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Article (Accepted Version)

Jolly, Margareta (2014) The feelings behind the slogans: abortion campaigning and feminist mood-work circa 1979. *New Formations*, 82 (1). pp. 100-113. ISSN 0950-2378

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‘THE FEELINGS BEHIND THE SLOGANS’: ABORTION CAMPAIGNING AND FEMINIST MOOD-WORK CIRCA 1979

Margaretta Jolly

Abstract Where does public mood live? How can it be stimulated and how is it apprehended? In this article I explore these questions by considering the so-called *‘winter of discontent’ at the end of 1978*, a set-piece in British history-telling in which public dissatisfaction with trade union power supposedly propelled the election victory of the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Ben Highmore suggests this *‘mooding’* underplays the pleasures and excitements of that period to tell a story of the failure of the left. This article concurs, by tracing feminist campaigns over abortion rights which came to prominence during that same year, *in which ‘discontent’* expressed a positive trajectory of ascendant reproductive control. Drawing on new oral history materials, I recast an emphasis on class, *but also reveal tensions within the Women’s Liberation Movement* over the place and nature of emotion, showing how some supporters of abortion rights had to wrestle with their own conflicted responses, often in silence. I conclude by considering the status of minority social movements as mood-measurers.

Key words: Abortion campaigns, Women’s Liberation Movement, Oral History, Emotion, Mood, 1979.

INTRODUCTION

In 1982, in the wake of a national debate about abortion law in the UK, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argued that abortion was an indexical issue, providing ‘a litmus test of how well – to put it crudely – feminist and socialist views are bearing up against religious and familist forces’.¹ Thirty years later, continuing struggles around abortion show it still stands as a measure of mood for a whole range of half-conscious questions about gender, race,

family, work, security, and continuity. It is in this way a prime site for exploring ‘how power circulates through feeling and how politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses’.² Yet understanding the operation of affect is quite different from being able to influence it. This article explores this through an intense internal debate within the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) over the politics of emotion circa 1979, the year that John Corrie, MP for Bute and Ayrshire, nearly prohibited British women’s access to legal abortions. In this I distinguish emotion from affectual mood not just by scale, but by tone, intent and degree of consciousness, as feminists politicized emotions about reproduction in response to Corrie’s attack. Yet we shall also see how the debate, and feminists’ advocacy of a woman’s right to choose, raised powerful feelings within them. Here the politics of mood operates on many levels. We shall also hear how anti-abortion campaigns have played emotional politics, including their characteristically hysterical tone.

I begin by detailing the campaigns against the Corrie Bill. These chart a very different mood-map of 1979 to that captured by the rightist historical set-piece of a winter of discontent supposedly broken by Thatcher’s spring-cleaning government. I then focus on the women’s movement’s internal debates, considering both emotion as movement method and the reality of mixed feelings for individual women involved. I conclude by returning to general questions about how we may apprehend public mood, whether minority social movements may influence it, and also, more generally, the ‘moodwork’ which an honest account of reproductive politics involves.

THE NATIONAL ABORTION CAMPAIGN AND A WINTER OF WOMEN'S DISCONTENT

While the early months of 1979 are remembered largely for dispiriting clashes between unions and the Labour government, a different political battle was unfolding over women's bodies. This became most apparent when John Corrie, Conservative MP, put forward a Private Member's Bill to drastically restrict the availability of abortion, soon after Thatcher's election victory in May. This challenged the 1967 Abortion Act which had largely legalized abortion.³ In reaction to the Corrie Bill, the feminist National Abortion Campaign (NAC) sought allies in the Labour movement to stage one of the most successful campaigns of the British Women's Liberation Movement, culminating in the Corrie bill's defeat in 1980.⁴ The NAC worked locally and nationally, picketing the offices of health authorities where abortions were difficult to obtain, holding conferences, pressuring union branches, and working with the broad-based Committee in Defence of the 1967 Act (Co-Ord) to lobby across the political parties and medical associations. When the Corrie Bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons with a large majority, the NAC organised a rally of hundreds of people and immediately launched the Campaign Against the Corrie Bill (CACB).⁵ Crucially, it also drew the support of the Trade Union Congress, and together they organized a march on 31 Oct of some 100,000 people.⁶ According to the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, this 'was the largest trade union demonstration ever held for a cause which lay beyond the traditional scope of collective bargaining; it was also the biggest ever pro-abortion march'.⁷

Feminist-led defence of abortion in this period intriguingly 're-moods' a political period conventionally defined as the moment when the nation awoke from its welfare-consensual sleep.⁸ In itself, the TUC's support of reproductive rights transforms the narrative of unions

driven only by irresponsible, self-interested pay claims.⁹ Indeed, the unions were in the process of being transformed by women's and Black rights groups, here notably the initiatives of the feminist doctors in the British Medical Association, and former school-dinner lady Terry Marsland, who, as the Deputy Secretary of the Tobacco Workers' Union had put forward the first pro-abortion resolution at the TUC congress in 1975.¹⁰ With hindsight, 1979 stands as a significant milestone in a new alliance between the masculinist left and the new, autonomous feminism, crucially forged over the issue of abortion.¹¹

