

Article

SEXISM AND THE LEFT: CASE STUDIES IN AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE

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Abstract

Many left organizations pride themselves on their commitment to women's liberation, and socialist feminism is a significant and important current of left praxis. Socialist feminists, for instance, have been central to the long history of social movement organizing to defend abortion rights in Canada. This record of feminist engagement and support of women's rights is not, however, a consistent pattern in the Left. There is also a long history that demonstrates a persistence of sexist practices within socialist organizations. This article suggests that sexist practices, as well as feminist analyses of and responses to sexism, have been too often epistemologically minimized, dismissed, distorted and ultimately forgotten, enabling a normalization of patriarchal hegemony on the Left, producing what the late Charles Mills termed an epistemology of ignorance. To demonstrate this, the article draws on three case studies, spanning recent and distant history of socialist organizing. These are: the crisis of the International Socialist Tendency and Socialist Workers' Party UK (2010-13); the founding period of the International Socialists in Canada (1975-6); and the Bolshevik-Menshevik division in Tsarist Russia (1902-3). The argument is based on extensive original research addressing the history of socialist practices internationally, and four decades of personal archives from socialist and feminist praxis relevant to these case studies.

Keywords

Feminism; socialism; epistemology; left; patriarchy

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Introduction¹

On June 24, 2022, in a stunning reminder of the depth of the backlash against women's rights, the United States Supreme Court officially reversed the historic *Roe v. Wade* ruling which provided legal protection for abortion rights in that country (Supreme Court of the US 2022). Within two weeks of the ruling, some half of all states in the US saw court filings and amended laws challenging the legal status of abortion (Messerly 2022). There are far-reaching international implications of the US reversal of women's right to choose, and the Canadian context cannot be assumed to be unaffected (Johnson 2022). Importantly, in Canada, we have a long history of social movement mobilization to defend abortion rights. Socialist feminists have played a pivotal role in successfully forwarding a reliance on social movement mobilization in the historic campaign for the right to choose (MacDonald and Egan 2005).

This social movement activism is complemented by the many contributions of socialist feminists to left political theory (see for example Arat-Koc 1989; Bakan 2012; Bhattacharya 2017; Boyce Davies 2008; Coburn 2014; Coleman and Bassi 2011a; Fox 1980; Dunayevskaya 1991; James 2012; Luxton 2001; Sangster 2021). In large measure due to this history, socialist organizations, commonly collectively referred to as the Left, pride themselves in upholding a commitment to women's liberation, one that rests on a radical challenge to the perceived inadequacies of mainstream feminist approaches to resisting oppressive practices of capitalism. However, the integration of feminism into the practices of socialist organizations is far from consistent. Indeed, there is a long history of controversies within socialist organizations concerning overtly sexist practices, suggestive of an overarching tradition of hegemonic masculinity (Duncanson 2015). At the turn of the last century, Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) related experiences of what can only be called normalized misogyny when dealing with male comrades in the European socialist movement (Dunayevskaya 1991, 90). In this century, despite the extensive contributions from socialist feminists over the intervening decades, controversies within socialist organizations indicate a remarkable persistence of sexist practices.

This article suggests that sexist practices, as well as feminist analyses of and responses to sexism, have been epistemologically minimized over generations in socialist organizations – dismissed, distorted and often forgotten. This pattern has been demonstrated repeatedly, resulting in a normalization of patriarchal hegemony, despite the pivotal necessity for and enduring contributions of socialist feminists. There has emerged, in other words, an epistemology of ignorance (Mills 1997). This is not merely about a lack of knowledge, but has resulted from an active process of generating specific absences. Ignorance is, in this perspective, related to hegemonic ideologies, associated with racism and other forms of oppression (Pateman and Mills 2007; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). When confronting contemporary sexist practices, activists are commonly burdened with the feeling they are starting anew, rather than building on a foundation of past lessons. The socialist movement needs to challenge this epistemology of ignorance in order to move towards a consistent, emancipatory practice.

This study uses a mixed methodology, based on autoethnography, document analysis and original translations from historical sources. The authors draw on more than four decades of praxis on the Left in Canada – from the 1970s to the present – and a related extensive body of archival material. In 1977, Paul Kellogg became active in the International Socialists (IS) Canada, an organization Abigail Bakan helped to found in 1975. We each served as leading members of the IS in various capacities, including: serving on elected leading bodies at the local and national levels; organizing and speaking at regularly held local and national meetings including public educational events and internal decision-making fora; leading and/or supporting numerous campaigns and activist interventions; and writing for, editing and producing an extensive series of publications for both internal and public dissemination.²

To develop the analysis in this article, we consider three selected case studies, examples of sexist practices in different moments of socialist organizing spanning recent and distant history: the crisis of the International Socialist Tendency (IST) and Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) UK (2010-13); the founding period of the International Socialists (IS) in Canada (1975-6); and the Bolshevik-Menshevik division in Tsarist Russia (1902-3). These case studies we summarize under the headings: "Sexual Assault"; "The Sexist Faction"; and "Sexism and Suicide".

1) Sexual Assault

In the early 2000s, Britain's SWP, along with other groups in various countries which collectively comprised the IST, developed a reputation for being central to some important campaigns. In 2013 Laurie Penny wrote in the *New Statesman* that the SWP was "not a fringe group: they matter"; she stated further that it also "matters that right now, the party is exploding in messy shards because of a debate about sexism, sexual violence and wider issues of accountability" (Penny 2013).

In July 2010, a young woman (referred to as "W"), a member of the SWP, made an informal complaint about sexual assault (Platt 2014) directed at a prominent member of the party, a man referred to throughout as "Delta."³ He was a long-standing, full-time paid staff person for the SWP, and a member of the group's elected Central Committee (CC) (the party's leading body). He was also middle-aged – 47 in 2010. "W" was not in the party leadership and was a teenager – 17 years old when she began a relationship with Delta in 2008, 19 years old when she made her informal complaint in 2010 ("The Age Gap, and Why It Matters" 2013).

