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UDC: 821.111.09-32; 305-055.2

EN-GENDERING THE CLASH: ELLEN WILKINSON AND INTERWAR SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Ellen Wilkinson emerges in the difficult landscape of 1920s and 1930s political activism in Britain as something of a maverick personality, often contradicting the stern ideological definitions of the interwar period and its labour militancy, as well as the more orthodox principles of the so-called "New Feminism" which arose from the 1918 extension of the electoral franchise. As one critic (on whose work I rely to a great extent in this article) has noted, Wilkinson "had continually to confront the contradiction that the movement in which she invested much of herself... did not, in the main, subscribe to her belief in the importance of equality between the sexes" (Joannou 1995: 148). In effect, it was a widely-held assumption of working-class activism at the time that the explicit articulation of a political argument around women's rights inevitably bought into the ideological camp of the bourgeoisie, thereby clouding the precise class identity of subject positions (whether male or female) within the labour movement.[1] Ellen Wilkinson's relevance, in this context, is highlighted by her cogent, if somewhat tentative, attempts at a dialectical resolution of what came across as strictly irreconcilable positions. Her fictional intervention with *Clash* (1929) contributed, precisely, one such experimental gesture of synthesis, rehearsing a variety of political stances or subject positions (ranging from the progressive-liberal "New Feminist" type to the middle-class chauvinistic left-winger, and further to the ideal of a feminist–working-class/socialist alliance) through which her own symbolic position as a Labour MP with highly uncharacteristic concerns is in turn clarified.

Wilkinson's iconic representation of gendered power in *Clash* does not detract from the class-conscious inclinations of her proletarian heroine. Joan Craig is a protean impersonation of working-class political instinct, discursively and emotionally articulate in both bourgeois-metropolitan and strictly industrial, working-class registers. She follows the mapped-out trajectory of many a (male) Labour figurehead, rising from grassroots union organiser to prominent activist and parliamentary candidate. The upward mobility record of the character is further complemented by that rather exceptional trait which adorned Wilkinson herself: a university education.[2] In a crucial sense, Joan Craig embodies the experimental values of a tentative fusion (between class and gender loyalties) whilst vindicating a subjective capacity for direct agency. Joan does not figure as a metonymic or subsidiary instance of an alternative

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power structure: her claims on leadership are unmediated, directly springing from a unitary identity which makes no attempt to disguise its combined definition as *both* gender- and class-specific. It is no coincidence that her given name, Joan, is in itself the emblematic signifier of a mythical-historical case of role subversion, and a general suspension of hegemonic patriarchal values. As Lisa Tickner has noted, both the name and icon of Joan of Arc commanded strong admiration and emotional identification from suffragists, as she had, in their view, "transcended the limitations of her sex and yet it was from the position of femininity – however unorthodox – that she posed a challenge to the English and to men" (Joannou 1995: 150).

Craig's own challenge comes in the shape of a "private" negotiation of vocational alternatives and their ideological underpinnings, followed by its "public" or indeed social, consequences. *Clash* manages to convey the suggestion, at a time so fraught with divisions and tenuous attempts at self-definition within the feminist camp, that the personal is indeed the political; and so, that the subjectivisation of a given set of social determinants (class, gender) need not brand them as contradictory or mutually exclusive elements. Her representation as a fully-fledged subject with a capacity for agency, desire and judgement focuses on the essential "openness" of Joan's life trajectory – an openness or fluidity which is all the more punctuated by the cross-class nature of her interactions.

In a very precise sense, this novel differs from other working-class narratives of the period in that there is no pre-determined immobility – no "historical necessity" – encoded in the life-world of its protagonist. A certain liberal instinct in the narrative presents inter-class exchanges (whilst maintaining an obviously socialist agenda) as a possibility available to the working-class individual.