Yet this political breakthrough was up against a much less certain national mood, at least as represented in the media, in parliament, and in medical bodies.¹² Although it did not altogether back Corrie, the Daily Mail for example, a conservative, middle market paper known for its 'women's interests', throughout 1979 featured stories of aborted fetuses 'fighting for life' and the moral dangers of new 'quickie' abortions available in private clinics. The historian Dominic Sandbrook argues indeed that there was a significant public anxiety about a 'surge' in abortions since the 1967 Act, with Conservatives linking it to what they saw as a worrying new sexual promiscuity, particularly amongst young unmarried women, who had gained free access to The Pill in 1970. He considers this to be partly because MPs had completely underestimated demand for abortion, expecting to see 10,000 per year; by 1973, there were 169,362.¹³ This chimed with growing concern about teenage sexuality. The Times' medical correspondent in 1978, dubbed teenage pregnancies 'the problem that will not go away', noting that in 1977, 30,000 children were born to unmarried teenage mothers, while 28,000 teenage girls had abortions. He thought the answer lay in sex education and birth control; but by 1979 teenage abortions were up to 35,000 a year.¹⁴ Some believed young women were treating abortion as simply another form of birth control. Feminists such as Jan McKenley, who became NAC national coordinator that year, did not believe this was the case, and certainly her own story is one of sexual inexperience, an

interpretation confirmed by one 1972 study, 'Abortion and Contraception: A Study of Patients' Attitudes'.¹⁵ Whichever of these analyses is true, clearly far more women were having more sex outside reproduction and at younger ages; the average age of girls first having sex was 18, three years younger than it had been in the early 1950s, and virginity before marriage was becoming largely irrelevant. This meant more chances of contraception failure simply by virtue of numbers.¹⁶

Feminists' attempt to drive a new road through this landscape by appealing to a principle of women's bodily autonomy was extremely difficult. Even the alliance with the TUC was by no means easy. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell's analysis in 1980, as with many in the women's liberation movement at the time, was that they had little to thank the unions for, and that the October march was one of their 'few, major, tangible achievements for women' [their emphasis].¹⁷ Part of the problem was that though the TUC clearly supported the 1967 Abortion Act, it resisted endorsing the feminist policy of free abortion on demand, as did the Labour Party. The NAC was formed on the basis of 'a woman's right to choose', a much stronger demand than the TUC's 'Keep it legal, keep it safe'. The march itself was the scene of an angry clash; a few hundred radical feminists carrying the London Women's Liberation and Women's Aid banners held everyone up as they argued that they, rather than the TUC General Secretary, Len Murray, should lead the procession. The NAC's attempt to mediate reflected its difficult position, too extreme for most of its affiliates (Co-Ord had nearly expelled it the previous November), but too moderate for parts of the women's movement.¹⁸ The campaign was internally divided, as it tried to combine the foundational women's liberation position of women's autonomy with the much narrower terms of defending the 1967 Act in the face of an apparently volatile public opinion.

The political pressure also impacted on the NAC's methods. Based at Gray's Inn Road near London's Kings Cross station, a large ramshackle activist hub,¹⁹ the campaign generally followed the WLM's fierce principle of decentralized and autonomous local groups, including separate chapters in Scotland and Wales. McKenley's memory of her appointment as a one-year limited, minimum-wage job-share on a minimum wage basis, captures its voluntarist and collectivist ethos.²⁰ For McKenley, the work was an 'active gift', driven by her personal experience of an unfortunate pregnancy, as she suggests it was for her co-worker, who had had a 'backstreet' abortion in her youth. Aged 22, a recent graduate from Essex University, involved in black politics and punk music, she remembers

looking in the mirror at the clinic in Brighton and saying it was never going to happen to me again and that [...] something so profound had happened from being so frivolous that I was going to kind of wake up.²¹ [...] And through that I joined the National Abortion Campaign and [...] that was the year I became a feminist through my own experience. And within the year I was its part-time co-ordinator.²²

Yet despite such personnel, for some, the NAC was losing touch with its WLM roots. Sheila Rowbotham, a pivotal activist not known for intemperate views, considered that 'we found it difficult to carry over the experience of the women's movement in discussing abortion in relation to our personal experience of our sexuality, our relationships, our attitudes to having children, or childcare ... [we] could not make these connections in relation to the National Campaign for Abortion'.²³ Eileen Fairweather, also writing in 1979, argued in *Spare Rib*, the movement's main magazine, that 'the doubts feminists have about formal structure have in many cases been proved right'. Yet she went on to say 'My worry is that the critics have never been able to provide any alternative model for effective campaigning':

Instead, women in NAC were accused of being male-identified, for drawing women away from consciousness-raising groups. My reply then was that I didn't want my consciousness if it was only so that I could stay calm on some backstreet abortionist's table. I still feel pretty much the same, except that I acutely regret the polarization was ever necessary. Because political activity without constant renewal of our feminist anger, caring and understanding quickly becomes counter-productive. Yet the women who are left to shoulder the work of meetings and leaflet-writing inevitably have less time for looking at the deeper issues.²⁴

This defence of a more professional activist method is striking, given that Fairweather was perfectly able to turn her hand to militancy, including occupying the pulpit of Westminster Cathedral in July 1977 in protest at an earlier attempt to row back the 1967 Act.²⁵