At the January 2013 SWP annual delegated conference (the highest decision-making body) in London, UK, a leading member reported on the controversy, stating that among the issues "not relevant to us" were "the age differences in their relationship" because there was no interest in policing "bourgeois morality" ("SWP Conference Transcript – Disputes Committee Report" 2013).⁴ However, the #MeToo movement has reminded us that imbalances of power are fundamental to consent, and relatedly to capacities to resist or refuse sexual advances. This has been, in fact, widely known long prior to #MeToo. In Britain, "The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill" of 1999-2000, sets the age of consent at 16. However, that age of consent goes up to 18 when

the older person “is in a ‘position of trust’ in relation to the younger person” (Selfe and Burke 2012, 26). In Canada, power imbalances, including those based on age, and the related potential for sexual abuse, are well documented – often covered by guidelines difficult to enforce, but at least outlining notions of “best practices.”⁵ Too often, however, the internal life of groups on the Left in Canada and internationally occurs in largely unregulated space. Norms regarding relational practices are internally generated, invisible, unnamed and undiscussed.

How did the SWP leadership deal with this unequal power relationship and the charge of sexual assault? There was a culture in the party that such issues be addressed internally. Registering a complaint with the police was strongly discouraged as it was seen as crossing a line, calling on the capitalist state to address a party matter. An internally constituted Disputes Committee served as the institutional mechanism for adjudicating more complex issues among party members. The 2010 complaint resulted in Delta stepping down from a prominent position he had held for some years, but remaining a paid staff member and a member of the CC. Delta spoke at the January 2011 SWP conference where the situation was, in very general terms, made public to the delegates in attendance. He stated that if delegates “knew the very worst he was accused of, they would gasp at how empty the story was.” David Renton wrote that: “In response to every signal ... that the misconduct was of the mildest character possible, the delegates chanted, ‘The workers united will never be defeated,’ and gave ... [Delta] a standing ovation” (Renton 2013). Some, however, were hardly cheering, and instead called this “one of the lowest points in the party’s history” (F, S, and M 2013; Platt 2014, 31).

Prior to the 2011 conference, W had resigned from the SWP. But in the autumn of 2011, she re-joined, as “she did not believe that there was anywhere else a revolutionary socialist could turn if they wanted to be active” (F, S, and M 2013). In September 2012 W reopened the issue, this time filing a formal complaint alleging rape. The 2010 informal complaint had been “handled” by three people, including two members of the same CC as Delta. The 2012 formal complaint went to a hearing of the Disputes Committee in October of that year. The composition of the Disputes Committee is notable. This was an internal committee of the SWP comprised of seven individuals, five of whom were current or former members of the CC, “people who had worked incredibly closely with Comrade Delta” (“SWP Conference Transcript – Disputes Committee Report” 2013). Journalist Tom Walker, who resigned from the party’s newspaper in the wake of this controversy, described this as “not a jury of his peers, but a jury of his mates” (Taylor 2013).

The Disputes Committee interrogated W about the case. In this process, they asked about her drinking habits and her past relationships. Delta had access to her written statement weeks before the hearing. W, however, never had access to his. With one dissenting vote, the committee decided that the rape charge was “unproven,” and therefore was without grounds. No further action was considered required. Note, however, that this was a case of date rape, for which the only witnesses, as is common in such cases, were the accused and the accuser.

The controversy did not go away. Four full-time employees of the party began addressing the events on Facebook, with a view to providing a space to discuss the crisis. They were expelled from the party because apparently their Facebook group amounted to “secret factionalism,”

something not allowed in the party (Seymour 2013). W asked to present at the January 2013 conference session where the Disputes Committee findings were to be discussed. She was not allowed to present. After a fractious debate, the decision of the Disputes Committee was brought to a vote among conference delegates. The report and its findings were voted on, being narrowly accepted – 231 in favour, 209 against, with 18 abstentions (“SWP Conference Transcript – Disputes Committee Report” 2013; Platt 2014).

Walker described his reaction to this conference discussion and vote, as “one of simple, visceral disgust. I was shaking.... I walked out of the building in a daze” (Walker 2013). The Socialist Workers’ Student Society (SWSS) at Leeds University released a public statement after the conference, where it condemned, “in the strongest possible terms, the recent handling of very serious accusations against a leading member of the SWP Central Committee.” The student group maintained that “an atmosphere of intimidation has been allowed to develop in which young members are viewed with suspicion and treated as such” (Leeds University SWSS 2013).

Hundreds of people resigned from the party – some immediately, some after a few months. David Renton was in the latter category, staying in for a while “because he wanted to see if they could take the complaint any further” (Platt 2014). The experience of W proved not to be an isolated incident. A second woman, identified as “X,” also a member of the SWP, came forward with a complaint about the behaviour of Delta. At the January 2013 conference, X described her experience during the internal investigation, an investigation again led by the Disputes Committee.

The accused was able to see my evidence four days in advance of any questioning to prepare his defence. I was not made aware of the evidence the accused brought to contradict the case, so I had no opportunity to challenge his testimony ... None of my witnesses were called. ... Finally (voice breaks) in my opinion the worst part was the nature of some of the questioning. I was asked if it was fair to say I liked to have a drink. That’s all I need to say on the matter. (“SWP Conference Transcript – Disputes Committee Report” 2013).

By the summer of 2013, the committee had concluded, regarding the complaint of X, that in this case Delta “had a case to answer” to. However, in the interim, Delta had resigned from the party; the Disputes Committee argued that “the investigation would be reinstated only if he should choose to re-join.” In essence, this amounted to, as Renton pointed out, admitting “that the second complaint was probably true,” something which “obviously cast a light backwards on the first complaint as well” (Platt 2014, 35). The SWP did not revisit the first complaint, did not reinstate those expelled for attempting to discuss it, and did not publicly account for its actions. The roots of the “larger controversy” were never substantively addressed (Worcester 2014, 126).