The pivotal event of the novel – the 1926 General Strike – effectively presents the warring classes with a counter-intuitive opportunity for encounter and intimacy. Travelling to London for the unlikely circumstance of a TUC General Council ballot on a general strike, Joan is paradoxically introduced to a world of debonair middle-class *savoir vivre*, radical posing and ideological contradiction. What her gradual – if only transitory – absorption into the social fabric of the Bloomsbury intelligentsia reveals is the fundamental divide between the "real" condition of the Northern proletariat and the "ideal" projection of a leftist politics entirely removed from the immediacy of lived experience. Joan's Bloomsbury host is a typically progressive bourgeois feminist, directly linked to the pre-war suffragist movement, and consequently modelled on that primitive paradigm of activism which had not yet fully rallied around class lines. Mary Maud Meadows – whose character is based on Wilkinson's friend Margaret Lady Rhondda, editor of the feminist journal *Time and Tide* (Haywood/Joannou 2004: xvi) – tends to disregard precisely those real or objective conditions which anchor experience and agency in the more or less dynamic set of relations of production.[3] Or, more exactly, she is described as being "[u]tterly without a sense of class or wealth, she loved to bring people together who could help each other" (Wilkinson 2004: 9). This instinctual idealism, which one may even characterise as genuine inter-class utopianism, surfaces notably in the first exchange between the two women – a scene showcasing the irreducible gulf between opposing class positions. Mary Maud cannot help wincing at the suggestion of a general stoppage in transport, communications and industry – an event

which, for her, really does not conceal a dramatically embodied truth of deprivation or humiliation, but rather, signifies, in this first and most telling expression of middle-class consciousness, a source of untimely inconvenience. Mary Maud expresses her concern that the Strike may come into effect at the very time when everything is ready for the première of her friend Helen Dacre's play *Resurrection*: " 'My dear child, do you know what it is like to get a theatre these days? We've been negotiating for the Princess for months, and can only get it for three weeks as it is. Oh, why must you have this beastly strike just now?' she wailed." She is not long, however, in recovering her core leftist sense of injustice following Joan's rebuke that "[t]hese miners will be starved back into their holes unless something is done to help them now" (Wilkinson 2004: 12).

Joan's travelogue in the Bloomsbury realm of wealth and enlightenment brings out a number of contrasts whereby the class divide is integrally signified as difference of epistemology rather than just of status. This early exchange between Mary Maud and Joan is characteristic in the way it signals an incompatibility of perspectives, a jarring interference of material ideology (of class-conditioned instincts and assumptions) with the relatively autonomous sphere of "political ideas". Class returns in the shape of an obtrusive condition, of a traumatic kernel in the field of political agency, overshadowing connections, alliances and common undertakings between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The ultimate "clash" which these genetic discordances signal is emphasised by Wilkinson's novel in terms of epistemology, as a set of contrasting and often conflicting modes of cognition and representation of those "objective conditions" to which they all allegedly seek to respond. In that sense, Mary Maud Meadows fails at first to understand the current predicament of the working-class by failing to capture the latter's *material* commitment to a collective horizon. She misses the rationale of the General Strike by trying to reduce it to an antagonistic scenario concerning individuals instead of classes – a (mis)perception which elicits another quick retort from Joan.[4] Mary Maud suggests the possibility of directly intervening in the conflict in support of the miners' demands, thereby asserting her privileged position as an important coalmine shareholder:

> "Couldn't I do anything? I'm a pretty big shareholder."
> "No. Individuals are helpless at a time like this. It's mass that counts – both sides."
> "But Joan, the individuals make up the mass..."
> "You can't do anything as individuals, anyway," persisted Joan. "You might get a move on if you organized..." (Wilkinson 2004: 13)

The symbolic universe from which Mary Maud speaks, and where individual subject positions thrive, is manifestly antithetical to the industrial hubs of the North which Joan stands for. The metropolitan world of pomp and circumstance is presented as a lure, "a journey of temptation" (Fox 1994: 170) in which the neat adherence of the young union organiser to her collectively inflected identity risks dissolution under a wealth of possibilities – not least, that of forsaking her dual commitment to class and gender for one of the pre-established positions (as *exclusively* feminist *or* socialist).