It is not my intention to rehash the pros and cons of the Women's Liberation Movement's principled 'structurelessness'. These have been thoroughly weighed, including at the time. And in any case, Thatcher's election for many became a galvanizing factor in deciding to join the Labour Party or develop 'municipal feminism' within local government. Lesley Hoggart has recently argued that the NAC's internal arguments represent the moment when the women's movement learned the art of political compromise.²⁶ But Fairweather's heartfelt yet shrewd piece – which explicitly names anger, caring and understanding as the heart of feminist perception – also touches on a contrasting politics of emotion, which upsets the easy opposition between amateur and professional activist styles – and indeed, between 'choice' and 'life'. Tellingly titled 'The Feelings Behind the Slogans', she proposed that a narrative of shame, guilt, love, care, forgiveness, was what the anti-abortion lobby could offer that the NAC did not. Fairweather, 25 years old at the time, had attempted suicide after an early abortion, and was speaking from her own experience when she argued that the movement had to acknowledge that the decision of whether or not to have an abortion could not be contained with a rationalist moral framework. *'The 'Antis' have "God and right" on their side; we have*

a legacy of shame and secrecy, and often pain which goes so deep you can't even bear to think about it – much less fight back'.²⁷

THE FEELING BEHIND THE SLOGANS OR THE SLOGANS BEHIND THE FEELINGS? EMOTION AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT METHOD

All social movements draw on emotional resources, as individual motivation, crowd behaviour, explicit or implicit goal. As Jasper notes, they 'can be means, they can be ends, and sometimes they can fuse the two'.²⁸ We can see this in the WLM's iconic public displays of outrage, pride, and occasional naughtiness, such as at the Miss World protest in 1970, the Reclaim the Night marches, the Night Cleaners and Grunwick strikes, and later, the five-year camp outside the Greenham Common air force base. The Anti-Corrie Bill march itself represented an orchestrated display of public 'anger' as we have seen. On the whole however, the women's movement has been more 'identity-oriented', or 'expressive', in contrast to the 'instrumental' or 'strategy-oriented' movements, such as the Unions.²⁹ Although the women's movement did use campaigns, mass meetings, rallies, marches, petitions, civil disobedience, its more common methods were to practice different gender roles, consciousness raising, local provocations.

As we have seen, however, the NAC was in a difficult position faced with the affective politics of abortion. On the one hand, there was the inchoate public 'opinion', as far as it could be apprehended in the press and parliament. Then there was the bittersweet experience of working with the Unions and allies in government. It also faced an organised opposition which had claimed the emotional high ground for itself in the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC). Formed in 1966 to oppose the draft of the Abortion Act, SPUC

and a splinter group LIFE worked with MPs over the 1970s to try four times to repeal the act or restrict it to the truly ‘deserving’; indeed, the Corrie Bill had been drafted by Sir George Crozier, the chairman of the ‘Pro-Life’ co-ordinating committee. Though it had a clear strategic aim, its publicity methods were highly ‘expressive’ in their own way.³⁰ Michael Lichfield and Susan Kentish’s 1974 *Babies for Burning* was one example of lurid, mostly false, stories of aborted babies crying, then recycled in the *News of the World* and *Daily Mail*.³¹ Such coverage undoubtedly fuelled the debate about the workings of the new Act, and not least, influenced MPs.³² In the run up to Thatcher’s election, further grisly stories in the press about ‘babies crying out’ as they were aborted, stoked up the debate.³³ In contrast, NAC feminists performed a rationalist approach, using voice to speak above body.

Fairweather’s article on ‘feelings behind the slogans’ was a decisive intervention in this light, becoming the basis for an emotional public meeting at the end of 1979, during which women shared abortion experiences in a way that campaigns to date had not allowed. In a recent oral history, Jan McKenley described it as a turning point, not only personally, but also for the WLM as a whole. Talking about women ‘testifying’ to sadness, guilt and loss as well as shame and relief, she points to complexities not captured by straplines such as ‘Abortion on Demand – A Woman’s Right to Choose’; ‘Our Bodies, Our Lives, Our Right to Decide’, still less the ‘potty slogans’ Polly Toynbee remembered, of women chanting ‘When do we want it? Now!’.³⁴ The meeting appears to have acted been cathartic; McKenley for example, cried desperately. Later she wrote to a friend about hearing a child ‘screaming’, a grief enhanced as she began to fear she would not be able to get pregnant again. Fairweather’s powerful argument was that such feelings did not prove that all abortion was always traumatic, still less, sinful, but that the reality of choosing ‘oneself’ as a woman over another life, even if a very primitive one, needed to be supported as a difficult experience. Abortion was not any

old 'choice', but a resort where motherhood was too hard or unappealing, and where men did not take responsibility for contraception.

It seems that despite clichés of the women's movement's emotional style, public sharing of emotion was uneven. In fact, sharing of feelings about feelings was sometimes a more accurate description of what happened. Feminists had to guard against appearing publicly over-emotional about political demands, especially abortion. In addition, internal ideological objections controlled emotional practice. 1979 indeed was the year when a new constituency of lesbian feminism, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, first lobbed their infamous 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality' paper at a movement already uncertain as to the emotional case for heterosexuality. Led by Sheila Jeffreys, this had nothing to say about abortion at all, seeing it as a mere consequence of penetration, a 'tedious/dangerous form of contraception'.³⁵ More generally inhibiting were Marxist arguments on the individualism of emotional discussion and the greater priority of materialist struggle.³⁶ Though very long-standing, they were rejuvenated by black and working class women activists throughout the 1970s. We can get a sense of alternative priorities through the 1979 agenda of the Haringey-based United Black Women's Action Group: housing, education and employment, and police mistreatment of black youth.³⁷

