

TR 1859 Peter Gray Audiotapes

Interview with Merle Thornton Brisbane Radical

... is to relate the present political climate at the University and more widely to the kind of student politics and demonstrations that were taking place in the late sixties and early seventies and perhaps I will just say at once that I wasn't here for the beginning of that, I was out of the country until August 69. One thing that's changed spectacularly is the style of politics. The age of the very big demonstrations seems to be at least temporarily in abeyance and I think this is something that makes things, people feel that there's been a fundamental political change. I don't really know how fundamental it is, it seems to me that there were indeed issues which lent themselves to demonstrations of a mass movement-ish kind at that time which don't exist in the same way now. The fundamental issues still exist but the ways of relating them to people's personal lives don't exist in quite the same way. The thing that it seems to me made the big demonstrations possible although they weren't all around this issue specially some of them were, was the big conscription issue which forced students to face a major personal decision in their lives which involved the major political, the major political problems of our time in a critical way at a certain time the 18th birthday or whatever. The underlying issues are still every bit as urgent. The issue of Imperialism which people were radicalised to realise because of the conscription issue that's still with us, but the necessity to decide at a certain stage of a student's life his attitude and what he planned to do and whether he was prepared to make a fairly major personal sacrifice to join the forces of anti-Imperialism, that's gone but it was a major radicalising force and to that extent people aren't being brought up so sharply against the great political issues of our time now. On the other hand it's fairly customary to, for people analysing the political scene to leave out the Women's Movement altogether. Women weren't faced with that personal decision and the Women's Movement was emerging at that same time did take, play an important part in those demonstrations and in that raising of consciousness that took part at that place at that time and has been more enduring and lively in a different way from some of the other movements that flashed at that time I think. So it's interesting that women's consciousness was worldwide being raised in a major way without the kind of conscription issue that arose in Australia at that time and perhaps yeah what was I going to say about that? [Long pause] It's important I think to see both the women's movement and the anti-Imperialist movement in the overall context of social change which is taking place a lot, as the background to or along with or more widely than the emergence of particular political movements.

You said for example (04.21) more real to people or women in particular on a human level in terms of their day to day experience than a lot of the other issues and so on that have been raised, even though they probably will, it's obvious that they all interrelate in some way.

Mmm. When I think back to the way that the Women's Movement did relate to the University radical movement and to the moratorium movement more widely than the University at the time that is under review in this series of discussions I remember some of the arguments that were then being used for example, I remember myself writing a pamphlet which was issued by the Liberation Movement at one of the moratoriums it was distributed in Roma Street Gardens and using the argument that since we believe that women's oppression has a certain kind of priority, psychological priority that the first discrimination that human beings

learn is sexual discrimination which they're taught from birth onwards and its by an extension of the kinds of techniques of oppression or what's the inverse word? Would it be oppressed or...

(05.46).

