward politics of identity based on its activists' sex, but what Avtar Brah has

[1213] Meehan, *British Feminism*, pp. 194-200; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement', p. 237.
[1214] 'James Interview', *Once a Feminist*, pp. 194, 196.
[1215] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution'.
[1216] 'Interview with Lewis', *SAA*; Lewis, 'Deepest Kilburn', p. 229; Interview with Lockhart, 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'; Interview with Leeming and Jackson, 'Do you remember Olive Morris?'

called a 'politics of identitication' defined by efforts at cross-class solidarity.[1217] The critiques of the Labour Movement were rejections of its notion of class politics, and were designed to reconstitute how class and class politics should be defined and expand who and what types of activism should be included within them.

Chapter three considered how the WLM went about this process of 'advancing' the scope of class politics into new areas by analysing the interaction of gender and class in working-class women's political activism outside of the workplace.[1218] Primarily, the WLM's interactions with class politics outside of the workplace intended to tackle capitalist exploitation and oppression and demonstrate the link between the productive and reproductive spheres of class struggle. This commitment to class politics in both spheres was again seen as 'necessary' and, despite differing interpretations of how class should be understood, such as between socialist-feminists and those affiliated with WFH, most liberationist groupings saw reproductive and productive class struggle as crucial to their political projects.[1219] For class analysis to offer a holistic understanding of exploitation and oppression under capitalism, it had to include struggles away from capitalist production, such as the issue of women's unpaid domestic labour as wives and mothers, the creation of women's refuges and the demand for financial and legal independence so that women, particularly less economically secure working-class women, had greater chance of liberating themselves from abusive relationships. Moreover, an essential tenet of this theorizing was to see these struggles, as well as 'community action' over housing, nursery access and welfare, as collective *class* endeavours, *not* the individual complaints of *consumers* of the services.[1220] This analysis again highlighted the importance of a shared political culture between the Left, the Labour Movement and the WLM around a focus on collectivist and class-based political action.

However, the issues tackled also revealed how women's minority position within class struggles in the field of capitalist production was reversed in the field of capitalist reproduction. Women's reproductive work, the WLM argued, made capitalist production possible. As a result, the broader Left's and the Labour Movement's relative apathy towards community struggles, women's economic dependence and unpaid domestic labour, was a partial and limited form of class politics that ignored how

[1217] Brah, *Cartographies*, p. 93.
[1218] Clegg and Bernstein, 'Marxist-Feminists'.
[1219] Rowbotham, 'Carrot', p. 199.
[1220] Cockburn, *Local State*, p. 160.

production and reproduction were inextricably connected. This was the breaking of what Anne Torode called the 'either/or' binary in class analysis; an approach that could link the politics of men's *and* women's everyday lives back to capitalism.[1221] The application of feminist analysis to class politics was not therefore destructive but offered the potential for development into new areas of struggle that could incorporate many working-class women excluded by their absence in the workplace.

Most importantly, WLM activists practiced what they preached. Local groups supported an enormous range of community action and became particularly deeply involved in campaigning for recognition of women's unpaid domestic labour, best illustrated by the various groups tied to Wages for Housework, and in the welfare and housing struggles being fought by Claimants' Unions. These efforts should be understood alongside similar levels of supportive for women's strikes in the productive arena as illustrative of women's liberationists' sincere identification with class struggle, in all arenas, and the foundational importance of fighting for liberation from capitalism and patriarchy alongside working-class women. Moreover, the lack of an obvious class 'antagonist' in struggles in the reproductive sphere seemed to provide more fertile ground for the development of feminism amongst the working-class women involved in these struggles than in workplace disputes shaped by an unmissable class structure.

However, despite the absence of the antagonistic relationship between employers and workers, class manifested in working-class women's identities in ways that continued to distinguish them from their feminist supporters. What was noteworthy was that whereas women strikers often had a differing political interpretation of their struggles than the WLM, many women exploited and oppressed in the reproductive sphere shared the WLM's theoretical perspectives. Taking housewives as an example, a wide range of the women spoken to members of the Coast Women's Group on Tyneside in the mid-1970s were keen to have financial independence, recognised domestic labour as just that, and wished for the opportunity to 'live for [themselves]' rather than their husbands and families.[1222] All of which seemed to correspond to the theories, demands and aims of the WLM and implied it was here, not the workplace, that feminism could take root within the working-class. Unfortunately for the Coast Group, the Tyneside women they interviewed were distinct from the female strikers the WLM interacted with in others ways, too.