These tensions were indeed present at 'The Feelings Behind The Slogans' meeting, which took place a month or so after the Revolutionary Feminist 'Love Your Enemy' conference. Another activist, Gail Lewis, offers a fascinatingly reflexive account of how they played out, with a quite different emphasis from McKenley, though they both shared the position of being black women willing (at least sometimes) to work with the white-centred women's movement. Well known as a charismatic founder member of the Brixton Black Women's

Group, Lewis describes feeling uncomfortable and angry, and challenging the white organisers who included Spare Rib editor Ruthie Petrie, for an agenda which did not address debates on the testing of the contraceptive Depo Provera, the right to have children and other issues of reproductive control pertinent to poor, black women. 'Feeling', as she smilingly narrates it today (in an interview conducted in 2011, 'was petit-bourgeois indulgence', mentioning that she was never in a consciousness-raising group.³⁸ This was little different from the position expressed in the first widely-circulated statement of black women's liberation in Britain of 1971 by The Black Women's Action Committee of the Marxist-Maoist Black Unity and Freedom Party.³⁹ Though this statement provided an important defence of black women's right both to contraception and to fertility, it also defined 'consciousness' as something to be attained through 'new institutions' and 'common struggles' far from feelings.⁴⁰

Emotional performances thus did not capture, though nor did they fully repress, more personal emotions about self, body, life chance, and status. Lewis goes on to say that she has now completely changed her mind about her argument at the meeting, to the extent that she is currently training to work in psychotherapy. She chuckles at her own former self, asking: 'what was I defending against, well we won't go there now'. She comments that she now wants to know: what 'is in excess, what does the focus on structure not encompass, leave out?' She muses with a striking image, 'even then, I think there was a miniature person wondering this'.⁴¹ What indeed was Lewis, and many others with her, 'defending against'? One answer is power and position within the new opportunity structure of the feminist intimate public. But Lewis's question to herself suggests that feelings of status and belonging were not the only 'excess'. Indeed, perhaps it was precisely feelings about sex and reproduction and race which she found intolerable, particularly in such a setting, which,

despite McKenley's presence, would have been all too familiarly a white majority. Lewis' recent writings and oral history say what she did not then, that her white mother was ashamed of her black daughter, yet also enduringly attracted to black men; that her mother's seven illegal abortions reflected her wish not to bring more children into poverty and racism; that her mother did not want to have more children with violent partners whom she both loved and hated.⁴² Lewis remembers her mother's wonderful empathy when she herself had an abortion, aged 18, in 1969, just after the Abortion Act, standing up to a punitive and disapproving nurse. And Lewis also remembers her mother's concern that she would ruin her life having children at such a young age. This, at the time, she also thought right.⁴³ Kirsten Hearn's portrait of confrontational meetings between Sisters Against Disablement (SAD) and the NAC in the early 1980s also illuminates the 'moodwork' that abortion rights activism entailed. A militant activist for disabled rights, Hearn argued that able-bodied women should be less 'afraid of the anti-abortionists' [...] emotional kind of arguments' and admit that sometimes they were having abortions simply because it was inconvenient to have a child at that time, or that they did not want a disabled child. Indeed, SAD's tactics were to argue 'in a very unemotional, but emotional way'. As Hearn puts it:

in the end I would find myself standing up at National Abortion Campaign meetings and going, you're talking about killing babies, or killing foetuses or ending foetuses who might grow up to be someone like me. And whilst that's true it's a rather hard way to do it, [...] I think we made our point. And I think [...] that our intervention helped the National Abortion Campaign be a bit clearer about their ethics around what they were advocating, actually. And in the end I think it actually really helped them take on the crap that was coming from, you know, the pro-lifers...⁴⁴

As Hearn suggests, this ‘hard’ challenge to simplistic feminist demands for ‘abortion on demand’ reclaimed some of the ground that SPUC controlled, in dealing with the unglamorous realities involved in reproductive choice. Yet how far could it encompass disabled women’s own emotional ambivalences? In her recent oral history, this account is entwined with a more fulsome story of growing up as a twin, as a young woman losing her sight, the daughter of a woman who had to abandon her ambitions to be a doctor because of her children’s needs. Inevitably this offers a much softer picture as to Hearn’s own eventual decision not to have children, including little details like her love of a tidy house.⁴⁵

Such memories undermine McKenley’s claim that for a brief moment, abortion rights cut across differences of race and class, uniting older with newer women’s movements – though clearly in contrast to many feminist demands, they did constitute one of the few issues capable of rallying mainstream support.⁴⁶ But on another level, they support her different argument that the movement was beginning to mature emotionally:

When we were active in the seventies you weren’t allowed to have any feelings behind the slogans, you know, feelings were considered to be indulgences as you’re saying, they were considered to be areas that would make you weak, not strong. And that’s come to be, [seen] through the seventies, eighties, nineties, [as] not a strong position. You are strongest when you understand your own weaknesses and your own fears and I think in much of the behaviours and the kind of fundamentalism was out of fear and a fear of change and a fear of... and not really being clear what it would mean to change, what change would mean and all the relationships would have to change, not just somebody else’s set of relationships, your relationships would have to change.⁴⁷