How could the SWP have failed so badly in dealing with accusations of sexual assault? Walker provided a clue, when he reported that within the SWP at the time, “‘feminism’ is used effectively as a swear word by the leadership’s supporters” (Walker 2013). Any of us who travelled to London for the SWP’s annual Marxism conferences in the 1980s and 1990s – educational

conferences which regularly attracted thousands of people from the UK and internationally – would be familiar with the transformation of the term “feminist” into “f**g feminist” during numerous discussions after meetings. SWP intellectuals had developed an extremely sectarian orientation to the feminist movement from the 1980s on, a subject to which we return in the next case study.

It is precisely from the feminist movements, however, that we have learned about the politics of sexual assault. By building a wall between the SWP version of socialist politics, and the contributions of international feminist movements from the 1960s through the 1990s, the SWP closed itself off to these lessons and contributions, exactly the contributions that could have helped them find a way forward during this crisis. Instead, a deeply sectarian approach to feminism contributed to an ossified internal culture, one that rejected even the vocabulary of feminism. The expertise that had been advanced over decades in the feminist movement internationally related to these issues was rejected (see for example McGregor 1989), creating an organisation poorly equipped to deal with charges of sexual harassment, assault and rape, expressly contributing to an epistemology of ignorance.

The SWP was the dominant group within the International Socialist Tendency. The internal party crisis of the SWP had repercussions for various member groups within the IST, including for the IS in Canada to which the authors of this article were at the time associated. While we saw a strong need to publicly dissociate the IS in Canada from the SWP’s failure to adequately address the serious charges, this proved to be a minority approach. A majority of delegates to the 2013 IS Canada convention (the annual national delegated decision-making meeting) voted against a motion to “send a statement” to the SWP “listing our concerns” about their handling of the cases of W, X and Delta (“Crisis in the SWP” 2013). Several of us, including the authors of this article, felt that, as a matter of principle, we could not remain in a group which stayed silent in the face of this sexual assault crisis (“The IST and the Crisis of the SWP (Britain): Statement of Resignation from IS Canada,” 2013).

Without question, the SWP’s sectarian orientation to the feminist movement impacted the politics of the IS in Canada. It would be misleading, however, to conflate the experience of the two groups. The framework of socialist feminism can be summed up by the slogan “No socialism without women’s liberation. No women’s liberation without socialism” (Kelly 2002, 18), and that slogan was central to the orientation of the IS in Canada from its foundation. This was reflected in our aspiration to have a zero-tolerance approach to sexual assault, domestic violence and any kind of interpersonal violence. In 2012 and 2013, however, it became clear that a very different kind of culture existed within the SWP, though few were prepared to press the difference and express a public statement to this effect.⁶ To some extent the difference in practice between the IS Canada and the SWP in the UK had to do with issues that had emerged much earlier, in the mid-1970s, in the context of the founding of the IS. We now turn to consider this in the next section.

2) 'Sexist Faction'

The IS in Canada originated from various forces involved in the debates that took place in the Waffle, an important left formation that originated within Canada's social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) (Bakan and Murton 2006). Once outside the NDP, the Ontario Waffle added to its name the phrase, Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada (MISC). Significantly, the minutes from the first Organizing Committee meeting of Waffle/MISC in August 1972, clearly indicate the influence of feminism. This included a commitment to representational gender parity, noting that "under *no* circumstances will men be seated in place of women if parity is not achieved" (Robinson and Boyce 1972). Picking up this thread from the Waffle/MISC, the IS – from its founding convention in Toronto in February 1975 – was explicitly committed to women's liberation. Many of the group's members as a matter of course thought of themselves as "feminists," which was assumed to be coterminous with women's liberation.

In April 1976, the newly formed IS⁷ held a National Committee (NC) meeting, a delegated body that was responsible for decision-making between annual conventions.⁸ In the weeks prior to this NC meeting a young male member shared with a female member his discomfort about the activities of a small drinking group of which he had been a part. The group on its face was a casual social circle. It was comprised of selected members, all either leading or highly influential male "comrades" of the IS in Toronto, the central branch of the new organization. They knew that the IS was formally and clearly committed to women's liberation, as this had been adopted unanimously at the first founding convention. However, this circle proudly referred to themselves as the "sexist faction," a secretly adopted term that was meant to be kept among themselves. This patriarchal club mentality can arguably be understood as an example of "how drinking practices, embedded in particular social contexts, elevate and/or maintain" hegemonic masculinity in the international Left (Hinote and Webber 2012, 294). Central to their topics of conversation were the women members of the IS, routinely ranked through a patriarchal gaze according to their ostensible desirability for masculinized, heteronormative sexual advances. The ranking criteria included the size of the women's breasts.

The faction included two prominent leading members of the IS, closely associated with the organization's work in industrial unions. One was a member of the day-to-day leadership group, then termed the Executive Committee (EC). The rest of the EC, upon learning of this self-identified "sexist faction", decided that a motion calling for the censure of the group's EC member would be brought up from the floor of the two-day national meeting, a previously scheduled decision-making conference planned for April 3-4, 1976. The event took place on the second floor of the national office, a rented house in the west end of Toronto. In attendance at this members-only meeting were two invited international guests from sister organizations of the IS in Canada: one from the International Socialists in the US; and one a longstanding member of the sister group in Britain, the International Socialists UK, predecessor to the SWP.