[1221] Interview with Torode; O'Malley, *Community Action*, p. 174.
[1222] NTCDP, *Women's Work*, pp. 9, 33, 82.

For strikers, becoming conscious of their class position in relation to their employer provided a powerful class identity that could be linked – whether successfully or otherwise – to the Labour Movement and a broader understanding of the potential of working-class agency. By contrast, the Tyneside women had no such simple enemy; capitalism, patriarchy and the state were felt at the micro-level of their lives but they were unchallengeable abstractions beyond that. Alternatively, suggesting their husbands were the enemy was problematised by a socio-economic position in which the women felt they had more in common with their male partners than more affluent women. Thus, the socio-economic structures of class were still felt keenly in women's identities and saw them identify with others in similar positions, cutting across gender differences. Although confronted by oppressions embedded in the everyday experiences of their lives, this was an anonymous, intangible opponent. There was an 'us' but no identifiable 'them'. This led to disenchantment and fatalism rather than the political agency of striking women workers in the period. This was particularly prevalent in women's attitudes to the WLM, which demonstrated an emotional disconnection with what it was believed to stand for – 'I don't, I don't agree with it. I've got no particular reason, I just don't'; 'I'm not really interested'.[1223] The WLM's experiences showed that when class and gender oppression intersected, it did not result in the mass mobilization of socialist-feminists but rather an army of the dispossessed.

The story was different amongst working-class women already politically active in Claimants' Unions or similar. For these women, the process of local action and identification with a wider movement, such as the CUs, encouraged similar levels of political consciousness as for women strikers. What was different though was that women activists in the reproductive sphere shared the WLM's desire to develop understandings of class to take account of those who did not carry out paid work; in short, to contend that it was possible to be working-class without work, and, by extension, to organise around this identity. The parallels with ideas permeating the WLM were uncanny and were exemplified in the considerable similarities between a WLM pamphlet, 'The Demand for Independence', and a handbook produced by CU women, 'Women and Social Security'.[1224] Indeed, the two movements even collaborated

[1223] Ibid., p. 82.
[1224] CU Women, 'Women and Social Security'; The Women's Liberation Campaign for Legal and Financial Independence, 'The Demand for Independence'.

on these productions at times.[1225] Nevertheless, class reared its head as a barrier between the women here, too. For CU women, socio-economic differences between themselves and the women's liberationists who supported them were apparent in a number of ways: they were 'suspicious' of those from the WLM and perceived women's liberationists as 'fairly wealthy', and disinterested in paying any more than lip service to the concerns of working-class women.[1226] They also balked at the employment of working-class cleaners and assistants at WLM conferences, challenging the right of women to enter economic class relationships with other women, an issue echoed in Selina Todd's recent critical section in *The People*.[1227] Thus, although women's liberationists were able to work with working-class women in various struggles in the field of capitalist reproduction, just as they did in the field of capitalist production, this political commitment was again rarely enough to overcome the class barriers between women. Feminism, in the eyes of many working-class women the WLM came into contact with, was a middle-class activity inappropriate for those in lower socio-economic positions. Try as they might to expand the movement, women's liberationists were hamstrung by precisely the socio-economic composition they hoped to change.

Ironically, desperately seeking working-class women to become involved in the WLM, had detrimental consequences for those working-class women who were participants in the movement already. In its consideration of 'sisterhood' in the WLM – an essential aspect of its ideology – chapter four detailed how class differences undermined it. One of the problems it discussed was the identity paradox self-identifying working-class women faced in the movement. Namely, if those inside the WLM were trying to 'reach' working-class women, it followed that the former were middle class, and if all liberationists were middle class then an individual identifying as working class must be mistaken.[1228] This exclusionary narrative has been repeated in both the traditional and revisionist histories of 'difference' in the British WLM. Nevertheless, each also had strengths. The traditional narrative correctly picked up on the anger of many self-defining working-class feminists at their invisibility in a movement aiming to interact with the working class. For these women, this was part of the movement's 'classism', which they believed was endemic, and though it took many forms, its essential feature was the imposition of middle-class values and identities on to working-class women

[1225] Sjoo, 'Unsupported mothers', *FAS: Politics/Policy 27*.
[1226] 'C.Us and Women's Lib', p. 22; Big Flame Women, 'Women's Struggle Notes No. 5', p. 46.
[1227] 'C.Us and Women's Lib', p. 22; Todd, *The People*, p. 308.
[1228] Farrer, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 10.