McKenley is surely right in pointing out too that ‘feelings around abortion and the feelings around pregnancy and fertility get more and more complex and deep as you get older’.⁴⁸ She situates her own abortion in this light, where her sexual relationships as a young woman reflected her youthful rejection of her Jamaican immigrant working class parents’ limited opportunities and her mother’s conservative morality. Even as McKenley berated herself at the time for having got pregnant through something so ‘frivolous’, her oral history shows a long sense of responsibility, to her family and community. This is expressed in her later work as an Ofsted schools’ inspector trying to improve education for black children from within the system. Similarly, Fairweather’s passionate NAC activism reflected a necessary escape from the moral judgments of her Irish Catholic mother, and her parents’ violent marriage. She eventually succeeded in winning over her mother, even getting her to hand out anti-Corrie leaflets. Perhaps more improbably she returned to Catholicism in later life, a conversion she described recently in her – equally surprising – regular column in the Daily Mail.⁴⁹ Both McKenley and Fairweather spoke later of their joy in becoming mothers themselves; neither of them regretted, or changed, their profound commitments to ‘a woman’s right to choose’.

Behind the ‘feelings behind the slogans’, therefore, lay a different, more complex set of feelings. These were not always admitted or even understood at the time. Nevertheless, their operation was not necessarily destructive. I wager that in the long view, the turbulent feminist ‘moodwork’ of 1979 did more than protect women’s ‘right to choose’. Even as activists managed their conflicted reactions, it explored the dramatic social and psychological consequences of controlled reproduction in ways that the mainstream evaded. We can see this in the development of advice on ‘feelings about unwanted pregnancy’ for the 1978 British edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, written in part by Angela Phillips who worked at the NAC alongside McKenley.⁵⁰ Feminist moodwork is also captured in a striking science fiction novel

of 1979, by another well-known movement figure, Zoe Fairbairns. *Benefits*, published by the feminist press Virago, is set in a dystopia of decaying tower blocks taken over by squatters, not dissimilar to Britain at the time, and was based in part on Fairbairns's experiences volunteering for an 'abortion charity' in central London, in which she 'listened to women who felt unable, because of poverty, to continue their pregnancies'.⁵¹ As a gender- rather than class-framed dystopia, 'the dying welfare state' of an imagined post-1984 Britain poisons the water with fertility drugs and uses the benefit system to punish rebellious women through its political 'Family' party.⁵² The feminist journalist-protagonist falls unexpectedly pregnant. This delights her new-man husband but causes deep ambivalence for her, heightened when the child is born with chronic illness. As with all the characters, the child is neither victim nor heroine, manipulating her uncertain mother to best advantage. As Judith Wilt has argued of other feminist novels dealing with abortion, Fairbairns' novel captures a profound psychocultural shock at the recognition that maternity is passing from the domain of instinct to that of conscious choice.⁵³ Yet it also looks at where women cannot and may never be able to choose, and how a feminist community can only respond imperfectly to forces that include biology, the state, big business, but also love, mortality, stupidity and pride.

MAINSTREAMING EMOTIONS: MINORITY MOVEMENTS AS MOOD-MEASURERS

Even as the final national WLM conference of 1978 testified to the combustion of the first phase of the movement, 1979 proved an extraordinarily creative year for feminist activism. I have argued that the NAC's work to defend the Abortion Act, with the TUC and others, marked a breakthrough in understanding how gender and class interests could align. But we can see, with hindsight, that alongside this, the winter of women's discontent was also a renewal in diversity, ironically galvanized by Thatcher's election. The lesbian feminism

which upset the NAC's mainstreaming attempts fed into an anti-violence movement which proved to be highly influential in the 1980s; liberal feminist initiatives included the beginnings of the anti-war protest that fed into Greenham and equal opportunities activism; socialist feminists directly responded to the new challenge of Thatcherism with a strategic joining of the Labour Party and initiatives such as Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright's *Beyond the Fragments*. 1979, as Lewis herself recently pointed out, also saw the formation of the legendary Southall Black Sisters, Asian Women's group AWAZ⁵⁴ and the first 'national' conference of OWAAD, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, as well as the first black women's centre in the UK, Mary Seacole House, founded in Brixton three months later in July.⁵⁵ Pertinently, a high profile sit-in at Heathrow Airport, protesting against the 'virginity test' examinations by immigration officers of Asian women who were coming over to meet fiancés, built broader and subtler understanding of reproductive rights beyond the question of abortion. Again, the protest was successful. Despite the peculiar pressures involved in the emotional politics of the NAC, it pinpoints a feminizing of the 'politics of mood' that not only challenges a narrative about trade union self-interest, but also the racial and sexual biases of a narrative which holds that 1979 saw the end of the British women's liberation movement.⁵⁶

However the bigger question is whether we can extrapolate a broader public change of 'mood' in the first instance about abortion, and more generally about everyday life in Britain. If we turn to surveys and opinion polls as the conventional approach to measuring large-scale 'mood', the public seems to have remained supportive of the 1967 Abortion Act, although it has never come close to endorsing a fully feminist position of abortion on demand. The NatCen Social Research agency, which surveys a representative sample of more than 3,000 British people annually, found that in 1983, 'just 37% endorsed what might be regarded as a

women's right to choose'.⁵⁷ Yet equally, and in contrast to the US, the general public has resisted SPUC's demands as well. Perhaps for this reason, MPs were not willing to overturn the Act in 1979; nor was Thatcher in the end prepared to commit government time. Although she had initially voted for the second reading of Corrie's Bill in July 1979, she only supported the more modest parts of the proposal, which would have allowed medical staff the right to 'conscientiously object', and the reduction of limit from 28 to 24 weeks.⁵⁸ The Daily Mail, which I have taken as one kind of populist mood-producer, also rejected Corrie's much more radical wish that abortions would only be possible where the mother's life was at 'grave risk'.