On the afternoon of the second day of the NC meeting, the issues of leadership and accountability were raised from the floor, including the actions of the sexist faction. No one

challenged the allegations. There was, however, palpable rage among some of the faction's adherents that the previously secret group's actions were brought forward for general discussion. In the moment, it was decided by some of the delegates that the situation called for more than simply a motion of censure, but demanded the more serious measure of suspension – a temporary removal of membership status that could be revisited in the future. When the vote to suspend the membership of the EC member in question was carried by a large majority, the now-suspended member of the sexist faction responded with visible outrage. He walked out, swearing and shouting, and indicated he was quitting the IS. The UK guest spoke immediately after, condemning the sexist faction behaviour as a “classic example of petit bourgeois individualism.”

And now, temperatures were rising. Another member of the sexist faction, an industrial worker, rose from his seat and aggressively shoved the UK guest, sending them through the second-floor window amidst shattering glass. Fortunately, the UK guest was not injured in the assault, saved from falling to the pavement below by the roof of the front porch which was like a small balcony. After this assault, this second member of the sexist faction walked out, also announcing his resignation. As the air left the room, the UK guest stood up, unharmed and apparently unshaken. They quietly dusted the bits of glass off their clothing, urging calm. In a composed tone, the UK guest asked that we continue to focus on the work of building our emerging socialist organization and advance our perspectives. The attendees proceeded with the rest of the agenda until the meeting concluded.⁹

The IS survived this early stress, proud to have challenged the grotesque display of sexism. Without doubt, the composed response of the UK SWP guest to the physical assault was pivotal in restoring a sense of purpose to what was then a young organization, in both membership composition and years of experience. The commitment to opposing sexism in all forms was foundational, and contributed to a key change in the organization's practice. The most hotly debated question in the earliest years of the IS in Canada was about which sectors of the workforce should be identified for “industrialization,” what is sometimes referred to as “implantation” – a practice of former students seeking full time employment in industry with the view of influencing workers with socialist ideas (“On Industrialization” 1975). At a subsequent National Committee meeting some months after dealing with the sexist faction, it was voted to turn away from industrialization (Bakan 1976c). This decision was received as a refreshing correction of a rigid and impractical orientation, one that was also associated with an inaccurate notion of how socialist ideas would advance in mass working class movements.

In turning away from industrialization, the tactic was challenged for serving as a “phony bridge” to connect a minority current of socialists with the working class. Among the limitations of the approach was, in practice, an orientation to “priority” sectors that were highly male-dominated industrial workplaces. This had serious negative implications for an orientation on women's liberation (Bakan 1976b).

Significantly however, the IS also fully accepted the analysis that the sexist faction was an expression, first and foremost, of petit bourgeois individualism. Though accepted without debate at the time, in hindsight it is clear that this is a very imprecise and highly charged phrase, one

commonly deployed in left circles. This ostensible class analysis of the petit bourgeois status of the sexist faction, though intended only as a comment in a heated moment, became epistemologically embedded and contributed to a very particular shaping of historical memory. The embrace of a loose, but inaccurate kind of class analysis and a simultaneous turn away from the language and concepts commonly advanced in feminist theory, is revealing of how the politics of sexism and women's liberation were to be framed over future decades, contributing over time to an epistemology of ignorance. With the benefit of the rich contributions of feminist analysis, a more accurate descriptor would be, perhaps, "misogyny".

For the remainder of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the IS in Canada moved more closely into the orbit of international collaboration with groups comprising the IST. Meetings of the IST were scheduled to be just before or after the annual summer public Marxism conference, also in London, UK. At the forefront of both the Marxism conference and the International Socialist Tendency meetings were Central Committee members of the Socialist Workers' Party, most of whom were full time party officers, many holding the same posts for years. The CC devoted considerable time and attention to the other much smaller and younger groups around the world, largely with a view to correcting perceived limitations. The annual gatherings of the IST in London were strictly limited, delegated meetings of the leaderships of IST member groups. The events were by invitation only, and took place in an atmosphere of near-secrecy with special security measures in place. Increasingly, as the years progressed, the annual IST meetings came to be narrowly modelled on the CC's view of the Bolsheviks in the early years of the Communist International (Comintern). As in the Comintern, a "teacher-student" binary developed, with the experienced party leaders from the main organization (the SWP in the IST, the Bolsheviks within the Comintern) using the meetings to share their "more-developed" experiences with smaller, less-experienced groups.¹⁰ With a one-size fits all approach, lessons from the Russian Revolution, as read and understood by the SWP CC leadership, were in turn drawn upon to support very specific strategic arguments, considered imperative for all the organizations internationally that were presented in the IST.

The atmosphere at these meetings was tense and competitive, with one group's advances commonly used to shame another's ascribed failures and weaknesses. Such weaknesses were often framed harshly, as adaptations to non-Bolshevik movements and ideas. Feminism was high on this list of problematic adaptations. The most notable individual involved in forwarding mentorship, guidance, and correction of wrong-headed adaptations, was Tony Cliff (Ygael Gluckstein). His prestige and influence were without comparators. In particular, and relevant to the current discussion, Cliff was among the most vocal CC opponents of what was termed an adaptation to feminism. Cliff insisted on the incompatibility of Marxism with feminism, a perspective articulated in his 1984 book, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation: 1640 to the Present* (Cliff 1984).

Two different movements have sought to achieve women's liberation over the past hundred or more years, Marxism and feminism....There can be no compromise

between these two views, even though some “socialist feminists” have in recent years tried to bridge the gap. (Cliff 1984, 7).

The same view was articulated years later in Cliff’s autobiography, where he argued that accepting the concept of “patriarchy”, even using the term in casual analysis or conversation, led inexorably to “separatism,” one expression of which “was the retreat from fighting capitalism, and leading women to indulge in their lifestyles” (Cliff 2000, 146).