'within the hierarchy of class values.'[1229] Moreover, the value of 'sisterhood' and distaste for the unity of the movement being undermined made broaching the issue of class oppression within the movement a painful one for those on the receiving end. Working-class feminists spoke frequently of the difficulty they had in coming to terms with their own class position and even used language reminiscent of 'coming out' to indicate the trauma class oppression could inflict within the movement.[1230] The issue of sexuality was intimately tied to class for many working-class feminists. Homophobia in the groups and institutions of class politics made their presence there uncomfortable: 'If you're a lesbian you need the Women's Movement'.[1231] The frustration felt when class oppression disrupted working-class lesbians' identification with the WLM manifested in the formation of separate and distinct working-class women's liberation groups, created because working-class feminists were 'pissed off with middle-class crap.'[1232] Moreover, black feminists' critiques of the WLM's 'whiteness' were near-universally accompanied by attacks on its' class composition and attitudes; the problem was not simply with a white essentialism but the intersection of racial *and* class oppression.[1233] The traditional school was right therefore to see 'difference' as a cause of tension and fragmentation within the movement.

However, as numerous revisionists have argued, this was not the whole story. Many working-class feminists were happy within the movement, felt no need to form their own class-based groups, and found 'sisterhood' to be as powerful for them as for any middle-class feminist. This was particularly true for women in the Coast Group who suggested that the relatively low numbers of feminists in the local area meant that disagreements and tensions were usually overcome through a shared culture of activism.[1234] Furthermore, the working-class women in the group discussed feeling welcome in the mixed-class group rather than alienated, and the women have maintained their friendships to this day, thereby echoing accounts of resilient sisterhood from other local groups across the country.[1235] The experiences of the Coast Group illustrated the revisionists' arguments that 'difference' was not always the cause of irreparable damage to WLM groups, and indeed, at local and regional level, sisterhood

[1229] Packwood, 'Colonel's Lady', p. 11.
[1230] Brackx, 'Working-class woman'.
[1231] Ibid.
[1232] 'Directory of Women's Liberation Newsletters', *FAS: Politics/Policy 4*.
[1233] W.E.P.G, 'Racism Dividing'; Interview with Otitoju, 'Heart of the Race'; Interview with Leeming and Jackson, 'Heart of the Race'.
[1234] Interviews with Coast Group.
[1235] Interview with Willan; Interview with Hardy; Radford, 'Women's Liberation Movements', pp. 44, 49.

was much more potent.[1236] The problem with this perspective is that as the traditional histories ignore the WLM's ability to conceive of and address difference, the revisionist histories overstate the flexibility of sisterhood. The revisionist approach is unable to explain the race and class distinctions made by the Black Women's Movement between themselves and the WLM, or the anger felt by white working-class feminists at their invisibility of their class identities in a movement emphasising the overriding primacy of their sex.

Fundamentally, class differences existed and influenced social and political behaviour and relationships within both the black and white strands of the WLM. However, for most black feminists, these differences were dealt with primarily in cultural terms and thought of as 'educational' rather than as class. Whilst this did construct a 'classless' narrative of the BWM that many of its activists have taken issue with in their reflections, these same women reasserted that black feminists' almost universal identifications with race, sex and class and rejection of the white, middle-class WLM enabled greater cooperation and the easing of tensions. Despite similar identifications with class politics from the majority of white feminists, large socio-economic and cultural distinctions between women made this flexible form of sisterhood harder to sustain. Beyond difference, class became an expression of power relations within local groups and the national movement that workshops on classism were unable to subvert. Exacerbated by the structureless nature of the movement, the greater social, cultural and economic capital of middle-class women enabled them, as Bourdieu argues, to control the movement in ways that some working-class women felt were deliberate although were more likely accidental.[1237] A class analysis of the WLM thereby challenges the Marxist formulation and demonstrates Skeggs' point that class at a cultural level can take the form of oppression rather than only economic exploitation.[1238] Nonetheless, class took on economic and exploitative forms within the WLM; women utilised the labour of other women as cleaners, au pairs and maids in ways that could not always be reconciled with their political identifications with socialism or feminism.[1239] Class within the WLM was therefore both a form of political identification – as or with the working class – that could develop sisterhood and solidarity between women and an expression of power relationships between women that could undermine it. This dialectical tension played