No, no being oppressed is oppression on the one hand and servility on the other, this is learnt from the cradle on and it's by an extension of the human techniques of subservience and oppression learned in the sexual context that we're able to extend our activities to racism and imperialism and class oppression and the other major oppressions. So we thought that there was an important theoretical link between the liberation movement, which was fighting sexual oppression specifically and the moratorium movement, which was fighting imperialist and class oppression both I think but particularly imperialist oppression and we specifically pinpointed the reasons for the support of the movement as such as distinct from the individuals in it by means of that theoretical link. There's another argument I had in mind there. [Long pause] The same sort of point was made by the Women's Movement in relation to anti-racist demonstrations for example, when the Springboks were here and the Liberation Movement conducted a hexing, hexing racist and sexist and specifically linking the two kinds of oppression by the link that they have in human psychology. That is to say learning to be an oppressor or learning to be subservient is the same kind of thing and there are links in human technique there and in fighting one you lose the, you lose the strings of the other. I was talking earlier about the use of the demonstration as a political weapon and how I think that to have the circumstances for a mass demonstration you need the kind of issue that people can feel as close to their own lives, they can feel as urgent for now. Perhaps this isn't always an ingredient but it's certainly a helpful ingredient and I think for that reason the conscription movement could be regarded as the, the conscription issue could be regarded as the catalyst which made possible the great demonstrations of that time. On the other hand, the feminist issues which were the basis of the Liberation movement were regarded as urgent for different reasons, for their continuous effect on people's lives not to do with just one dramatic decision at a certain time in student hood, if we're talking about University students. And I remember another thing that was said around that time of the great demonstrations was that the other political movements offered some different way to think perhaps, they offered the anti-Imperialist perspective, the anti-racist perspective, but the Women's Movement offered a different way to live. All the other movements offered a sort of psychological or theoretical change but the Women's Movement offered an immediate practical change in way of life and for this reason we felt at the time that our movement had a more enduring offering than the other political movements for most of the students who were involved. And I think that's proved to be true in the kind of growth that's taken place in the women's movement since that time as distinct from the dwindling, certainly in any organised sense of the other movements. Now potentially those other movements offer a different way of life. For example being committed to anti-Imperialism ought to have all sorts of implications for the way that one lives but unless one's prepared to make a decision of a different kind from what was taking place for students at that time, I mean not just the decision to go and demonstrate or even the fairly dramatic decision to tear up one's draft card but the decision to commit oneself to a life of fighting Imperialism which is a much more deeper thing and which most of those students were not wholly committed to I think then it becomes a different kind of thing. For most of them it was the more short term thing of being opposed to conscription, opposed to the war and in some cases opposed to Imperialism in a more general kind of way but we're now getting down to smaller numbers and certainly not the whole of those great mass movements committed to anti-Imperialism but then to be committed to a way of life involving anti-imperialism is another matter.

I'd really like to sort of, the important thing is the for you to say what you'd like to bring in.

Yeah okay well...

Like a (12.23).

Oh, it's not so much the tape it's just that (12.29) amount of space in the paper.

Look can I just, just before you turn that on I'll just look through your...

That sort of ties in with question two but what about do you want to make some general comments too on whether you've seen sort of what the nature of the crisis, if there is any really serious crisis that we face and what the nature of that would be or the origins of that would be. Umm what form it would take or if its, if you believe that it's sort of like it's going to be more oppression. See a lot of the other people have actually been arguing that they're predicting a change. It's amazing. Peter's hinted at that and so has Bob Wensley they're making allusion to some sort of new oppressive authoritarian Right Wing dictatorship or something similar like that. Some future you know even for Australia. In fact, Wensley went so far as to say it could happen in 10 years time. Which is pretty amazing. I don't know why he'd say anything like that so this is the doomsday sort of then. And then you know maybe you could tie in your attitude to whether there's any Trotskyism faced with what you think might occur in the future which would be no contrast to what they're then saying you know.

Mmm.

Let you (13.42).

Well I think one thing that's essential to the way the Women's Movement did from the beginning offer a new way to live was the emphasis on the Women's Movement particularly on consciousness raising making appeal to psychoanalytic or psychological management techniques related in some ways to the kind of techniques which I used in group therapy or radical therapy. Women sought to reinforce one another in raising consciousness about the way general social realities are related to the details of one's personal life including the most intimate details and I think that this accounted for a genuine intellectual breakthrough in the Women's Movement which was not evident in the other radical movements of that time or indeed of this and that is a very healthy refusal in the Women's Movement to discuss very general theoretical concepts without making sure that one could relate these to details of one's personal life and that one actually knew what the grand theoretical generalisations meant in human terms right close to the nose. I think this is a genuine intellectual breakthrough and I think it accounts for the hardihood of the Women's Movement where it has that hardihood. But I'd now like to make a few critical remarks about some of the things that I thought were deficiencies using the radical movement and also in the Women's Movement at that time and I think that they haven't been solved yet. I think that one thing that was most noticeable was the way that the emphasis on the personal decision involved in conscription and also the facts about the affluent kind of backgrounds of students of that time and on the whole although certainly not exclusively of women in the liberation movement comparatively affluent background compared with counterpart people of a generation or two before say, was a rather self-indulgent emphasis on personal pleasure, the importance of personal experience of expanding experience, the kind of psychedelic approach to life and this is linked with the kind of approach to democracy in University Government, the kind of emphasis on what you might call a naïve anarchism, the emphasis on the experiential aspects of participation in every level of decision making, it's good for you to make decisions and its fun, it's a fun experience to be making decisions, that kind of attitude and I think that I'm of course I'm exaggerating one kind of attitude and I'm doing it in an emotional rather than theoretical kind of way but I think these emotions were present and they did link to a theoretical deficiency and a lack of willingness to build organisation for ongoing programs of