This theoretical approach, and its related discursive implications, had serious organizational repercussions within the SWP. Beginning in 1972, the then International Socialists, precursor to the SWP, included *Women’s Voice* among its publications, written by and for socialist women. In 1977 *Women’s Voice* groups were formed across the UK. The publication, and the *Women’s Voice* groups, were a bridge between the SWP and the women’s movement in Britain. But this was increasingly seen negatively by the SWP leadership, with the groups and *Women’s Voice* seen to be “becoming a bridge out of the party” (German 1989). Ultimately, the *Women’s Voice* groups were compelled to disband or face disciplinary action, and the journal with the same name ceased publication.

The authors of this article attended IST meetings annually from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. We took copious notes, and sometimes those notes indicate sharper and clearer formulations even than those that appear in published books and articles. In July 1989, Cliff introduced an IST International Meeting, which was summarized as follows:

The Second and Third Internationals had not only numbers, but also cadre...
- Every idea of the past revolutionary socialist tradition, were all eliminated, not just distorted, by Stalinism...
- Today we see the same ideas – the lack of centrality of the working class – existing in other forms than Stalinism: these are ideas like feminism, greenism
- Academic Marxism: Michael Kidron, Eric Hobsbawm – they are disgusting.
- Feminism: this is the easiest thing in the world to make concessions on
(As quoted in Bakan 1989)

Cliff’s meaning was not ambiguous and was fully endorsed by other members of the SWP leadership. Marxism had to be defended against the threat of feminism, with the same uncompromising fortitude that previous generations demonstrated in their desperate struggles to survive against Stalinism. While “greenism”, or environmentalism, and “academic Marxism” were similarly identified as threatening to socialist politics, these currents were not considered as potentially attractive, and therefore as dangerous to socialist organizing, as feminism.

Let us return to the 1976 moment when the IS was an emerging current of activists. The sexist faction incident is best understood when placed in a wider context of systemic patriarchal hegemony, generalized in capitalism as well as in the Left – a subject that has been widely addressed

in feminist discourse (Rowbotham 1973; Bakan 2012; Coleman and Bassi 2011a; 2011b). Asserting a form of Marxist analysis that was opposed to the sexist faction on class terms, as an example of petit bourgeois individualism, but not framed as an example of misogyny, can be understood as an epistemic moment – both an expression of and a contribution to an epistemology of ignorance facilitated by a pivot away from a consistent engagement with the feminist movement and feminist theory. This moment was consistent, then, with the overall orientation expressed with increasing clarity in the years that followed – demonstrated in Cliff’s writings and statements at the IS tendency meetings. While it was incredibly helpful to see the importance of challenging the sexist faction, the associated elision of a focus on patriarchy turned the discussion to a very general framing of “capitalism” as a totalizing approach. This epistemic pivot was typical within the IS tendency. An epistemology of ignorance regarding sexism and misogyny was not, however, an original contribution of the International Socialists tendency. Rather, it is ubiquitous, and can be found even in a half-hidden origin story of one of the most influential revolutionary currents of the early 20th century, the Russian Bolsheviks. This brings us to the next case study under consideration.

3) Sexism and Suicide

To understand the origin story of the Russian Bolshevik current requires more than recovering a received history, but retrieving and revisiting the profile of some long neglected political figures. In particular, we need to revisit the often-maligned Iulii Osipovich Tserdbaum – better known as Iulii Martov – and those associated with him, including Martov’s younger sister, Lydia Osipovna Dan.

Martov’s name, and the name of the political current he represented, the Mensheviks, have both been transformed into insults within the Bolshevik-influenced Left. This leading Marxist scholar and activist has been maligned variously as indecisive, a bad organizer and even a counter-revolutionary. In fact, he was one of the most influential figures in the Russian Left, a consistent and principled opponent of imperialism, war and capitalism, and a respected leader of a serious socialist current with deep roots in the working class.¹¹ Martov’s early political writing and organizing became intimately connected with the origins of both the Bund (the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia) and Russia’s Social Democratic Workers’ Party (*Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaia rabochaia partiia*, or RSDRP) which housed both the Bolshevik and Menshevik currents. The early years of the RSDRP were marked by a tragedy which in the contemporary moment would be well-understood by those influenced by the #MeToo movement, an incident of extreme sexism and slut-shaming ending in suicide.

Alexander Potresov, writing from exile in the 1920s, stated that in the early 20th century:

at the end of our deportation, we established what Lenin called the ‘Triple Alliance’ (Lenin, Martov and myself), with the aim of creating an illegal literary centre for the movement around the newspaper *Iskra* [Spark] and the journal *Zaria* [Dawn]

making of these publications tools for building a truly all-Russia, unified and organized party” (Potresov 1927, 412).¹²

The *Iskra/Zaria* project, significantly, began with the quest for left unity. However, it resulted in the most extreme disunity – the acrimonious political split of 1903 at the infamous Second Congress of the RSDRP. This divide for a time separated Martov and his supporters from the Bund, and permanently shattered the Triple Alliance by dividing Lenin from his former collaborators, Martov and Potresov.

The split with the Bund can be relatively easily understood. The Russian socialists, at the time, would not countenance recognition of the Bund as an autonomous section within the RSDRP, a section with sole responsibility for the Jewish proletariat. The Bund – which was a genuine mass party within the Pale of Settlement¹³ – saw no reason to relinquish this autonomy to the much smaller, more rigid and doctrinaire sections of the party outside the Pale. Their autonomy denied, the Bund delegates left the Congress (Gechtman 2007).

However, the split between Lenin and Martov is much more challenging to narrate. The apparently relatively circumscribed differences – subtle disagreements over the party’s criteria for membership and the composition of the *Iskra* editorial board – were out of proportion to the extreme emotions on full display. Martov’s biographer, Israel Getzler, described this debate as “that stormy session in which Lenin and his twenty ‘hards’ purged the editorial board” (Getzler 1967, 81). Brian Pearce says that there was “an atmosphere of extreme tension” at that session. One delegate “had to be restrained from beating up another delegate” (*Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaia rabochaia partiia* [Russia’s Social Democratic Workers’ Party] 1978, 529n7). Martov was heckled by, among others, leading Bolshevik Nikolai Bauman, described by Getzler as “one of Lenin’s best-trusted men” (Getzler 1967, 66).