In this context of estrangement from her native milieu, Anthony Dacre emerges as the embodiment of a distortion, of a drifting course away from Joan's purposive "politicisation of the personal". His effective wooing is significantly clad in a rhetoric

of left-liberal sympathy for the workers' cause and for women's emancipation, but it is ultimately exposed as inauthentic, or at least as subservient to that characteristically bourgeois privileging of "the personal" (understood as a sense reduction to subjective individualism), which Joan's reply to Mary Maud – "individuals are helpless at a time like this" – denounces with recognisable emphasis and collectivist sensibility.

Tony Dacre is a married writer whose detached but formally impeccable fiction of a marriage (to Mary Maud's friend and artist, Helen) seems to announce a genuine belief in the equality of the sexes, in a creative and flexible approach to romantic love. His initial infatuation with Joan presupposes a genuine interest in or admiration of her "difference", of her public incarnation of the imaginative organiser and labour movement activist in whom talent and spontaneity conspire to flout available stereotypes of femininity: "[t]he type of female who, while quite obviously competent to command an army corps, found it necessary to be coy, or else to deliver him a lecture on women's rights while she insisted on paying her share of the bill, tired Dacre" (Wilkinson 2004: 19). Yet the development of historical events – the advent of the Strike – forces a polarisation of feelings and ideas which will no longer allow such compromises. The complex commitment which Joan upholds (as a gendered *and* class-bound subject) is contrasted to Tony's fundamentally bourgeois faith in a firm separation of public and private spheres. As Joan becomes involved in her adherence to the cause of the workers – to a point where her subjectivity is directly predicated on her social being – Tony grows entrenched in an increasingly conservative conceptualisation of the division of roles between the sexes. His reticence before Joan's enthusiasm soon turns into dismay at her plans to run for a parliamentary seat in the wake of the Strike:

> Damn this business of women's work. Why on earth did attractive girls like Joan want to work? Why couldn't they leave that to the plain women who had no other goods to market? It was all right getting keen on work till their mate came along, it made them more interesting, but it was time to drop all that nonsense when a lover's arms were waiting. (Wilkinson 2004: 94)

Even if such moments of crude sincerity are rare, and only indulged in through interior monologue, they certify the pitfalls of a concession to middle-class temptations. Romantic love, as discursively wielded by the bourgeois imagination, represents the ultimate betrayal of those fundamental commitments on which Joan's life hinges. ""Love. What does that word mean, Mary Maud, the word that every flapper, every cheap journalist is always using? Do I love Tony? In my way, yes. In his way, no"" (Wilkinson 2004: 116). The possibilities offered by an orthodox romantic entanglement with Tony are minimal, considering the contradictory nature of his fundamentally conservative assumptions – underneath the progressive veneer – and her unshaken determination to rise with her class in proud assertion of her sex. For indeed "Tony was essentially middle-class. He had none of that rigid, working-class patriotism which was Joan's inspiration and which Blain had so wholeheartedly adopted." (Wilkinson 2004: 92)

Gerald Blain emerges as a contrasting figure in the rather mild landscape of Bloomsbury radicalism. A crippled war hero, Blain epitomises the exilic identity of one self-ostracised from his native ranks, of a bourgeois-turned-socialist through

