Moralizing Doesn't Help

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Abstract

Verity Burgmann's condemnation of identity politics is unhelpful, because it is moralistic and ahistorical. Its assumptions take us back to a time before the civil rights, New Left, women's, and gay movements reinvented the Left so as to articulate their aspirations and grievances.

I was pleased to read Verity Burgmann's optimism about the "antiglobalization" movement, and its potential for creating multi-issue, multi-identity Left politics. But the article's condemnation of identity politics is ahistorical and unhelpful. Its assumptions take us back to a time before the civil rights, New Left, women's, and gay movements reinvented the Left so as to articulate the aspirations and grievances of the people they represented. Its implication that postmodern academics undermined class consciousness is a serious overestimation of academic power.

What is Class?

Speaking as an historian who has emphasized class structures and class conflict in all my writings, I share Burgmann's frustration with the silence about class that blankets American discourse—even on the Left. But the burden is on us who remain convinced of the centrality of class to prove its relevance to others. It just will not do to assert *a priori* and without argument the "objective importance of class," as Burgmann does. That importance is precisely what is at issue, no? In the logic of her article, all forms of inequality and domination are ultimately about class, and this assertion is demonstrably false. I am sure I do not need to review for ILWCH readers the mountains of evidence that gender and race, not to mention sexual preference, religion, disability, age, and physical appearance are often the sources of inequality. They are not reducible to class, not even in the "last analysis," and if we stretch the meanings of "class" so as to take in all these relations, then "class" becomes meaningless. Moreover, Burgmann seems to treat class as synonymous with socioeconomic status, an equation which also drains the concept of the meaning which connects it to social change. In fact class is a relationship, and as the world changes, so do these relationships. So class is, as E.P. Thompson wrote, a process. For those who choose to analyze it in the present day, it must remain more a question than an answer.

The main problem with Burgmann's essay is that it is moralistic rather than historical. I want to offer here some historical evidence, taken exclusively from US history where I stand on strongest ground, as a way of taking issue with her

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approach as well as her conclusions. The tone and prescription of the article suggest that the decline of class politics came about as a result of strategic mistakes or pig-headedness on the part of Leftists who should have known better; and that if Leftists would only return to the path of virtue, we would make progress. Alternatively it treats identity politics as a "trick" that the labor movement should emulate and adopt. She calls upon the labor movement to "restore to working class people the sense of identity that new social movements have imparted . . . ," as if a class-conscious identity could be constructed by manifestos, leaflets, or barbecues. The institutions that helped create working-class solidarity arose from racially homogeneous, male-dominated and often skilled-worker-dominated class communities and identity. Working-class identity was not imposed by wise leaders with correct class politics. Nor is it accurate to say that radical intellectuals, "often positioned as leaders or spokespeople of the new social movements . . . emphasize social categories other than class in order to conceal the extent to which their own relatively privileged class position makes them unrepresentative of those they claim to represent." This is just nonsense. When non-workers become leaders of working-class people it is rarely because they are trying to hide their own positions. Working-class people are no more dupes than any other group. I also suspect the historical record would show that radical intellectuals have sometimes been as effective in fighting for working-class interests as many working-class leaders.

Burgmann's moralism appears vividly in her condemnation, following Raymond Williams, of the Atlee educational reforms in Great Britain. The reforms may indeed have weakened working-class consciousness, as the similar expansion of higher education did in the US after the Second World War, but what were the alternatives? Should the Labour Party or the CIO have opposed opportunities for academically talented working-class kids to get to university? How much working-class support would there have been for a policy of all or nothing—no higher education for the working class until all can get it? A similar dilemma is exhibited in the American New Left's critique of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935. By throwing federal support behind the right to unionize, and by institutionalizing the practice of deducting union dues from wages, the Act made labor unions part of the establishment and reduced their space for political action independent of the Democratic Party; for example, unions no longer had to listen to workers in order to collect dues because the dues had become like a tax. Under these conditions, it was harder for labor to continue to create social movements, as Burgmann argues about the British Labour Party. So the NLRA was simultaneously a victory for the grassroots labor movement and a move to discipline it. It would have been difficult and probably destructive for the Left to have opposed it.