Tony Cliff articulates what is probably the hegemonic understanding of this division, an early premonition of the split between Lenin’s “revolutionary” Bolsheviks and Martov’s “reformist” Mensheviks (Cliff 1975, 98–139). This divide has been read as necessary, inevitable, and prefiguring fundamental political divisions to come. Lars Lih invites us to trouble this standard interpretation, arguing that “the somewhat frustrating debate of 1903–4 was not over the profound issues many people have wanted to read into it. All the same, neither was it a trivial squabble. We can best call it a characteristic split over empirical questions” (Lih 2006, 495).¹⁴

In the moment, key individuals from what came to be called the Menshevik side of the division developed a third position, seeing the division as rooted in the incompatibility of Lenin’s approach with an emergent politics of “self-activity.” According to Leopold Haimson, “*samoupravlenie, samostoiatel'nost' samodeiatel'nost'* [lit. self-government, autonomy, self-activity] were terms used by the Mensheviks to express the need for the ‘active involvement’ of workers in public affairs” and “were developed by the Menshevik editors of *Iskra* following their 1903 split with Lenin” (Haimson 1987, 482 n13). Pavel Akselrod, in an influential article, the first part published in late 1903 and the second part in early 1904, outlined these ideas at some length.

He argued that “the development of class self-awareness [class-consciousness] and the self-activity of the proletariat is a process of self-development and self-education of the working class”, the indispensable foundation for the “process of social-democratic self-development and self-education” (Akselrod 1903; 1904).¹⁵ Leon Trotsky, in his first major work, *Our Political Tasks*, argued that the publication of Akselrod’s article marked “the beginning of a new era in our movement” (Trotsky 1904, 25; compare with [1904] 1979, 39). “The basic task” Trotsky argued “may in general be formulated as consisting of the development of the self-activity of the proletariat” (Trotsky 1904, 68).

In fact, there was another aspect to the bitter divide, prominent at the time, but largely hidden from history in subsequent decades. And this brings to the fore both the centrality of sexist practices and the related issue of epistemic erasure. In the months leading up to the 1903 split, there was a private and increasingly toxic cauldron of dysfunctional personal relations among members of the editorial board. Potresov describes the atmosphere at the editorial table as one of “increasingly fierce political struggle” leading to “an extremely unpleasant aggravation” in their common work (Potresov 1927, 413). Lenin described this time as “three years of ‘legalistic wrangling’” (V.I. Lenin [1903] 1975, 301).¹⁶

Lenin would pin the blame for this toxicity on the psychological indecisiveness of the intellectuals, most of whom would later become Mensheviks – an anti-intellectualism in his thought covered in detail elsewhere (Kellogg 2021). Potresov views it quite differently, seeing Lenin as “a sectarian who had a serious Marxist training behind him, a Marxist sectarian!” (Potresov 1927, 407). Potresov goes on to say that “the atmosphere surrounding Lenin was poisoned from the very outset by the fact that Lenin, in essence, was organically incapable of tolerating opinions that differed from his own, and consequently every editorial dispute tended to degenerate into a conflict accompanied by an acute aggravation of personal relations.” Lenin approached these debates deploying “war-like measures,” struggling to “gain the upper hand for his own views, no matter the cost” (Potresov 1927, 413).

In early 1903, six months before the formal split, these years of tension exploded over an issue we would today refer to as slut-shaming (Dow and Wood 2014). Potresov’s account is telling:

Half a year before the party congress of 1903, at which the split in the party became a fact, relations between Lenin on the one hand, and Martov, Vera Zasulich and myself on the other – relations which had already become strained – broke down completely. The chance occasion which drew our attention to Leninist a-moralism and knocked the bottom out of the barrel was the resistance Lenin put up – with boundless cynicism – to the investigation into an accusation made by a complainant against one of the agents closest to him. All such accusations, even if they involved the death of a human being, were for Lenin only annoying obstacles standing in the way of his political successes, and as obstacles they were simply to be brushed aside. (Potresov 1927, 417)

Lenin acknowledged the bitterness of this incident, saying that in the heat of the debate, his opponents had called him and his ally, Plekhanov, “fiends and monsters” for defending a man whom Martov, Potresov, and Zasluch “all but ‘condemned’ ... *politically* for an incident of a purely personal nature” (V.I. Lenin [1903] 1975, 301).¹⁷ But neither Lenin nor Potresov offer any meaningful details as to the nature of this incident. Instead there are only hints and insinuations.

To get those details, we turn to Lydia Osipovna Dan (1878-1963), an account she provided to Haimson as part of a series of interviews, recorded from exile in New York towards the end of her life. Dan was a lifelong socialist, a key activist in the *Iskra* project, and from 1903 until her death in 1963 a committed member of the Menshevik wing of the RSDRP. Nikolai Bauman – earlier here described as “one of Lenin’s best-trusted men” – was someone Dan knew “fairly well” and who she described as being “rather derisive” and “enormously successful [sic] among his women comrades.” When in exile in Viatka province in the late 1890s, Bauman developed a relationship with another party activist, Claudia [Klavdiia] Prikhodko. After the couple broke up, Prikhodko “took up with” another party activist, Metrov, who “helped her out, since she was very depressed” (Dan 1987, 181–82). Getzler (1992, 66–67) tells a very similar story, although in his account and others Claudia Prikhodko remains nameless.¹⁸