Sandbrook concludes that 'the great majority were essentially indifferent to the abortion controversy', even as they argued about 'permissiveness'.⁵⁹ His own explanation is that the disassociation of sex with reproduction and marriage proved too useful to the leisure and consumer industry to be curbed, not to mention the sheer pleasure it offered to men, perhaps more even than women.⁶⁰ This seems to prove the Revolutionary Feminist point that abortion rights are a very weak challenge to patriarchy. An alternative explanation is that the endurance of abortion rights in Britain lies not so much in the power and interests of men pursuing 'free' sex, so much as a more comprehensive influence of New Right ideologies of liberalization and choice. From this point of view, the wish to push women into the workplace overrode policies of familialism.⁶¹ Ironically, even emotion itself has been viewed as the subject of liberalisation and commodification during the 1980s. Presumably 'emotional capitalism', manifested in the growth of personal therapy and management techniques, could easily provide services for those traumatized by reproductive traumas of all kinds.⁶² Finally, we need to acknowledge as well, the impact of bringing the doctors onside – though this

reflects professional self-interest⁶³ – and the enduring political coalition between feminists and the Left.

Opinion polls do not sufficiently capture this context. Raymond Williams' concept of a 'structure of feeling' expressed in popular culture and everyday life better enables this wider tracking of mood. Consider the disappearance of the 1950s and 60s dramas about backstreet abortions over the 70s (famously, *Up the Junction*, 1968), as in their place came, not so much tales of abortion as choice – that was still too difficult – but *The Joy of Sex*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Sun*'s page 3 and the first British porn boom.⁶⁴ 1979 itself saw the first nudist beach established in Britain, the YMCA suing Village People for gayifying their reputation, Dallas and Donna Summer. Fringe right wing groups captured the fears of those who could only see their place and power threatened by this culture: the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children was made up not only of older white Christian men but women who had given their own lives to an identity and 'job' as mother. Feminist protest on the other hand, intersecting with those of black power, feminist disability rights and other emergent movements, can be read as a dissident and radical version of a mood in which both men and women associated reproductive choice with freedom and autonomy.

In this way, both minority movements become meaningful for the majority.⁶⁵ Lesley Hoggart indeed attributes the rise in public debate over abortion in the 1970s not to the number of abortions but to the clash of the 'pro-choice' and 'anti-abortion' movements, and notes that both movements asserted considerable influence over the voting patterns of MPs on both sides. The Labour MP at the forefront of defending the Abortion Act, Jo Richardson, compared her personal revelation about sexual politics to having a cataract removed.⁶⁶ The *Daily Mail*'s editorial in July 1979 concluded

The members of Britain's parliament – the overwhelming majority of whom are men – must endeavour to penetrate [sic] beyond the organized and sincere passion of the pro- and anti-abortion lobbies and try to evaluate for themselves the profound complexity of feeling that moves so many women these days when this sad debate is raging.⁶⁷

We can read such sentiments against the grain to argue that the passion of the two extreme lobbies articulated hidden structures of feeling. On one side, the anti-abortion lobby's portraits of extreme vulnerability and mortality in the iconic dying foetus spoke to a longing for innocence and safety in a world of threatening change and new choice. On the other, the debate over the deeper 'feelings behind the slogans' within the women's movement, brought out an unglamorous but terribly realistic ambivalence about what choice over fertility actually meant and felt like, the impossibility very often of making the absolutely 'right' choice.

CONCLUSION

Mood bears a complex relationship to the political institutions of democracy which translate, moderate, and officially represent public will. In this way, a minority movement can represent more than its members. The fears and excitements involved in feminist (and anti-abortion) activism in 1979 are a case in point where a national historical narrative needs 're-mooding' to consider not only the importance of minority subcultures but its reproductive as well as productive political cultures.

Are there lessons that we can learn from the politics of abortion rights today? It seems that the first may be to consider social movements' capture of general emotional realities. Yet just as importantly, we can learn that these do not translate into political change without aims which will be accepted by the middle ground. The NAC's 15 years of campaigning only defended the 1967 Act, and experience then, and still now, suggests there is no chance of success in campaigning for abortions after perceived foetal viability.⁶⁸ On the other hand, recent anti-abortion posturing by the Health Minister Jeremy Hunt suggested that there is no appetite for changing the law on abortion.⁶⁹ If we go by polls, Britain is 'more individual, liberal and cynical' still than in the late 1970s. In contrast to 30 years ago, when only a third of the population approved of abortion rights, the social research institute NatCen recently found that a major shift in attitudes in the 1980s has held an approval rating of about 62%.⁷⁰ NatCen situates this within a thinning of collectivism, both religious and socialist, in the wake of a consensus around economic neoliberalism. To this, we may add the forces of biotechnology which are further encouraging a marketised relationship to reproduction.

