

## “A big change”: Intersectional class and gender in John Sommerfield’s *May Day*

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What is the relationship between class and gender? This question has been both a perennial and problematic one within the women’s movement. Also within academic criticism, the two concepts have often been repeated as part of the mantra of gender, race and class, with class being perfunctorily mentioned, but hardly explored. The link between gender and race has seemed easier to trace, since both represent biological and cultural categories within patriarchy that, while certainly in need of some serious reinventing and restructuring, retain positive qualities that will always be with us. Class, in contrast, is a condition of oppression and exploitation that sits uneasily with the other two or is left out of the gender equation altogether. Thus, as Diane Reay notes, mainstream “feminism in the 1990s appears to have abandoned social class” (Reay 2004: 141). Why is this?

In part it is due to the fact that the debate within second-wave feminism was often aimed at distancing the movement from marxism, with which it had strong ideological ties and from which it felt more and more politically estranged. The tensions between gender and class were at the heart of what became known as the “unhappy marriage” of marxism and feminism, which, as Lydia Sargent recalls, led to a critical free-for-all of mutual suspicion and reproach:

Marxist feminists criticized radical and socialist feminists for being insufficiently materialist and therefore oblivious to class oppression and the class nature of the feminist movement. Radical feminists criticized Marxists and socialists for ignoring the importance of patriarchy as part of the formation of people’s consciousness and for ignoring the importance of people’s psychological need to maintain sexist behaviour. Socialist feminists criticized marxist and radical feminists – the former being overly economic, the latter for being overly subjective and therefore ahistorical. Black feminists criticized all three for being racist and posed a theory which incorporated race as part of feminist analysis. Lesbian feminists in all three areas argued for consciousness raising around heterosexuality as an institution and for the importance of lesbianism as part of feminist analysis and strategy.

(Sargent 1981: xxi)

Michèle Barrett drew similar conclusions about the shortcomings within these different approaches, to the detriment of class as a viable coefficient of gender: "We can see that none of the existing formulations of the class and gender relation is entirely satisfactory, although this situation reflects a general difficulty with the contemporary marxist theory of class as well as a particular difficulty in dealing with the class positions of women" (Barrett 1980: 136-7). As part of the same debate, R. W. Connell argued for a more comprehensive critique of both capitalism and patriarchy as being separate systems of oppression: "Understanding the contemporary world requires the simultaneous analysis of its class and gender structures. The analysis of gender requires in principle an intrinsic theory logically independent of the theory of class" (Connell 1987: 46). Cora Kaplan was also clear in her assertion of feminism's need to be independent of all other political discourses. In her view, the relationship with marxism was neither a marriage nor a separation. Feminism should remain, she asserted, completely unattached:

In spite of the attraction of matrimonial metaphor, reports of feminist nuptials with either mild-mannered bourgeois criticism or macho mustaschioed Marxism have been greatly exaggerated. Neither liberal feminist criticism decorously draped in traditional humanism, nor her red-ragged rebellious sister, socialist feminist criticism, has yet found a place within androcentric literary criticism, which wishes to embrace feminism through a legitimate public alliance. (Kaplan 1985: 956)

Thus, a declaration of complete self reliance was deemed essential in order to extricate feminism from what was seen as the social, political, economic, ideological confusion about the combined impact of patriarchy and capitalism. Patriarchy, it was shown, was older than capitalism, and clearly remained in post-capitalist societies like the Soviet Union. It seemed therefore logical to put forward gender as the primary category of historical oppression.

In recent years, however, there has been a significant change of direction within the debate. Not least because of the influence Black feminists have had in pointing out the often white, middle-class bias of the women's movement. This corrective critique shifted the focus away from viewing the three concepts of gender, race and class as distinct, to a broader understanding of the way they in fact overlap in women's lives. The term that was coined to describe this historic re-encounter between

gender on the one hand and race and class on the other, is intersectionality:

At the heart of the exchanges about intersectionality was the accusation made by black feminists that *white*, bourgeois feminists had only raised the issue of white middle-class women's experiences of oppression and made this the measure of feminist politics, and so had ignored the needs and the reality of the lives of all other women, including black women. (Lutz et al 2011: 2-3)