his traumatic experiencing of capitalist contradiction. Bearing the material traces of injustice within his body (as Tony explains to Joan, "[h]is inside is in bits – all silver tubes – and he is strapped together outside."), Blain has to live with the unacceptable fact that his father "made millions out of Army supplies" (Wilkinson 2004: 32), and that those vain hopes once instilled by the fervour of his warmongering own have finally clashed against the cruel realities of illegitimate profit and general oblivion. Profoundly embittered by a sense of betrayal, Gerry turns to the socialist cause without a sense of private calculation or fashionable sympathy. His embrace is wholehearted inasmuch as his ostracism is complete. He projects an ideal impersonation of the class warrior which will ultimately eclipse Tony Dacre's bland commitments and Mary Maud's pseudo-romantic socialist-feminism. Gerry's brand of socialism is head-on: his passionate commitment exposes the inherent timidity – and unreliability – of middle-class contrarians à la Dacre. Tony's ultimate dismay at the idea of revolution (which is not very different from Mary Maud's) becomes in Gerry sheer devotion: the sight of fuming factory chimneys moves him with a vision of conquest and of working-class power. Socialism beats with its promise of redemption through the cracks and wounds of a world as torn and savaged as his own body:

> The struggle to control them [the factory chimneys] seemed the biggest thing in life for him. If only this strike could take them out of the hands of men like his father, the men to whom they represented only percentages and dividends – figures in a ledger – and put the workers in control, the researchers, the men who could build a great world. To Blain the working class, the men crowded into his meeting that night, had become the Hidden God. (Wilkinson 2004: 50)

For Joan, this character represents the companionable sense of solidarity and deep understanding required by her life project within the labour movement: an unlikely attachment which reaches beyond the dichotomous exigencies of romantic love and political commitment. In Joannou's words: "[s]eeking to end the division between the private world of feeling and the public world of work, she chooses independence within marriage instead of romantic love" (Joannou 1995: 155). In turning away from Tony's traditional promise of marriage and "true love", and in acquiescing to Gerry's proposal – based on co-operation and a sense of joint undertaking – Joan effectuates a reconciliation of the extreme positions maintained by middle-class feminists à la Mary Maud (whose rejection of the idea of marriage is wholesale) and those of working-class labour women, whose stern attachment to family and community generally makes them critical of feminist misgivings. Her egalitarian relationship with Gerry Blain, as projected at the end of the novel, is predicated on a sense of balance and rational symmetry between the public and private dimensions of subjectivity which her affair with Tony notoriously lacked. Joannou goes on to observe that "Ellen Wilkinson uses a romantic plot within a class-conscious narrative in *Clash*. But because the novel is concerned with a woman's need for intimacy and for solidarity, the importance attached to purely individualistic longings and impulses must ultimately be qualified" (Joannou 1995: 154). In effect, the solution offered by the novel to the ostensive contradiction between the personal and the political is, as we have insisted, a dialectical one. This

is to say that the individual domain is not reducible to a set of particular or monadic concerns, but rather, that it derives from or is forged in, a trans-individual process of self-constitution. Wilkinson's exemplary politicisation of the romantic genre subverts this categorical pre-eminence of the private sphere, turning it into a function or component element of its collective horizon. Thus, in clear contradistinction to the archetypical narrative of romance, Wilkinson's heroine attains an exclusive subjective profile through her involvement with the labour movement; and most notably, after the defeat of the General Strike, through her "self-encounter" in the midst of her class and away from the mystifications of Bloomsbury luxury and narcissism.

Joan's growing doubts about her role as Tony's lover, compounded with a heightened sense of class-consciousness and accompanying guilt at her extravagant and "lazy week" in middle-class London, are resolved with a spatial shift of her concerns from the bland interiors of Bloomsbury chic to the grim realities of proletarian England. Joan needs to go back to Shireport, to the mining districts, in order to recover, not her political vision or programme, but the material sense of poverty – without which, as her union boss William Royd reminds her, political ideas lose their "edge":

> We always seem to lose the best of our movement when they are tempted by the fleshpots... It's not that they change their beliefs, but all the edges get blunted. Poverty doesn't press on them so much. It's hidden, it becomes a matter of statistics. Just an objection to poverty isn't any good, Joan. You've got to be up against the real thing to hate it hard enough to be able to fight it. (Wilkinson 2004: 144)

Losing contact with the crude phenomenality of destitution, unemployment or post-strike victimisation involves taking the critical focus away from its collective dimension, reducing poverty and its figures to the abstract status of a "condition" (in the old, Victorian sense of the "condition of England" discourse) or problematic.