Patricia Clough sees theories of affect as especially valuable in this context of 'post-humanist' reproduction, 'to grasp the changes that constitute the social and to explore them as changes in ourselves, circulating through our bodies, our subjectivities, yet irreducible to the individual, the personal and the psychological'.⁷¹ They perhaps explain the ever more pointedly 'emotional' lobbying of The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children which continues to respond in its own way to capitalist liberalism. Its website presents itself as the entrance to an evangelical Christian community of passionate conviction on all sorts of issues, with appeals to children to wear 'I'm for life' teeshirts. Feminists, on the other hand, still try to walk a line between reason and emotion in their reproductive 'moodwork'. The lobbying group Abortion Rights, created in 2003 through the merger of NAC and the

Abortion Law Reform Association as the national grassroots campaigning body, has as its key demands the extension of abortion rights to Northern Ireland and the removal of power from doctors as gatekeepers. The tone of their advice is coolly neutral and it is clear that, unlike their 70s predecessor, they do not themselves offer counselling. Moreover, they avoid recent American pro-choice tactics of using ‘coming out’ stories as campaign tools, keeping their case studies anonymous and sticking to general arguments.⁷² Both campaigns continue to prove the point that abortion is a litmus test for ideologies of gender relations but also questions over self, body, life chance, in a time of even greater reproductive choice, sexual pressure and social uncertainty. By this measure, the emotional politics of 1979 have much to teach us about going beyond the slogans as well as the opinion polls of public mood, even as they remain a fascinating moment where the Women’s Liberation Movement began to play at a more national political level. Here, we find ourselves still faced with the question of women’s autonomy and relationship, answering which will always be, at heart, an emotional process.

¹ Michèle Barrett, and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, London, NLB, 1982, pp14-15.

² Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, ‘Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory’, *Feminist Theory* 13.2 (2012): 115-29, p116.

³ The Corrie Bill had four objectives: first, to reduce the upper time limit from 28 to 20 weeks; second, to reduce the social grounds for abortion such that it would only be offered where doctors considered there to be a ‘grave risk’ to the woman’s life; third, to extend the ‘conscience’ clause so that medical staff might refuse to take part in abortions on moral grounds; fourth, to restrict the abortion charities by tightening licensing procedures and breaking the link between referral agencies and clinics. The Abortion Act did not and still does not apply to Northern Ireland. See Lesley Hoggart, ‘Feminist Principles Meet Political Reality: The Case of the National Abortion Campaign’, Web, np. Accessed 28 November 2013 <http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk/al6.php>

⁴ Corrie officially withdrew his bill on 26 March 1980, before the Third Reading, whilst the House of Commons was still debating amendments. It had become clear that the Bill would not succeed as it stood and Corrie was unwilling to compromise until it was too late. *Ibid.*, np.

⁵ The Bill was passed by 242-98 votes on 13 July; the rally took place on 14 July. *Ibid.*, np.

⁶ Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s', *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, in H. Smith, (ed), Aldershot, Elgar, 1990, pp189-204.

⁷ Susan Hemmings, 'October 28th', *Spare Rib* 89, December 1979, p237.

⁸ Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979*, London, Allen Lane, 2012, pp xviii-xix

⁹ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982, pp147-48.

¹⁰ Beatrix Campbell, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2010-2013. British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/60, transcript p71-72/track 3. © University of Sussex and The British Library. See also Peta Steel, 'Terry Marsland; Union Leader Who Devoted Her Career to Fighting for Women's Rights', *The Independent* June 25 2011, p42.

¹¹ Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹² Drew Halfmann shows how the British Medical Association initially fought the Abortion Act, for professional rather than ethical interests. 'Historical Priorities and the Responses of Doctors' Associations to Abortion Reform Proposals in Britain and the United States, 1960-1973', *Social Problems*, 50, 4, (2003), pp567-91.

¹³ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974*, London, Allen Lane, 2010, pp430-31. However Anna Coote in *Marxism Today* quotes the much lower figure of a total of 112,055 abortions performed on residents in England and Wales in 1978. See 'Focus: Abortion', *Marxism Today*, (November 1979), pp2.

¹⁴ Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun*, op cit., pp401-402.

¹⁵ Sandbrook, *State of Emergency*, op cit., p694.

¹⁶ Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun*, op cit., p431.

¹⁷ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, op. cit., p148 (their emphasis).

¹⁸ The Labour Abortion Reform Committee was led by Jo Richardson and Maureen Colquhoun and supported by Michael Foot. See Brooke, op cit., pp214-215.

¹⁹ 374 Gray's Inn Road also housed Women's Aid, Rights of Women, Homeless Action and Lesbian Line.

²⁰ Jan McKenley, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2010-2013. British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/60, transcript p73/track 2 © University of Sussex and The British Library.

²¹ Jan McKenley, *op cit.*, transcript p52/track 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings*, London, Virago, 1983. 'Women... How Far Have We Come?'

²⁴ Eileen Fairweather, 'The Feelings Behind the Slogans', in M. Rowe (ed), *Spare Rib Reader*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, p340.

²⁵ Charles M. Tolbert, 'Notes on Church-State Affairs', *Journal of Church and State*, 19, (1977): 609-48. See Brooke, *op cit.*, p212.

²⁶ Hoggart, *op cit.*, np.

²⁷ Fairweather, *op cit.*, p342.

²⁸ James M. Jasper, 'Emotional Dimensions in Social Movements', *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, in D. Snow et al., (eds), Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, pp413-32.

²⁹ Dieter Rucht, 'The Strategies and Action Repertoires of New Movements', in R. Dalton and M. Kuechler (eds), *Challenging the Political Order: New Social and Political Movements in Western Democracies*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, pp156-75.