improvement and I think this has been a lasting deficiency in the radical movement and in the Feminist Movement by which they're still linked. I think there's still an emphasis on the cult of spontaneity. The importance of all participating at the same somewhat tepid experiential level in mass movements of a kind of Eiseinsteinien sweep which don't, which don't emphasis such qualities as taking individual and ongoing responsibility, delegating responsibility, well keeping appointments and making certain kinds of political train run on time and I think that it was some kind of awareness of this that made many of the, many of the more aware people in the movement of those at that time dig in for the long haul. At the University level this is evident in the way that people have retired to their Departments and tried to relate their, the theoretical side of their radicalisation out of that period to their actual approaches to their own courses, the way they treat their students, the way their students are encouraged to treat them and the way they try to radicalise the theory of their subjects, disciplines in the University. On the other hand although you could say there has been relatively speaking some democratisation of University Government growing out of the kind of consciousness raising that occurred in the period of radicalism early sixties, late sixties early seventies, there's also been a good deal of disillusionment with that and that relates to the overall because of the enormous amounts of time involved the constant brigades of new starters coming to meetings who have to be caught up on all that's been done, the general inefficiency of grass roots participation for every kind of decision making, the expenditure of human effort sometimes at least seemingly although it's a contested concept of course, at least seemingly wasteful of a great deal of time that could be spent with developing programs, progressing theoretically and so on. Now ...

Do you think it ties in with what Ralph (19.49) suggested on the campus when he came here when he said that the, that the movements have often failed to realise in what's called for in trying to achieve social change is persistence, hard work and really sophisticated organisation.

Sophisticated organisation, very important I think. I'm not opposing democracy; I'm opposing a certain kind of theory of democracy. It seems to me that democracy does minimally involve a certain realisation of the human condition, which does involve some individuals taking responsibility which others cede to them at least for a period perhaps with rights of recall with all sorts of safeguards for the, for the against the excesses of power but still with people actually taking responsibility. It seems to me that everyone taking equal responsibility leads to a situation of nobody taking any or nobody taking any much. And I think that there has been a disenchantment with some of the problems of the cult of spontaneity and I think that we do await a new kind of political analysis. And that links to the fears that some have expressed that there will move in some sort of swing to tyranny in which there will be a tendency for, I remember a recent SMG pamphlet which talks about the way the; I've forgotten the words that they used but the eco-farming kind of people ...

Counter-culturalists.

Counter-culturalists have turned to strong man type leaders to keep their camps free from roustabouts and so on. And more widely there's been expressed with considerable ballyhoo on the media fear of the rise of tyranny if there should be a major depression in England and the same sort of thing in Australia. I think these fears are not altogether unfounded but I think what is rather the case is that we do really await a new, a fresh deep striking political theory which will form the basis for new initiatives in politics and that these haven't really been forthcoming. It's been said many times and certainly by me quite often that there isn't a satisfactory deep analysis of women's position in society, something that carries the kind of conviction, the kind of new clarification that was associated with Marx's analysis of class last century when it first, when it was first advanced that was a most enlightening theory, all sorts of problems with it now emerge, but to hear it for the first time was certainly to be enlightened and its changed people's minds permanently. Now we don't have that same kind of deep

analysis of sex oppression, something that will carry with it obvious implications for the way to proceed against sex oppression. Rather what we have is an agglomeration of different insights without there being a satisfactory link together in one guiding, one overall synthesising analysis. And I think that the same kind of thing can be said for politics generally, that with problems emerging in the Marxist structure, in or rather in Marx's own structure of class, problems of relating it to Imperialism to racism to sexism, I think that there has been a kind of theoretical and thus practical faltering in Left politics generally and that the initiatives of the time under discussion, late sixties early seventies, couldn't really be followed through for a fundamental reason that there wasn't a sufficiently deep analysis of the problem and how to go against it. Now I think that people like Peter Wertheim have said things directly counter to that, that it's pretty obvious what the problems are, it's just that people aren't willing to tackle them. I think at a certain level that's true. I mean one can see where the sore itches; one can see where to scratch as it were, but not how to scratch. One can see the location of the problems but not the causation of the problems in a deep way and it's that deep analysis that I think we're lacking.