None of this means that the Left made no mistakes, far from it. The path away from class identity arose from both within and without the working class. Long-term changes in the state and the economy (over which the Left had very little control) were restructuring class, moving many more people of color and white women into the wage labor force, shrinking the industrial working class,

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and exporting jobs from the First World. What the Left could have controlled was its over-long and over-strong identification with the Soviet Union and other Leninist revolutions, and the racism and sexism within the Left that alienated so many and cut off examination of race, gender, and cultural forms of domination. By the 1950s the Communist Left was staggering from McCarthyist suppression of dissent and the Khrushchev admissions of Stalinist tyranny. No existing organization, not even existing African-American organizations, could represent the new grassroots civil rights activism emerging in the US south. As the US replaced France as the colonial power in Vietnam, no existing organization could organize or lead the emerging antiwar activism. The New Left that arose in the 1950s (and I include the civil rights movement in my conception of the New Left) was a response to these historical problems. The break with the Old Left was not something dreamed up in the 1980s by postmodern academics.

Moreover, many of the unions that claimed to represent the working class before the New-Left challenge were making fraudulent claims. To say, as Burgmann does, that the labor movements "have not been as successful in mobilizing their constituencies," creates a misleading impression; in fact the labor movements had a rather narrow constituency and did not adequately "represent" the working class. The unions were often men's clubs and union leadership was overwhelmingly dominated by white men. In other words, they represented at best a minority of the working class. Working-class men of color, and all women, often created separate organizations to represent their interests and ideas. *ILWCH* readers should, I think, avoid categorizing unions as the only truly working-class organizations in contrast to women's or ethnic or race organizations which were often also working-class organizations.

Responding not to doctrinal or even analytic rejection of a class-based movement, the progressive social movements of the 1950s to 1980s defined and expressed class interests in new ways, through experiences shared by groups not defined in class terms. By asserting the legitimacy of resistance from new quarters, they often identified class issues not previously articulated. The black civil rights movement was stimulated largely by college students. Were they middle class or working class? By what definitions? It is not clear, but it may not have mattered because their demands represented large sectors of the working class. Theirs was largely a youth movement rebelling against the caution and accommodation of their elders—although they were helped immeasurably by a few elders such as Ella Baker who, despite Marxist backgrounds, rejected a class test in throwing their support behind the young people. The growth of black identity did not result from middle class "misleaders of the people," as the Trotskyists used to say. The extreme racism of the American economy and polity was such that the overwhelming majority of African Americans were working class or farmworkers, and that demands for racial equality almost always benefited working-class people most. The same was true of Latino/a, Indian, and Asian-American civil rights movements.

But civil rights was not a class movement in disguise, because racism is not

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a class structure in disguise. *ILWCH* readers know well that racism has been an enduring, autonomous force that transcends class regimes and class positions; unfortunately Burgmann seems to ignore this fact. The racial identities of people of color have been created by their movements which were in turn created by the racisms that surrounded them. These racisms function within as well as between class groups, among workers as among professionals, and the antidiscrimination struggles that they require must aim at equality of opportunity among other equalities. It is impossible to banish individual rights from a Left program.

Similar things could be said of the women's movements that arose in the late 1960s. Most were cross-class movements but not all. Women's groups formed within unions to challenge policy and leadership, and within academic faculties to do the same, and these groups served class as well as gender interests, just as civil rights campaigns did. Union women formed a major core of the leadership of the National Organization for Women (NOW) at its origins, and a significant proportion were black. NOW's founders included black lawyer and minister Pauli Murray, labor union women like Dorothy Haener of the United Auto Workers and Addie Wyatt of the Amalgamated Meatcutters, and Betty Friedan, who brought her Old-Left and union experience. African-American Aileen Hernandez was NOW's second president. NOW's first headquarters was provided by the UAW. NOW's membership, like that of other parts of the women's movement, was primarily white and middle-class; yet after a successful internal affirmative action effort, by the mid-1990s black and Latina women made up one-third of NOW's national staff and leadership. NOW concentrated heavily on employment issues, reflecting its close ties to unions and to the US Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor. NOW litigated class-action lawsuits against sex discrimination in employment, particularly in working class jobs. Women's earnings, which were about fifty-nine percent of men's when women's liberation broke out, reached seventy-seven percent of men's by 1993, and among unionized workers, women have gained even more equity, earning eighty-four percent of men's wages on average. (Unfortunately some of women's gains are more apparent than real, and result from the fact that men's real wages are declining.)