Wilkinson's radical gesture includes this "experiential" correction within a cross-class pattern inserted in the romantic plot. Whilst courting the dangers of a critical epistemology detached from its object (by lingering on the individual protagonist of a potentially private plot), the novel succeeds in confronting its essentially bourgeois generic form with a pervasive warning about its epistemic limitations. For, as John Kirk has pointed out:

> [T]he predominant emphasis in bourgeois writing on the individual consciousness could be regarded as being of little use for expressing, or articulating, the collectivity of class, so that taking on the conventions of the bourgeois novel precludes class expression by individualising experience, thus silencing the imperatives of class. (Kirk 2007: 109)

If Wilkinson manages to circumvent such pitfalls, she does so by articulating an individual voice with a collective project based on both class and gender discourses. The privileged consciousness of the socialist-feminist protagonist carries within it an index of *dialectical mediation* which resolves both the epistemological knot of the public/private disjunctive, and the ideological contradiction haunting Labour women

in the interwar period. In the discursive context of Wilkinson's novel, this confrontation of spheres or sense-horizons results in a number of tentative or evolutionary "exiles" within Joan's consciousness: from the grim actualities of the industrial North to the lush universe of London's bourgeoisdom, and from self-ostracism in traditional romance to the politicisation of love and her "return" to the working class. This sequence marks an ascending dialectical trajectory from the stagnant politics of division (feminism versus labourism) which, as we have seen, characterise both the fictional context of *Clash* and the ideological environment of Wilkinson's biographical militancy. It proposes a resolutory alternative in which neither initial stance or position – socialist or feminist – is to be played off as exclusive or incompatible with the other. On the contrary, it shows a way forward for women *qua* women (i.e. *qua* focal, rather than supplementary or adjacent, political subjects in their own right) through the medium of class-specific socialist politics: "Ellen Wilkinson offers the reader revealing glimpses of how political struggle enables women, *as a consequence of their very involvement*, to identify and clarify their own priorities as women." (Joannou 1995: 158 my emphasis)

1 Feminists being identified in the popular imaginary of Labour activists as essentially "rich, but idle, ladies" (Graves 1994: 124).
2 This circumstance seldom concurred with that of genuine working-class origins, as indeed "[f]ew of the thirteen [Labour women] elected between 1923 and 1931 could claim any working-class background", while a number of them had been to university (Howell 2002: 337).
3 This "dynamic" quality has been emphasised by Raymond Williams (2005: 34): "So we have to say that when we talk of 'the base', we are talking of a process not a state. And we cannot ascribe to that process certain fixed properties for subsequent translation to the variable processes of the superstructure."
4 For more on the theoretical and historical position of the general strike within the general context of the class struggle, see Goodstein 1984.

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SUMMARY

EN-GENDERING THE CLASH: ELLEN WILKINSON AND INTERWAR SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Ellen Wilkinson's status as a pioneer in the history of British working-class feminism is to a great extent mediated by her reputation as the author of the 1929 novel *Clash*. This book stands out for its topical relevance as a major reflection on the 1926 General Strike and as a crucial interrogation of conflicting identities within the "progressive" movements of the period. In particular, Wilkinson manages to expose the contradictions haunting the labour movement on account of its stance on gender issues, and to criticise the class logic (or bias) underpinning established feminism. Wilkinson refuses to accept the terms of what she considers a disabling opposition (between labour and feminist militancy), resolving instead to weld a dialectical alternative in which gender and class identities are experienced as mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive.

KEYWORDS: Ellen Wilkinson, feminism, working Class, socialism, general strike, subjectivity, romance.