[1236] Graham, ''New' 1970', pp. 159-63; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis), pp. 15-16; Thomlinson, 'Colour', pp. 453-4.
[1237] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 141, 471; Bourdieu, 'Social Class', p. 5.
[1238] Hennessy, 'Class', p. 63; Skeggs, *Formations of Class*, pp. 6, 10.
[1239] Todd, *The People*, p. 308; Langton, 'Home not so sweet home'; Oakley, *Taking it*, p. 67; 'C.Us. and Women's Lib', p. 22; Interview with Lynn, 'Sisterhood and After'.

out in the tensions and conflicts within the movement around class with a resolution that contributed to the WLM's disintegration into increasingly disparate identity factions.

However, what an analysis of class differences within the movement also highlighted was the complexity with which it was defined. Feminists experienced and understood class in their economic positions and relationships, their social networks and cultural capital, but they did so differently. This was never more evident than in how individuals constructed their own class identities in relation to these factors. Chapter five of the thesis considered this complexity through an analysis of women's liberationists' subjective experiences of class. In so doing, it responded to Heron's call from 1990 to address the 'scant attention' feminists' class experiences had received to that point.[1240] It is indicative of the absence of deep class analysis of the WLM that this call had been ignored in the interim twenty-five years for good reasons and bad. For the good, the centrality of class to historical analysis has been joined by a multiplicity of analytical frames including – but not limited to – gender and race. These three have formed the basis of intersectional analysis and demonstrate the impossibility of analysing one 'section' without recognising how it is cut across by others.[1241] This has been the approach of both recent revisionist histories of the WLM and this thesis but with significant differences in focus. Revisionist accounts of the WLM have emphasised race as differentiating feminists' identities and experiences in the 1970s and beyond, accepting the stark critiques by black feminists of the WLM's white essentialism, a point made explicit by many.[1242] By contrast, this thesis has focused on the role of class in shaping identity and shown how it, like other axes of oppression, was able to cut across gender and race, such as in the equal importance of class differences as racial in the accounts of black feminists, or the cultural and socio-economic influences on women of any ethnicity. This thesis has consequently attempted to rebalance intersectional analyses of the WLM by reconsidering the 'forgotten' class axis and arguing that it had enormous resonance to the majority in the movement.

This was certainly true in women's liberationists' personal narratives of their lives and the WLM. There were clear differences in experience between women of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and these shaped how feminism was interacted

[1240] Heron, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.
[1241] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 18; Scott, *Gender*, p. 25.
[1242] See for example, Cohen, 'Researching Difference', p. 138; Thomlinson, 'Colour'.

with and understood. Those from socio-economically working-class or mixed-class backgrounds were considerably more likely, for example, to reconstitute the lamentations of middle-class feminists around the 'death of sisterhood' as a necessary process of transformation and development. Similarly, middle-class women tended to have more strongly gender-based identities founded in a repeated theme of 'relief' that they also experienced oppression, whereas those from working-class backgrounds usually saw their class as at least equally important.[1243] Nevertheless, this did not disqualify working-class women from gender-based 'epiphanic moments', the most common of which related to class mobility. Many feminists from working-class backgrounds discussed how becoming involved in the WLM was part of their transition between classes and they found great strength and sisterhood in the movement. This process also complicated the definition of class in women's subjective identities as individuals were split between placing significance on economic versus cultural capital, often in the same account. This was evident in the narratives of the Coast Group, as their definitions of class regularly cycled through experience of class inequality, to cultural capital and settled finally on socio-economic divisions.[1244] Others in the group and elsewhere emphasised cultural change and 'transition' as key aspects of the WLM's story and suggested that this inherent ambiguity in women's class position detracted from the usefulness of such analysis.[1245]