Do you think that's a deeper (24.54) of the complexities of human beings more so, well in a psychological sense than...

No in a political sense, I was thinking particularly although the other thing might also be true. No I think that we have no, there is no political analysis that carries the kind of conviction that Marxism must have done late in the last century for the people who followed it and obviously did if you read their biographies and even if you read, if you read the theory and think of the setting in which it emerged that the kind of conviction that was associated with that must have seemed overwhelming to those who could understand it, but there's nothing comparable now. What we have is a crushing agglomeration of political problems and no key of analysis, no way of synthesising those problems.

Well why isn't it occurring do you think?

Well I hope that it will. I don't know whether there's going to be a major crisis of capitalism in Marxist terms. It seems to me in fact that there's a bit of wishful fulfilment amongst Marxists who alight on the current inflationary problems and the problems of the world money system and so on and there's a bit of a downturn and people see at last the justification of Marx's doctrine of the crises of capitalism. I'm not saying it won't happen and I don't have enough economic knowledge to venture my arm one way or the other but I've seen nothing that convinces me that it must happen and I think that if there's a major downturn as distinct from a final cataclysmic crisis of capitalism. I think if there's a major downturn, there will be problems of the emergence of tyranny. There will also be opportunities for radicalisation for people to see, to see the skull beneath the bouquet of Capitalism and I think that it will be a fighting situation. I don't think that in any fatalistic way the outcome is determined for tyranny or for revolution or for anything in particular, I think it's up to us to analyse the situation and to show the initiatives which will be changing in the humanising kind of way that we want and not to feel that tyranny is upon us or not to feel that the revolution is around the corner. I don't think either thing is necessarily the case.

Looking specifically at the Women's Movement again for a second, it seems to have the potential to at least bring about great changes possibly in consciousness and values and so on with women, with half of our population women at least right if not with men as well hopefully, now just how far so far do you think or how great an impact so far do you think the Women's Movement has actually had on women at large and society at large and what role do you think it will play in terms of any changes which could occur in the future in the political, in the total political sphere?

Well the Women's Movement is clearly the tip of an iceberg in a great period of social change with respect to sex and sex roles and the work allocated to the sexes and so on in this society. It's important not to overestimate the effects of the Women's Movement as distinct from the effects of that social change generally, in a way the Women's Movement is itself a symptom of those social changes but it can transcend that position of being a symptom by its own initiative I believe but it doesn't have to it's not destined for a great role of initiative unless it, unless it makes itself so but I think that without wanting to exaggerate it can be said that the Women's Movement has changed the general social consciousness to the extent that it has somewhat changed the framework within which people think of sexual questions, not necessarily the kind of answers that they give. It hasn't turned everybody into a liberationist that's for sure, not all men, and not all women. But it has changed the kinds of questions that people think are relevant, the questions that they think to ask and this is a very important impact for it to have had at a time when the media again doesn't necessarily provide people with readymade answers but does very much set the framework of people's questioning. And in this way I think that the movement has been a successful one because I think that social consciousness is, the changing of social consciousness is fundamental for securing social change. I don't think that consciousness is all but I do myself think that with respect to sex oppression, Capitalist society may be in something of a condition of equilibrium as far as the economic system goes, I think it may be the case that the advantages and disadvantages to the system of diminishing sex oppression at this stage may be fairly finely balanced, which gives a greater chance for consciousness raising to have an effect if we're not in a situation where the logic of our economics strongly counteracts or goes against counter indicates I mean, the the liberation of women, even if we're not in a situation where economics demands that women shall be liberated. There may be a chance for us to exercise an initiative of consciousness and get something that's very valuable for us without being pushed into it by economics.