These webs of personal relationships became a party issue after Prikhodko became pregnant. Bauman who, Dan recalls:

could draw rather well ... drew a caricature which everyone immediately recognized – Klavdiia as the Virgin Mary with a child in her womb, and a question mark asking who the baby looked liked. In short, it was pretty malicious, on the verge of being indecent. She was apparently very distraught, and committed suicide, hung herself. (Dan 1987, 181-82)

Metrov (identified as “M.” by Getzler) brought to the *Iskra* editorial board “as the highest party tribunal,” Claudia Prikhodko’s 15-page suicide note, dated 28 January 1902. In that note, according to Getzler:

[S]he appealed to the party, “the party of the struggle for freedom, the dignity, and the happiness of man”: she complained of the “prevailing indifference” in the party to the “personal morality” of comrades, and expressed the hope that her “undeserved end” might “draw the attention of comrades to the question of the private morals of public figures.” (Getzler 1967, 67)

The appeal was unsuccessful. “Lenin, to the dismay of Potresov, Martov, and Vera Zasluch, ruled it out of order as a purely personal matter, outside the competence of *Iskra* and detrimental to the interests of the party” (Getzler 1967, 67). Lenin, together with the senior authority of the movement, G.V. Plekhanov, outlined their minority “dissenting” position in October 1902.

We find that the case, raised by Comrade Metrov, is a purely personal matter ... It cannot and, we firmly believe, *should not* be examined by any revolutionary organization at all. In particular, we, for our part, do not see at the present time, absolutely any grounds for instituting actions against N.E. B[auaman].” (Lenin and Plekhanov [1902] 2000)

Ultimately, on 17 October 1902, Lenin and Plekhanov accepted a resolution from Martov, shelving the issue. Martov wrote that “in view of the differences revealed in the meeting ... the editorial board and the administration did not consider it possible to investigate it” (Quoted in Lenin and Plekhanov [1902] 2000).

To the extent that this incident has stayed in the historical record, it has done so perversely. Bauman’s name is ubiquitous and revered inside Russia. During the turmoil of the 1905 Revolution, “Bauman was arrested, then freed from jail by a revolutionary mob, and killed in a demonstration” (Dan 1987, 182). His funeral procession was the occasion for one of the first mass demonstrations of the Bolshevik Party. In subsequent decades, he has had factories, schools, streets, and a district of Moscow named after him (Figs 1998, 198–99). Even today, his name remains well known. In the fourth season of the television series, *The Americans*, we learn that one of the main characters, KGB agent Oleg Igorevich Burov (played by Costa Ronin) attended “Bauman Technical University” which he describes to his FBI confidante Stan Beeman (played by Noah Emmerich) as being “like your MIT” (Long 2016). By contrast, Bauman’s victim, Claudia Prikhodko, the target of his slut-shaming, remains almost unknown in most accounts, and if mentioned is done so anonymously, remaining nameless.

In considering the long shadow of sexist practices on the Left, remembering her experience in today’s context is instructive, including noting the constructed absencing of Claudia Prikhodko as foundational to an epistemology of ignorance. Potresov links the personal friction on the editorial board with the sharp disagreement over how to deal with Bauman’s abusive shaming and the resulting tragic suicide of Claudia Prikhodko, saying that, together, they provided evidence of Lenin’s firm belief that it did not matter how something was accomplished, only that the desired result was achieved. Potresov saw this as extraordinary, labelling it with an exclamation mark as “the end justifies the means!” and calling Lenin “the most consistent adherent of this Machiavellian political recipe.” Potresov uses the term “a-moralism” (“Amoralismus”) to describe Lenin’s approach (Potresov 1927, 417).

In today’s language, we might consider this to reflect an ethical deficit. The centrality of a kind of feminist ethics is embedded in the insistence that the personal is political (Rowbotham 1973). Potresov does not, of course, explicitly adopt a feminist methodology. However, he did insist on interrogating actions that occurred within the realm termed the “political,” with actions taking place inside the realm historically walled off as “personal.” In the 1960s and 1970s the feminist movement put on the agenda an explicit recognition that the personal is political. In its first iterations, the concept was applied specifically to the situation of women. As Barbara Ryan

articulates, “What appeared to be a personal issue was actually a political one that occurred because of unequal gender relations.” In the decades since, this insight has been extended to all manifestations of oppression. “Domination of one group over another, whatever the guise, leads to the awareness that the personal is, indeed, political” (Ryan 2013).

Understanding that the personal is political provides a bridge between the Bauman controversy and the focus on self-activity noted earlier, articulated by Akselrod and Trotsky. For these Russian socialists, the focus was on the self-activity of the proletariat. However, they did extend the notion to encompass the nationally oppressed minorities within the Russian empire, supporting national self-determination. This is, arguably, consistent with an approach to include other sections of the oppressed – here, specifically women – and to place a politics of women’s liberation within a conceptual framework of self-activity. In the 1970s, this article’s authors took it for granted that feminism was directly complementary with the notion of self-activity in socialist theory, something developed at length by activist scholars including Raya Dunayevskaya (1991) and Selma James (2012). Such a conceptual move is tightly linked to an understanding that the personal is political. Specifically, consent in the realm of the personal is linked to self-activity in the realm of the political. The self-active subject is the agent of transformation, and by definition, such agency cannot be the product of coercion. These conceptual moves were not made at the time of the 1903 *Iskra* controversy. But they were present implicitly, particularly in the important analysis by Potresov.

Interestingly, the aforementioned Tony Cliff had a position identical to Lenin’s, insisting on building a wall between the personal and the political. He wrote that “the women’s liberation movement slogan ‘the personal is political’ ... turns politics into a personal matter, redefining it and negating collective action aimed at political change” (Cliff 1984, 193). We are not aware of evidence that Cliff’s hostility to the term has its origins in his readings of Lenin, but he was known as an ardent disciple of the Russian revolutionary (see for example Cliff 1975).