However, the experiences of other women illustrate that ambiguity should not see class discarded. Indeed, for a range of 'transitional' women, class re-emerged in their identities during interactions with middle-class women whose experiences and perspectives were distinct. The process of transition itself revealed that – ambiguous though it may have been – there was a class system to be traversed that influenced women's liberationists' lives, and, in some cases, was foundational in individuals' commitment to class politics.[1246] Moreover, even socio-economically and culturally middle-class women like Penny Remfry sought to recover personal experiences of class inequality as 'epiphanic moments' that led to their socialism.[1247]

Ultimately, an analysis of class identity and experiences in women's liberationists' life histories shows that defining oneself primarily by one identity structure does not render

[1243] 'Hadley Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 72; Jones, 'Words', p. 235; O'Sullivan, '1969', p. 55; Nichols, 'Tomorrow', pp. 177-8; 'Charlton Interview', *Once a Feminist*, p. 162.
[1244] Coast Group Interviews (various).
[1245] Interview with Bream; Interview with Taylor, 'Sisterhood and After'.
[1246] Interview with Willan; Interview with Remfry; Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', p. 210.
[1247] Interview with Remfry.

the others superfluous. In a capitalist society, class is experienced by everyone in economic, cultural and political terms. Born and developed in such a society, the WLM and its activists could never have been immune from these experiences and they were instead perceived as formative, 'epiphanic moments' that overlapped other axes of identity, rivalling the importance of gender in the accounts of many socialist-feminists.

Indeed, therein lay the crux of class identity in the WLM; although distinguished by class culturally, economically and socially, few women went untouched by the pervasive inequalities of class society and this enabled the development of individual identities rooted in class. When reduced to 'us and them', class identity was simplified and women's liberationists' identities were built on a belief in being part of the 'us' camp that persists four decades later. Combined with a commitment to the struggles of working-class women through ideology and activism, it is clear that class mattered personally and politically to the majority of British women's liberationists, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Rethinking the WLM, women and class in modern British history

The importance of class and class politics in the individual narratives, political identities and behaviour of women's liberationists challenges two narratives in the history of the WLM. Firstly, it disputes suggestions that middle-class women's route to feminism was mainly through frustration at the social expectations of domesticity, an account prevalent even in histories not specifically concerned with the movement, and amongst Far Left critiques of the WLM's 'bourgeois' character.[1248] Conversely, working-class women were seen to have come solely to the wider Women's Movement through industrial conflict. There is truth to this dichotomy but although women's domestic role was an important tenet of patriarchy to challenge and featured in many women's accounts, it was present alongside identifications with class politics and experiences of class inequality that cut across socio-economic differences. Class politics may have resonated more strongly with working-class feminists but it was never far from the surface of middle-class narratives either. This was most apparent in the research process itself. Gaining access to women's liberationists for oral histories was complicated by my sex but overcome by a shared sense of class politics. In this intersubjective moment, the importance of class to women in the Coast Group surpassed

[1248] Webster, *Imagining Home*, p. 149; Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 12; Holloway, *Women and Work*, p. 211; Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise*; Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*.

their preference for a female researcher. Thus, an awareness of the intersubjective conversations between 'the interviewee with himself/herself, with the interviewer and with culture' revealed the 'meaning' of class to my interviewees as much as their accounts.[1249] The strength of this connection around class politics enabled greater composure in the women's narratives and underlined the significance of class to their stories.[1250]

Secondly, the significance of class to women's liberationists' personal and political identities and the focus of the movement's activism demonstrate that the neglect of class in recent histories of the WLM is flawed. Class is experienced within a multitude of intersecting structures of oppression and identity, and is not always the most prominent of these structures. It should not, for example, come at the expense of an analysis of race in the WLM. However, where class is prominent, as in the WLM, the reverse is also true. Thus, the current focus on race in histories of the WLM, elevated above other structures, or the recovery of 'sisterhood', must not neglect the power of class in shaping the identities of women in both the WLM and the BWM. To an extent, this is an irresolvable problem. Indeed, in emphasising the importance of class as socio-economic category, mode of politics and political identity, this research also illustrates the difficulty of a fully intersectional analysis. In this sense, it should be seen as the addition of an alternative frame of analysis rather than a corrective to 'Sisterhood and After' or other recent histories of the movement.[1251] Seen together a synthesis may be possible.