We'll have to probably finish up around about there.

Yeah well, there was something else I was going to say yeah.

Is there anything else that you (31.42) it's pretty long as it is, we've actually been on for about 20 minutes or so.

Mmhm.

But I'll give you the extra space because Brian's not going to be (31.51).

There is one thing that I do want to say yes. With respect to the relationship of the Feminist Movement and the Left generally I think that there has been a good deal of unease both at the practical level and at the level of the theoretical framework within which people saw that connection because among some at least there's been an attempt to relate their feminist hand to their socialist hand. Among others there's been a feeling that moving into the feminist movement ought somehow to have wider political and probably Left probably Socialist implications but they couldn't quite see the connection, there's been a rather self conscious effort to show how a Socialist theory or Marxist theory somehow covers feminist issues or how feminism somehow involves socialism or something of the kind and the more I've thought about it the more that it seems to me at the theoretical level these two things are dissociated. That socialism is about class oppression and feminism is about sex oppression and these two oppressions are not essentially related, not related by definition, not related by some causal process that one can end, one could in principle end oppression which is specifically sex oppression, the oppression of women because they're women or as women without getting rid of class oppression or vice versa. One could get rid of class oppression without getting rid of oppression of people specifically because they're women or oppressing them specifically as women. Now of course they're both oppressions and they're both very

major oppressions and they both need to be fought but this has many implications for the way one would go about fighting them for the strategy of fighting those two oppressions I think and the implications which haven't been well thought out by opponents of oppression yet. But if I'm right about the dissociation of the those two oppressions in principle then I think that to realise that would clear the air a good deal and make a lot of strategic decisions seem closer and it may also make it closer the day when one would have a more penetrating social analysis generally which would help for major new political initiatives. So that I think the Feminist Movement did at the period under discussion, late sixties early seventies to some extent stand aside from the other political movements because of the way it offered a different way of life and it offered in a personal sense a more ongoing issue than the kind of thing that was present, that was really the major catalyst in the other political movements. I think it has been more ongoing and shown more growth since. I think it's shown, I think it hasn't been characterised by the phase of disillusionment and cynicism which have been present in the other movements. On the contrary it's continued to be an extremely optimistic movement and perhaps in some directions excessively optimistic. It certainly has continued to grow and it is now while hardly a mass movement, has much more claim with the recent conference with 800 persons from all over the country for example, has much more claims to a mass characteristic than those other political movements of that time but I think it does share the same social context, it does need more thought behind it. It does need a way to understand a democratic organisation which is still organisation and can carry out ongoing programs for social change, does need new initiatives in the same way that those other movements do. Maybe that's it. Mmm thank you.

I wonder how long... [Recording paused.]

[Recording resumed]. I did say in a general sort of way that the problems around which the great demonstrations were organised are still just as much with us but I'd like to say specifically that the problem of the Vietnam War is still just as much with us with major casualties and offensives still going on, the terrible oppression in South Vietnam still going on, the draining of the North Vietnamese economy by war needs and casualties still going on and yet the tumult and the shouting has died in Australia which emphasises how, to what a great extent the personal issue of conscription was the catalyst to not just realising the problem but being prepared to do something active about it. And even that's doing something active was something fairly limited, I'll say that in spite of the considerable sacrifices made by a few individuals, but something fairly limited like going on the next demo or at most being a draft resister, which was a considerable impact but only on someone's personal life for those who did it, that it was only a few who did it and many who simply cheered them on, hid them for a night, for a big lark, that sort of thing. But compared with the kinds of sacrifices being made in the Third World in the war against Imperialism these are very small sacrifices and the main thing is that not only the anti-Imperialist issue but even the Vietnam War issue is still there and yet without the catalyst of the direct experiential thing the draft card and the counter to it, the exciting and somewhat fun thing, I say this with all great respect for those who made the most sacrifices of draft resistance or much more fun just being a supporter of draft resisters. When that's gone, the movement's gone. It's a pretty sad comment.

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