The mass grassroots women's liberation movement rested on recent college graduates as its main base, and these were predominantly white and, of course, predominantly middle class. Yet once we get past the mainstream press's shallow and stereotypical picture of the women's liberation movement, an examination of its program calls into question the claim that it did not pursue class issues. Campaigns for day care, against sexual harassment, for affirmative action, against job discrimination—not peripheral but leading areas of feminist activism—these were and remain working-class demands. The campaign for abortion challenged the class system in health care, by which prosperous women could get "therapeutic" abortions from private doctors or in Puerto Rico or Sweden, and demanded universal access. The successful campaign against sterilization abuse exposed and prohibited the coercive approach used against poor women and women of color.

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The women's liberation movement also encouraged unions to democratize and to organize the unorganized and when the unions did not respond, took on the task itself. Unions had been relatively disinterested in organizing clerical and service workers until the civil-rights and women's movements pushed them, from both within and without unions. The women's liberation movement, especially its several socialist-feminist organizations in big cities (e.g., Chicago, Boston, San Francisco), initiated organizing projects among clerical workers, bank tellers, janitors, health-care workers, waitresses, stewardesses, communication workers, and other groups. The movement was particularly successful with clerical workers, because so much of the feminist constituency was employed in that sector. Today the most well-known union of clerical workers is Nine-to-Five, a.k.a. 925, which grew out of Boston's socialist-feminist organization Bread and Roses. Using the slogan "Raises not Roses," 9-to-5 published an office workers' "bill of rights," demanding equal pay and promotion opportunities, detailed job descriptions, maternity benefits, overtime pay and the right to refuse to do personal errands for the employer. Nine-to-Five gained such prominence that its name—and its call for respect for clerical workers—were appropriated by a Hollywood hit movie starring Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton, and Lili Tomlin. Nine-to-Five's success rested on retaining its independent identity as a women's-movement organization even after it joined the AFL-CIO. Like clerical workers, flight attendants became particularly critical of the discriminatory and exploitive aspects of their jobs, which required appearance and weight checks, excluded women of color, fired employees who reached age thirty or got married, and advertised stewardesses' looks in ways that invited sexual harassment. Their victories are evident on airplanes today where there are flight attendants of both sexes and all sizes and appearances; less visibly, they have also won better health benefits, wages, and schedules.

The class-based program of the feminist movement has been ignored in part because its cultural critiques and strategies were often more newsworthy, designed to be disruptive, even shocking. In this respect second-wave feminism was a natural child of the male-dominated New Left. Reflecting its historical context of relative prosperity, its mood was optimistic, even at times utopian; it was as critical of commercialization and conformity as of poverty. Its implicit motto was to challenge received wisdoms and hierarchical authorities. It was quintessentially a movement of young people and it was correspondingly impatient. In dress, in sexual behavior, in its favorite intoxicants and above all in its beloved music it distinguished itself sharply from grown-ups.

The movement became most controversial from its challenge to power relations in areas previously considered outside politics, such as sex, cooking, cleaning, childbirth, child-raising, religion, sports, education. (These are, in fact, as material to women as wages and hours.) These challenges arose from consciousness-raising, a powerful new organizing medium developed by the radical women's movement and the method associated most closely with the development of new identities and, hence, identity politics. Consciousness-raising pried open a lid to a well of grievances about male supremacy and, yes, some individ-

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ual men. Women in civil rights, the New Left, and the anti-Vietnam War movement were on the whole less victimized, more respected, and less romanticized than they were in the mainstream culture or counterculture, but they remained subordinate and less powerful than the men who dominated the meetings and the press conferences. Women experienced galling frustrations and humiliations. Everywhere and in every organization women were responsible for keeping records, producing leaflets, telephoning, cleaning offices, cooking, organizing social events, and catering to the egos of male leaders, while the men wrote manifestos, talked to the press, negotiated with officials, and made public speeches. But the feminist critique went beyond the matter of sex equality to the observation that men's leadership was sometimes deformed by destructive masculinities into an approach that weakened instead of strengthening democracy. The fusion of these critiques with the demand for equality in "private" life produced some angry and defensive male reactions.