However, the inclusion of class serves another purpose. As Hennessy has argued, the absence of class from analyses of feminism is more than a problem of misrepresenting the WLM, it also disables the critical power of history to challenge dominant economic interests in our society.[1252] This is particularly problematic when considering the WLM as its political legacy is not only felt in feminism but in the inclusion of women workers in class struggle and the expansion of class politics into the community. The WLM was committed to challenging capitalism and it would be remiss of any history of the movement to deny the importance of class analysis in doing so. Moreover, the link between working-class women's industrial and community actions in this period and

[1249] Abrams, 'Memory as both source and subject', p. 97; Portelli, 'What makes oral history', p. 67.
[1250] Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 70.
[1251] Cohen, 'Researching Difference'; Thomlinson, 'Colour of Feminism'; Radford, 'History'; Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Thesis); Setch, 'Anti-Violence Organisation'; Graham, ''New' 1970'.
[1252] Hennessy, 'Class', pp. 67-8.

the more explicit feminism of the WLM within a broader Women's Movement is vital to maintain.

There has been a tendency in wider social history of this period to see working-class women as conservative, placid, concerned by 'status' and individualistic aspiration, and disinterested in political engagement.[1253] What working-class women's militancy in the workplace and the community in this period shows is that radicalism and collectivism pervaded their identities as much as conservatism and individualism, whilst the shared political culture of solidarity between the Labour Movement and the WLM dispels any general female proclivity towards the opposite. Moreover, emphasising women's role in this radical collectivist history is an essential challenge to interpretations of society that see human beings as 'risen apes rather than fallen angels' and therefore genetically predisposed to acquiescence to social hierarchies.[1254]

However, this shared collectivism and the WLM's politics of identification were rarely enough to overcome the class barriers between socio-economically and culturally defined working-class women and WLM activists. Women workers were frequently complementary towards feminists' 'invaluable' contributions to strikes and direct interaction with feminists did change women's views of the WLM and the idea of feminism. However, sympathy and empathy tended to be the extent of the relationship as the majority of women workers engaged in industrial disputes continued to identify with their class and other workers, rather than feminism. This class-based nature of their identities and perspectives, linked to the economic form of their struggles, resulted in the politics of class resonating more deeply than the politics of gender, even if there was an awareness of how the latter influenced their class experiences.

Furthermore, away from the antagonistic relationship between workers and employers in women's industrial actions, there was a similar story. Claimants' Union women were 'suspicions' of those from the WLM and found the socio-economic distance between the two groups difficult to traverse.[1255] These views mimicked those of many women workers who had engaged with the movement and illustrated that difference in both socio-economic and cultural capital played important roles in preventing the WLM from expanding beyond its primary demographic. Moreover, as noted above, when these

[1253] Pugh, *Women's Movement in Britain*, pp. 329-330; Benson, *Affluence*, p. 418; Fielding, *Labour Governments*, pp. 224-5; Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters', p. 234.
[1254] See David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 2000), p. 23.
[1255] 'C.Us and Women's Lib, p. 22; Big Flame Women, 'Women's Struggle Notes No. 5', p. 46.

differences were negated enough for culturally, socio-economically or self-defined working-class women to become involved in the WLM, the middle-class dominance of the movement at national and local level saw the intractable problem of class rise to the surface again.

Nevertheless, although these women were not part of the WLM, they were part of the broader Women's Movement in this period, which encompassed politically-active women in trade unions, the Labour Party and the Far Left. Together and independently, these women demonstrated that, at their roots, class, gender, race, and all other forms of exploitation and oppression in capitalist, patriarchal and colonialist societies are not only definitions of position or forms of identity but expressions of power. Whether it was challenging their exploitation in equal pay strikes, demands for fair rent and welfare, or the protection of abortion rights and autonomy over their bodies, power relations were always central. The WLM contributed hugely to these struggles, physically and intellectually, never more so than in trying to show that these axes of power were interlinked, most thoroughly and successfully in relation to class and gender. Thus, whilst economic, social, cultural and racial differences between the central demographic of the WLM and the rest of society made the development of a mass movement impossible, feminism seeped into disputes in other ways. It was embodied in female strikers' recognition of the gendered nature of their class position, in housewives' desire for autonomy, and in working-class claimants' revisions of class struggle, beneath all of which was a socialist-feminist heart that, at least in struggle, refused to accept a class-gender binary. Thus, what women's experiences interactions with class struggle and feminism tell us is that women are not an addition to class analysis, nor are they detached from it. Instead, they reconstruct it altogether, and the WLM's contribution to this reconstruction, is as pertinent as ever when we deal with contemporary battles over the political construction of class and feminism.