It is now widely accepted that what have been constructed as “normal” acts of bullying and microaggressions are manifestations not only, or merely, of personal psychological issues, but also of structures and institutions of systemic oppression. Oppressive behaviour is socially constructed, and responses to challenge such behaviour often move from the margins to the centre only through public exposures of tragic cases of abuse (hooks 2014). The Russian Left in 1903 was of course far from the feminist consciousness of today. But importantly, some among them, notably the majority of the members of the *Iskra* editorial board in early 1903, did see the legitimacy of the claims for justice from a victim of Bauman’s abuse, and the painful shaming that followed.

Conclusion: Notes for Further Research

These three case studies are, of course, selective. Two of the examples are grounded in the authors’ experiences, while the third is a reinterpretation of a moment commonly seen as foundational to the revolutionary Left. The examples are not, however, we suggest, exceptional

(see for example, Weiss 2021). They identify examples of sexist practices on the Left that have been actively hidden from view, pivotal moments in the construction of an epistemology of ignorance.

An epistemology of ignorance is reproduced through repeated patterns of denial, avoidance, silencing, and distortion. Our hope is that the ideas and examples advanced above can contribute to productively engaging with wider experiences, with a view to understanding and transcending the problems documented in the three selected case studies. The ubiquity of these issues reinforces our understanding that misogyny and patriarchy are systemic within capitalism and continue to influence movements whose aim is to resist capitalism.

We can recall the current context regarding women's reproductive freedom and the contested terrain particularly in the US. This context indicates that mass resistance to capitalism and related sexist backlash is no less important today than in previous periods. In fighting for, and preserving, abortion rights in Canada, socialist feminists historically directed attention to such mass social movements. Indeed, this involvement has made a significant impact, and the lessons of this movement deserve continued attention. As Rachael Johnstone summarizes:

Social movements have actively structured the language we use to think about abortion in Canada, language that appears in legislatures and courtrooms, as well as in homes across the country, language that shapes not only how the public understand abortion but also how women seeking abortion services understand their decisions. (Johnstone 2017, 8)

For the social movements that we need today, learning from the history of previous generations and studying the contributions of socialist feminist theory are foundational. In doing so, it is also necessary to understand the dangerous legacy of sexist practices. Certainly, a better world, and a better Left, are possible.

End Notes

¹ This article is written equally and jointly by the authors. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft, and Jess Clausen for expert research assistance.

² The publications included a regular (monthly and later bi-weekly) newspaper *Socialist Worker*, (formerly titled *Workers' Action*); an annual journal, *Marxism* (volumes 1-5); French language publications, *Socialisme Internationale* and *Résistance*; and multiple pamphlets on topics including feminism, anti-racism, immigration, Indigenous rights, Canadian and Quebec politics, and Canadian and international political economy.

³ Some of this section, in abridged form, was published in "Britain: Reflections on the crisis in the Socialist Workers Party" (Kellogg 2013).

⁴ This transcript is available thanks to an anonymous whistle-blower, who recorded and then transcribed the session.

⁵ See for example the “Advice to the Profession” published by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (“Boundary Violations” [2008] 2019) – in particular the section on “Sexual Abuse.”

⁶ The IS use of “discipline” internally was also quite different from that of the SWP. On the rare occasions when we did vote to suspend or expel members from the organization, the issues triggering such actions were, without exception, bound up with personal safety (sometimes domestic or other violence).

⁷ Note that in the first year of its history, the name of the organization was “Independent Socialists”, informally reflecting a closer relationship to Canadian left nationalism. The name was later changed to “International Socialists”, retaining the acronym “I.S.”

⁸ Abigail Bakan was a founding member and part of the leadership of the IS at this time, and this section is based on personal experience, oral history, and archival documents. Paul Kellogg became involved with IS activities after this event, in October 1977.

⁹ In the end, this attempt to “discipline” the member “for sexist practices” was unsuccessful in moving towards any reconciliation. After the person in question and other members of the faction attempted to split the IS, the suspension of membership was changed to expulsion, a permanent removal of membership status (Bakan 1976a).

¹⁰ For the teacher-student binary in the Comintern, see Kellogg (2021, 181–87).

¹¹ This section based on research published in “The Lost Voice of Iulii Martov” (Kellogg 2022).

¹² Translations from the original texts cited in this article are by Kellogg.

¹³ In tsarist Russia, the Jewish Pale of Settlement was “an area in the western borderlands of the empire to which the residence of the Jewish population was almost exclusively confined.” At the turn of the century, 95 percent of the Russian empire’s Jewish population of roughly five million resided there (Rowland 1986, 207).

¹⁴ The 1903 Congress of the RSDRP was also interpreted by Cliff as a necessary, formative moment in the advancement of contemporary socialist organizations. Cliff took it upon himself to send a personalized letter to the leadership of IS Canada in 1994, via our then sister group in the US,

indicating he was “very worried” because the “tradition of the group [IS Canada] is very poor.” The issue was failing to learn the lessons of the “original split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks over the question of the definition of Party membership,” where “the Bolsheviks were the hard ones” and the “Mensheviks were the soft ones with an extremely loose definition of what Party membership entailed” (Cliff 1994).

¹⁵ An abridged version of this article exists in English translation but does not include the section here quoted (Ascher 1976, 48–52).

¹⁶ Compare with Lenin ([1903] 1966).

¹⁷ Israel Getzler renders the first phrase “scourge and monster” (Getzler 1967, 67), while the standard translation offers “flayers and monsters” (V.I. Lenin [1903] 1966).

¹⁸ The interview with Dan uses “Mitrov” rather than “Metrov”. Another account that reads very similarly, is in Jane Casey’s fictionalized biography of Krupskaya I, *Krupskaya: My Life with Lenin* (Casey 1974, 179–86).

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