The basic conclusion is that gender, race and class are “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins, quoted in Lutz et al 2011: 3) and that they “need to be understood in terms of their mutual interactions” (Lutz et al 2011: 3). Thus, from being experientially exclusive, these three areas of oppression are now seen to interconnect, creating critical junctures that capture in a much more complex way the reality of women's lives. As Andersen and Collins put it: “At any moment, race, class, or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's experience” (1998: 3). In other words, intersectionality seeks to answer the more far-reaching question: what is the actual relationship between gender, race and class in terms of women's everyday experience of capitalist patriarchy? More specifically, how does being black, white, homo- or heterosexual, middle- or working-class affect the experience of being a woman? This is, moreover, not just a token recognition of the need to redress a critical imbalance. It responds to a tangible necessity to address the interrelated conditions of situated being within patriarchy and capitalism in order to understand more fully the impact of gender, race and class within these structures of male power. In the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, the feminist critic who first launched the concept of “intersectionality”:

The metaphor upon which intersectionality is scaffolded acknowledges a wide variety of encounters as well as relationships. In this sense, intersectionality applies to everyone – no one exists outside the matrix of power, but the implications of this matrix – when certain features are activated and relevant and when they are not – are contextual. Intersectionality represents a structural and dynamic arrangement; power marks these relationships among and between categories of experience that vary in their complexity. (Crenshaw 2011: 230)

It is this nexus of class and gender experience and above all consciousness that I want to explore in more detail in John Sommerfield's experimental novel *May Day*, which was first published in 1936. It is a work that has received a lot of critical acclaim, both then and since, enabling it to survive the relative obscurity of its 1930s leftwing literary origins to becoming recognized today as a modern classic. Soon after publication it was described for instance by Jack Lindsay as "the best collective novel that we have yet produced in England" (Lindsay 1937: 915). Its dramatic narrative technique, associated with that of reportage, snapshot or photographic montage, also gave it, according to Andy Croft, "the feel and force of documentary non-fiction" (Croft 1990: 260). Stuart Laing praised the broad sweep of the story in which Sommerfield uniquely sought to "reveal the connections and relations" between all sorts of people in London—from factory workers to millionaire bosses—showing how interdependent their fates really were (Laing 1980: 149). He also noted the novel's projection of a "positive" working-class identity, something that was defined by "collective" rather than "individual" consciousness (Laing 1980: 154). This image of a community of urban lives is something to which critics have continued to return. Andy Croft observes for example that there is "no single central character [...] but over 90 named ones whose lives are linked together by the social and economic changes, the industrial and political struggles in London in 'an average year between 1930-40'" (Croft 1990: 255-6). Earlier, in his introduction to the 1984 reprint of the novel, Croft pointed to its sensitive amalgamation of politics and art, stating that Sommerfield's "political arguments only work in so far as they are expressed through the story-lines, the actions and thoughts of persuasively-drawn characters" (Croft 1984: xvi). In a similar vein, John King celebrated the novel as a classic portrayal of London, one that reflected the myriad lives of its inhabitants: "their hopes, successes, mistakes, regrets, dreams, reality" (King 2010: 11). "No single voice dominates, no central character is in control" he concluded (King 2010: 12).

Despite this emphasis on the collective, there is nevertheless a concern with the development of individual consciousness, not least politically, in the novel. The combination of character voices is not amorphous; there is a tangible sense of conflicting personal interests, which, I would argue, is primarily associated with the female characters.

They are the ones who form a connecting narrative throughout the story, which is characterized by their experience of having to live both under patriarchy and capitalism. It is, moreover, this complex intersectional web of gender and class, of action and reaction among the women that gives the novel its particular dynamic. It is also something that critics have tended to miss, often seeing the novel mainly in terms of the relationships between the male protagonists. King is typical in this respect:

The first of the larger characters to appear is James Seton – Communist, seaman, Civil War veteran; like Sommerfield – who is on a ship anchored off Gravesend, waiting to return to London [...] Family connections are clearly important, a concentration of the larger family perhaps. John and James Seton; the powerful (and well-named) Sloane brothers; Sir Edwin and his son Peter. James is a loner in many ways, married to his politics, searching for his brother, but he doesn't find him until late in the novel, and not in the sort of circumstances either would have wanted. By chance James meets an old friend, Pat Morgan, and this other sort of brother is an interesting addition. (King 2010: 12-14)

Of course, there is a reason for this critical bias, since it is the male characters that dominate the narrative, at least in terms of space. Detailed portrayals of women are few and far between. Not only that. Since this is a novel of class struggle, it is the men that traditionally tend to represent its most conscious expression. They make up the different standpoints in this social conflict, personifying its opposing interests. Their understanding of what is at stake is already articulated in their minds and there seems little room for development or change of viewpoint. They complement one another in a masculine world of political ideas. At the top, for example, there is the group of capitalists, the male rulers of the City, who are driven by their function in the economy to defend the fundamental interests of their class:

These gentlemen represented the power, the unresplendent glory of what is rather tactfully named the Capitalist System. Directors of banks, newspapers, mines, armaments, railways, shipping, insurance, housing trusts, employers of governments, at the moment they were acting in their capacity of being the Amalgamated Industrial Enterprises. But they were to be found where and whenever men gather together in the name of the largest financial undertakings.