Finally, an analysis of class and class politics in and around the WLM shows that we should not lose sight of the importance of class in individuals' personal and political attitudes, identities and behaviours, even in groups or movements defined ostensibly by another axis of identity. Class does not only 'invade' culture or influence political behaviour at the ballot box; it pervades the lives and politics of everyone in a capitalist society. Nor should it be the case that class analysis is seen as the preserve of historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially when the majority of the population in the 1970s believed a class struggle was occurring in Britain. Indeed, this

underlines how both the institutions and ideas of class politics have at times been able to shape the identities of working-class women – and men – in struggle more than any other, alternately encouraging and disenchanting, but ever present.

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Title: Class and the women's liberation movement, c. 1968 – c. 1979

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully, discuss it with others if you wish and take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you would like more information or have any questions please contact the researcher, George Stevenson.

Researcher: George Stevenson, 20 Mafeking Terrace, Sacriston, County Durham, DH7 6ND; George.stevenson@durham.ac.uk; 0191 6829893

Supervisors: Dr Andrzej Olechnowicz, History Department, Durham University and Dr Gidon Cohen, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University.

Project Objectives: The research investigates the role that class played in women's political engagement and identities in and around the Women's Liberation Movement. It considers how feminism related to 'class politics' and the Labour Movement; how working-class women taking industrial action constructed their identities in relation to class and gender; the socio-economic composition of the WLM and the difficulties this caused for creating a 'mass' movement; class tensions between women within the WLM and the problem of 'sisterhood'; the importance of class experiences and transitions to feminists' political perspectives; and what it meant to be a socialist/radical feminist in relation to class.

Adhering to socialist and feminist principles of 'history from below', the research uses a mixture of archival material and oral histories, which, where possible, focus on the often neglected experiences and accounts of working-class women.

Benefits: The rationale behind the project is to address the absence of "class", as a socio-economic category, political identity and cultural construct, in recent histories of the British Women's Liberation Movement. In addition, it seeks to recover missing voices from these histories, such as those of working-class women but also women from areas of the country not often considered, such as in the North East of England.

What you will be asked to do in the research: You will participate in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher where you will be asked to describe your experiences in the Women's Liberation Movement and the importance of class in your life and politics.

What will happen to the results of the research: The recorded interviews will form a significant part of the PhD project, 'Class and the Women's Liberation Movement, c. 1968 – c. 1979', supplementing existing information and archival records. The data may also at some stage form part of oral presentations and published material, such as newspaper or journal articles and book chapters.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time without providing reasons.

Confidentiality: Your name will appear in any publication of the research in relation to the information provided unless you request otherwise. In that instance, anonymization of the data will take place. Your data will be available to any research staff involved only with your complete consent. Otherwise your data will be stored in a locked facility and only myself and my supervisors will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law; however, research data given in confidence may not enjoy full legal privilege, and may be liable to subpoena by a court.

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Title of Project: Class and the Women's Liberation Movement, c. 1968 – c. 1979.

	Please cross out as necessary
Have you had a chance to read the participant information sheet?	YES/NO
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study with George Stevenson?	YES/NO
Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions from George Stevenson?	YES/NO
Have you received enough information about the study?	YES/NO
Do you consent to participate in the study?	YES/NO
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study: - At any time and - Without having to give a reason for withdrawing and - Without any adverse result of any kind?	YES/NO
Do you understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded?	YES/NO
Do you agree to the use of quotes and information given in publications with reference to your name?	YES/NO
IF NO, do you agree to the use of anonymised quotes?	YES/NO
Do you agree to the storage and future use of your interview data as a reference source for *bona fide* researchers at the British Library sound archive?	YES/NO
IF NO, do you agree with specific sections closed?	YES/NO

Signed …….. **Date ……..**

NAME (IN BLOCK CAPITALS)

……

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