The standard interpretation of the impact of second-wave feminism is that these disenchanted women deserted the New Left—seceded—to join women-only groups. This standard interpretation is quite wrong. The majority of feminists in the 1970s remained active members of various New-Left projects and organizations. They continued to march against the Vietnam war and other US military interventions, against police brutality, against environmental despoliation, against tax caps. They supported strikes, funding for schools, accessible health care, affirmative action, and progressive political candidates. The historical record suggests the need for some skepticism about the claim that identity politics weakened the Left.

What is Identity?

Burgmann's antipathy toward "identity" politics struggles such as civil rights and feminism arises in part from her antipathy toward equality of opportunity demands, since they promote individual rather than collective gains, and may thus further divide potentially Left constituencies. In fact "identity" groups have tended toward collective demands. But more important, Burgmann's critique of equality of opportunity, however accurate in pointing out its potentially negative impact on solidarity, is morally and strategically impossible as an imperative, in parallel to her critique of meritocratic educational reform. Does Burgmann mean to say that people of color should not struggle for equal access to opportunities here and now in this capitalist world? That women have no call to demand an end to discrimination, even in boardrooms and advertising agencies? I am sure that she does not mean this—but then it is not clear where the condemnation of equal-opportunity demands, i.e. liberal demands, leads.

Ultimately Burgmann's understanding of identity seems to me as ahistorical as her approach to class. She recognizes quite clearly that identities are fluid and historically constructed and reconstructed. But in a manner oddly close to the approach of postmodernists, whom she criticizes, she treats identities as malleable by leaders good and bad. I see political identities as socially constructed

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and changeable, to be sure, but also rooted in material structures, culture, and experience (as identities themselves also influence structures, culture, and experience). A revived women's movement arose in the late 1960s because of significant changes in the gender system, just as civil rights became a mass movement in the 1950s because of deep-rooted changes in the racial system.

The evidence suggests that the historical Left accomplished very little against racism and sexism until identity-based movements of people of color and of women forced those issues into priority. In fact, the evidence suggests the opposite: much of the Left had vested interests in race and sex discrimination. So we have to conclude, I think, that one of the contributors to making identity politics necessary was the (ostensibly) class-conscious Left.

Like Burgmann, I find useful and insightful Nancy Fraser's analytic distinction between demands for redistribution and recognition, and lament, also along with Burgmann, the relative curtailing of the former. But identity politics does not automatically focus on recognition. The women's movements were primarily about redistribution—of money, labor, responsibility, leadership. Gay movements, civil rights movements, movements of the disabled and the elderly—these have all featured demands for fundamental redistribution. Not to recognize this is part of the problem discussed above: assuming that class is the source of all material inequality.

What makes the Seattle-born movement promising is not its class base but its potential for identifying the common ground among many destructive state and corporate policies. I agree entirely with Burgmann that "organizations that could reasonably be regarded as the executive committee of the international bourgeoisie" are the authors and coordinators of many of these policies. But I don't think the opposition they evoke is simply rich against poor. The alliances are far more complex and vary by region, economic sector, ideology, gender, etc.

Moreover, identities need not fit into existing categories. It is possible that the "antiglobalization" movement is creating a unique identity among its participants. It seems almost certain that these identities, and with them the articulation of interests, will become increasingly varied and the contradictions among them sometimes overt. Example: the AFL-CIO opposes NAFTA and FTAA but its solution is, often, protectionism, vehemently opposed by many other constituencies, especially those outside the US. Example: it is not the WTO or the World Bank that makes Americans so attracted to driving Sport Utility Vehicles. Example: working-class claims that environmental protection will cost jobs may well be true in the short run. Example: it is not the US that produced the patterns of sexual practice in southern Africa that so escalated the spread of AIDS or the lengthy resistance of South Africa's top leadership to an effective campaign against it. Unanimity among all the potentially progressive forces in the world is a worthy goal, but difficult to achieve, and certainly not advanced by Burgmann's moralistic and ahistorical approach.

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