Now they are met to plan restrictions: they are scheming to close down factories and speed up others, to consume their lesser rivals. They are making their class an ever-smaller and more exclusive society: control of production passes into the hands of an ever-shrinking group. (Sommerfield 2010: 65)

Moreover, these men know very well who their main enemy is within the working class, those who consciously and actively challenge their privilege and power: the Communists. Thus, both groups have already reached a stage where they are locked in ideological battle, fully aware of the irreconcilable antagonisms between them:

*Take Dunbourne, Sloane, Redesdale, Gilray... the men masked with power. Now they are scattered, their masks laid aside. Lights burn for them to illuminate the bare shoulders of silken women, waiters' shirt-fronts, crystal and cutlery, singing mouths and kicking chorus legs. They move in the narrow orbits of their world of pleasure. The night is their day.*

*And for others too, the night is a day. At street corners the platforms are set up, the Communists speak, the Communist voices are sounding now, in the trade-union meetings, in the night shifts of factories, in pubs and upon doorsteps. [...] These are the conscious protagonists of the struggle that extends throughout society; a struggle that is both of minds and things, both between and within classes and individuals. This struggle of men's lives controls the orbits in which they move.*

(Sommerfield 2010: 93-4)

What is more significant but less obvious, however, is that this clash “both of minds and things, both between and within classes and individuals” is for the most part something that takes place among the women, at home and at the factory. It is they who are the object of the struggle to win over the sympathies and support of the workers. Moreover, it is when the women cease thinking of themselves merely as individuals, but instead as part of a collective, that the stalemate of power on the shop floor is challenged and the dynamic of revolt evolves. However, this struggle is never a simplistic one. One of the great strengths of Sommerfield's novel is the way in which it dramatises the complexity of women's lives in a continuum of sometimes very different individual and collective responses to the day-to-day challenge of living under patriarchy.

This gendered image of contrasting levels of consciousness is established, for example, early on in the portrayal of a married working-class couple, John and Martine. John is a factory worker and Martine is a housewife who cooks, cleans, shops and looks after their baby son. It is clear, however, from the outset that there is an emotional strain between these two people, with John feeling drawn to the trade-union struggle at work and Martine acting as a break on his militancy by her dreams of domestic bliss. Thus, these social factors create very different personal

and political hopes and expectations, a theme that also recurs throughout the novel:

John pondered on social phenomena, his mind working slowly and heavily. He was beginning vaguely to sense the direction that his conclusions were taking. But there was something else in his mind too, a feeling that always accompanied these thoughts and opposed them, a kind of inner ache of disloyalty to Martine. He knew what she wanted from life and could sympathize with her little ambitions for a nice home with bright curtains and new furniture; he knew her passion for security and how heavily the fear of poverty bore upon her. To think her husband was a 'Red' would fill her life with a perpetual sense of danger. (Sommerfield 2010: 46)

This male complaint about the conservatism of women underpins in fact the whole story. It appears to be the foremost obstacle to the development of trade-union action and ultimately that of social revolution. Its source is also located within the private sphere outside of the world of work. When Jock, John's fellow carpenter and trade unionist, takes up the question of a strike on May Day, his comments once again reflect this male dismay at the lack of militancy among the women, even those who work at the factory. Although there is the growing realisation that things are in need of change, the implication is that the women are still not a force to be reckoned with. It is, nevertheless, an early intersectional point in the novel where gender and class are shown to impact significantly upon one another:

'I brought up about there being a strike likely here and what we should do,' said Jock. 'Old Kitteridge said something about referring it to the District. "Damn that," says I. "If the others come out, we should too."'

'That's what I feel,' said John. 'But my wife's dead against it, 'specially as I've been out of work so long.'

'It's the wives that break many a strike.'

'She says my conditions are all right and what the others do is their affair.'

'That's the worst with women – no offence meant to your wife, mate, but they're all of a piece. You can't make them see we've all got to stand together. The girls here see it all right, 'cos it's *their* rotten condition more'n anyone's.'