³⁰ See also Joni Lovenduski, 'Parliament, Pressure Groups, Networks and the Women's Movement: The Politics of Abortion Law Reform in Britain (1967-1983)' in J. Lovenduski and J. Outshoorn (eds), *The New Politics of Abortion*, London, Sage, 1986, pp49-66.

³¹ Michael Litchfield and Susan Kentish, *Babies for Burning: The Abortion Business in Britain*, London, Serpentine Press, 1974.

³² Brooke, *op cit.*, p201.

³³ Coote, *op cit.*

³⁴ Polly Toynbee, 'Behind the Lines: Ironing in the Soul', in K. Cochrane, (ed), *Women of the Revolution: Forty Years of Feminism*, London, Guardian Books, 2010, p124.

³⁵ *Love Your Enemy? The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*, London, Onlywomen Press, 1981, p6. Jessica Wood's letter, reprinted in this publication,

describes campaigning with the NAC as an example of her former oppressed, heterosexually focused life, p52.

³⁶ This approach is also obvious in Coote's article for *Marxism Today*, op cit.

³⁷ 'Black women together: The Need For a United and Autonomous National Black Women's Organisation', *Spare Rib*, 47 (October 1979), pp. 42–45.

³⁸ Gail Lewis, interviewed by Rachel Cohen, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2011-2013. British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/60, transcript p151/track 5. © University of Sussex and The British Library. Natalie Thomlinson summarises black women's approach to reproductive rights politics in 'Race and Ethnicity in the English Women's Movement after 1968', Unpublished dissertation, Cambridge, 2013, p115.

³⁹ The Black Women's Action Committee, Black Unity and Freedom Party, 'The Black Woman', in M. Wandor (ed), *The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain*, 1971, London, Stage 1, 1978, pp84-89. Women in this party included Afruika Bantu (formerly Annette Blair), Sonia Chang, Leila Hassan and probably Gerlin Bean.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p89.

⁴¹ Lewis, Interview, op. cit., p152/track 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p46-53/track 2. See also Lewis, 'Birthing Racial Difference: Conversations with My Mother and Others.' *Studies in the Maternal* 1.1 (2009): 1-21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p48/track 2.

⁴⁴ Kirsten Hearn, interviewed by Rachel Cohen, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2011-2013. British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/60, transcript p67/track 3. © The University of Sussex and The British Library.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p107/track 4.

⁴⁶ McKenley, op cit., p79/track 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p102/track 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p58/track 2.

⁴⁹ Eileen Fairweather, 'I Know a Lot About Wicked Priests, but I'll Still Be Going to Mass This Christmas', *Daily Mail online*, (20 December 2009). Accessed 2 December 2013.

⁵⁰ Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen, *Our Bodies Ourselves: A Health Book by and for Women*, London, Penguin Allen Lane, 1978.

⁵¹ Zoë Fairbairns, *Benefits: A Novel*, Nottingham, Five Leaves, 1998, pii.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp37-39.

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- ⁵³ Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- ⁵⁴ AWAZ was not an acronym but Urdu for 'voice'.
- ⁵⁵ Thomlinson, *op cit.*, p111.
- ⁵⁶ This is expressed in Sandbrook's recent account, *State of Emergency*, *op cit.*, pp368-419. In contrast, see Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.
- ⁵⁷ Randeep Ramesh, 'Britons More Liberal, Cynical and Individual Than 30 Years Ago, Says Survey', *The Guardian* (10 September 2013): p. 13.
- ⁵⁸ A Spare Rib editorial of May 1979 notes that during the two recent attempts in Parliament to restrict abortion rights, Thatcher 'chose (ever the tactician) to vote neither for nor against' (No. 82, p4). However the Daily Mail reported that on 13 July 1979, Thatcher voted with 242 MPs for a reduced version of Corrie's Bill (98 MPs were against). Gordon Greig, Political Editor. "Maggie's move eases changes in abortion." *Daily Mail*, London, (14 July 1979): 9. *Daily Mail Historical Archive*. Web. 28 Nov. 2013.
- ⁵⁹ Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun* *op cit.*, p431
- ⁶⁰ Sandbrook *State of Emergency*, *op cit.*, p427.
- ⁶¹ Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp220-258.
- ⁶² Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012 and Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity, 2007.
- ⁶³ Halfmann, *op cit.*, p585.
- ⁶⁴ Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun*, *op cit.*, pp.439-445.
- ⁶⁵ SPUC claimed a membership of 26,000 and LIFE 20,000 in 1980 (figures cited in Lovenduski and Randall, *op cit.*, p222). In contrast David Bouchier estimated that the women's movement at that time consisted of around 300 organisations and 10,000 active members, though capable of marshalling much larger numbers for particular campaigns. Cited in *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*. London: Macmillan, 1983, p177.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Brooke, *op cit.*, page 194.
- ⁶⁷ 'Changing the Abortion Law', *Daily Mail*, London, (16 July 1979): 6-7. *Daily Mail Historical Archive*. Web. 28 Nov. 2013.

⁶⁸ In April 1990, the 1967 Abortion Act was amended to take account of medical advances to reduce the limit for terminations from 28 to 24 weeks.

⁶⁹ James Kirkup, 'Cut Legal Abortion Limit to 12 Weeks, Jeremy Hunt Says', *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 2013, np.

⁷⁰ Ramesh, *op cit.*, pp1,13.

⁷¹ Patricia Ticineto Clough, and Jean O'Malley Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p3.

⁷² Hannah Betts, 'On Abortion, Beware the Overshare', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2012, p26.