

Ti-Grace Atkinson's journey to socialist feminism

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Early this fall, capacity crowds in Seattle and New York City heard feminist author, philosopher, and activist Ti-Grace Atkinson announce her decisive turn to socialist feminism and call for a united front of feminists and all oppressed groups against the growing threat of rightwing reaction.

A founder of N.O.W. who later adopted tactical separatism, Atkinson has been a leading voice of radical feminism. She describes her move to the left as neither abrupt nor surprising, but as a natural process of theoretical growth and development related to the living currents within the women's movement and the global struggle for human justice.

Since 1971, Atkinson has been distressed with the drift of the women's movement into cultural nationalism, inventing women's history from myths rather than analyzing history in order to fashion strategy from the plane of reality.

"In reaction to the male world, we condemn ourselves to repeat the past," she warns, and "in disregarding the Left, we attempt to reinvent the wheel."

Common Ground

Atkinson chose to dramatize her statement of affiliation with socialist feminism in a Women's Rights Day farewell address to Pacific Northwest feminists held at Freeway Hall in Seattle on August 27. She considered the location most appropriate because it is the headquarters of Radical Women, a political organization of female revolutionaries that has been a target for the very type of anti-Left antagonism that permeates the moderate-liberal wing of the feminist community nationwide.

She commended Radical Women for setting the example of political analysis, discipline, and determined coalition work that the feminist movement as a whole needs to adopt to survive.

During her two years of teaching Women Studies and Philosophy in Washington state, she enabled many women to deepen their understanding of history and give clearer expression to their ideas.

Her willingness to engage in discussion with Radical Women led to a reduction of the polarization in the feminist community and contributed to the formation of the United Feminist Front in Seattle.

Back home in New York, Atkinson and a number of other nationally known feminists spoke to 1,300 women in September on a panel sponsored by the Foundation for Matriarchy. Atkinson made the clearest call for socialist theory and practice, while many other speakers made surprisingly strong anti-capitalist statements as well.

Feminist Disorientation

In the Seattle speech, Atkinson traced her studies in philosophy, history and politics which helped her discover the causes of social change — and of women's alienation from the Left.

She found that the witchhunts of the McCarthyist period had destroyed the continuity of the Left; the denial of political freedom deprived an entire generation of the benefits of radicalism — the rigorous tradition of study, individual discipline and organizational structure, the tools of committed fighters.

When the New Left arose, it was assumed to be following in the tradition of all revolutionary movements for change. However, she said, its anti-intellectual, anti-historical and anti-organizational posture provided the awakening women's movement of the '60s with little ideology and structure, and

with much disappointment.

Instead of accepting the work and responsibility of coalition politics, of organizing for a united front, the New Left sought instant — but limited — reforms.

After the Vietnam War ended, the antiwar activists and so-called leftists joined the establishment or floundered in liberalism. The feminist movement was left to confront the system alone, without the support of all the other movements that could have stood by them if long-range coalition organizing had been undertaken while millions were marching together against the war.

As a substitute for political analysis, said Atkinson, feminists sought a scapegoat to mask their lack of direction, and mistakenly denounced the entire Left.

The Fallacy of Fantasy Ironically, the women's movement then proceeded to absorb wholesale the New Left women: *"We welcomed with open arms the pacifists, the anarchists, those anti-ideology and anti-organization people because of whose politics we had seen our allies melting away before our very eyes."*

Angry with the New Left, yet infected by its theoretical blindness, the women's movement has failed to define the natural connections between feminism and socialism, Atkinson said — and it has failed to form alliances with socialists, minority women, and working women that could save it from separatist stagnation and recharge itself with strength, bold new direction and crucial allies.

Atkinson explained that feminists who become mired in myths rather than informed by concrete data and scientific analysis let themselves be waltzed into the rightwing camp where they promptly denounce the Left in the name of feminism and thereby cripple feminism itself.

New Directions

Ti-Grace Atkinson was drawn to feminist activism by her powerful sense of the injustice done to women in the capitalist social order. She has gone on to study Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky — and to embrace socialism with conviction. If her past ability to articulate what large masses of women are thinking and feeling is any indication, a world of women are now on the highroad to discovering along with her the revolutionary socialist solution to the crimes of patriarchal capitalism.