(Sommerfield 2010: 45)

As Michèle Barrett reminds us in this context, the family under capitalism forms an important source of ideological support for the status quo, not least in terms of reproducing conventional class and gender roles: "The structure of the household and the ideology of the family combine to form a system that has important effects on the consciousness

of the working class and hence on the possibilities of political action” (1980: 210). This is particularly the case in working-class families where the husband is the sole breadwinner. Women are isolated at home and class conflict appears alien to their world of the individual family unit. This is certainly the case with Martine, John’s wife, who remembers what hardship John’s previous period of unemployment imposed on them. Thus, any talk of a strike on May Day is seen by her as a direct threat to their existence, especially now that they have a baby. Her lack of sympathy for the cause is also linked to the isolation of her daily routine which is devoted to serving her husband and child. Clearly a case of existence determining consciousness:

When the stew was on, she would have some bread and cheese and a cup of tea. Then there was washing to do all afternoon. The time would go by so quickly until it came to those last moments of pleasurable suspense while she waited for John to come in. This was the time she loved, when the stewpot was gently bubbling out delicate smells and the table ready, and there was nothing for her to do but sit listening for the sound of John’s footsteps on the stairs.

After she had bought the meat she turned to go home, out of the noise of the market, through quiet, shabby streets, slums of houses that have come down in the world.

In front of her, painted in white on a long blank wall, was ALL OUT ON MAY DAY; MARCH FROM RAG FAIR AT 12.30 in huge letters. This somehow threw a shadow across her light-heartedness, the shadow of a world she feared and could not comprehend. (Sommerfield 2010: 61-2)

The tracing of such differentiated levels of feelings, hopes and fears that are sometimes only half formulated or understood, is what make Sommerfield’s novel such a psychologically convincing panorama of people’s lives in London in the 1930s. It is this particular aspect of the narrative that retains its power even today: how individual perceptions of reality are moulded by the everyday and then thrown into a flux by the sudden and dramatic changes that occur. It is also a gendered spotlight, since in the novel it is the will of the women that forms the main ideological focus of the struggle that emerges. It is their participation as members of a collective that becomes decisive. Even though this movement forms part of the novel’s overriding political message of May Day mobilisation, the personal obstacles in the way are still not underestimated.

However, if there is any shortcoming in the novel’s collective narrative, it lies in its predominantly masculinist point-of-view. Not least

in the somewhat voyeuristic depiction of the factory women as being almost entirely defined by their bodies as young girls. Moreover, their leap towards consciousness is seen as a tentative one, dependent on the timely intervention of “class leaders” who will have to guide this “mass” of women forward. There is therefore no irony intended in the description of these women as the physical “raw material of history”:

Blondes and brunettes, beauties and uglies, good girls and bad girls, virgins and tarts, so much flesh, so many thoughts and feelings, so many drab, cheerless destinies, so many who might have been born at some other time in some other place to live the lives of human beings. At least once the moment will come in each of these lives when they will stop and think, ‘What have we been born for, why do we live as we do, toiling only to eat, eating only to toil...’ This moment may come and be forgotten in an instant, or it may be a sudden revelation altering the whole course of a life.

These silly girls with their synthetic Hollywood dreams, their pathetic silk stockings and lipsticks, their foolish strivings to escape from the cramped monotony of their lives, are the raw material of history. When their moment of deep discontent comes to them in a mass, taking form in their class leaders, then there are revolutions. What happens to the revolutions depends upon other facts – automatic lathes for instance. (Sommerfield 2010: 49-50)

In contrast to these working-class women who sell their labour power, another female strategy of survival is depicted in the person of Jenny, a former factory girl who has become the mistress of Dartry, a company director. In a stereotype of the traditional housewife, a role that consciously parodies that of Martine, Jenny waits on him in the luxurious flat in which she has been set up, providing a source of sexual service and relaxation away from both his real wife and work at the factory. There is without doubt a certain ironic scepticism intended in this context, however, through the conflicting expectations that are revealed about their class and gender roles. In both cases, there is a sense of play-acting on Jenny’s part that subverts the escapist pleasure of their relationship:

Now she kissed him, took his arm and led him in. ‘I’ve got a lovely dinner for you,’ she said. He sighed, sank into an armchair, and she sat on his knee without anything being said between them, yet as if he had invited her.

How quiet, how peaceful am I now, thinks Dartry. Here in this domain of naked desire I am at ease, a man, instead of a figure behind a desk masked with power and feared or hated, or a husband whose home is no home, whose wife and children are strangers [...]

She pressed his hand to her left breast (he likes me to do that, she thinks) and kissed the top of his head. 'Are you glad to see me?' she said caressingly.

'Am I glad ...? You're free of the factory now, but you know how you felt in the evening when you were through with your work ...'

'You hate it too. It's funny. We never thought of you like that.'

'Little bitches ...' he smiled. And she began to talk of the factory girls as he liked her to, of their amours, their desires and adventures, using their frank, coarse words ... (Sommerfield 2010: 91-2)

Although there is an apparent merging of personal interest in this scene, where both mistress and master, worker and boss, seem to reach a point of contact in their separate lives, this moment of class harmony is questionable. Jenny is well aware that she is selling her body to the factory owner, albeit in different circumstances and at a more favourable price. Her physical capacity is still commodified and there is no deep emotional bond between them. It is an individual solution to the exploitation of the system that Jenny chooses to adopt. At the same time, she has no illusions about the commitment of her employer to her future well-being. It is merely a transaction that affords her more personal gain and comfort that she received as a factory girl:

Jenny had not grown too old for her job, nor had she been displaced by new machinery. She was warm-hearted, sentimental, but she knew clearly what life had to offer her, and without questioning she took her chance. Now she had a flat, a bank account, a car and also a lover. Once or twice a week Dartry visited her. Gravely, unthinkingly, she submitted to his embraces, a little grateful to this stranger who had changed her life, who had taken her virginity, yet who remained a man outside her life. She drew her money from the bank and saved most of it; she never asked for gifts or jewels but was grateful when he gave them. A day would come when she would be quite free; this life would be over and forgotten. (Sommerfield 2010: 91)

There is a blurring here of class and individual consciousness between the experience of factory labour and the mercenary sexual transaction, although the individual rationalisation of it is compelling. For Jenny, it represents a form of escape from the drudgery and anonymity of factory work. As Priscilla Alexander notes in the relationship between prostitution and women's attitudes to work in general: "First person accounts by women in the sex industry often mention economics as a major factor, coupled with rebellion at the restricted and tedious jobs available to them" (Alexander 1998: 344). It is another one of those intersectional points in the novel where the connection between class and

gender is shown to be fraught with social and psychological tensions. At the cost of repressing her feelings as a woman, Jenny is able to function as the paid mistress of her boss in order to liberate herself from a life of wage slavery. Despite the fact that, as elsewhere in the story, we only get a fleeting view of these people in situations that pass before the panoramic lens of the narrative and then disappear, it remains a telling moment, full of personal and political implications: the individual fate of a lower class woman trying to negotiate the limitations imposed on her by a system of male privilege. As Kimberlé Crenshaw writes in relation to intersectionality as a critical point-of-departure, the overlapping focus that it provides helps to reveal “the sometimes hidden or marginalised dynamics of power and exclusion across the social terrain” (Crenshaw 2011: 233). Part of what I am trying to show here is that Sommerfield’s novel brings such intersectional connections very much to life in these moving, microcosmic close-ups of the mundane.

Another female figure that acts as a more overtly political focalizer of the story, this time in the transition from individual to collective, is that of Ivy Cutford, a factory worker and Communist. Like her male counterparts, it is clear that Ivy is already fully class-conscious. She is a politically schooled militant who from the very beginning is depicted as a potential source of social change: “She is a communist, one among two hundred and forty. She can’t do much perhaps, but circumstances do a lot for her. The girls are beginning to take a good deal of notice of what she says because they like her” (Sommerfield 2010: 50). Although Ivy provides a link between the private lives of the girls and the sense of group solidarity that is in process of emerging, her own personal life has less intrinsic correspondence. Her status as a single woman is what defines her home life, just as her communist politics characterise her role at work. It seems as though the two spheres are separate, however, and there is little contact between them. There is even the implication that political commitment always comes at a personal cost, particularly for a woman:

Now, walking through the soft April air that stirred with amorous thoughts, going back to her lonely bus ride, to her lonely little room, the memory of those glances aroused in her an intolerable longing for a lover, a longing to be desired for once instead of liked, to be followed by amorous looks through the soft night. She was so often the confidant of the other girls’ stories of their love affairs, their pick-ups, their little exciting adventures ... she laughed with them, commiserated with them. Nothing like that happened to her. It was not love she ached for now, it was not lust;

companionship she had, but she wanted to be of dear importance in some man's life, and she feared she never would. (Sommerfield 2010: 111)

This dichotomy forms another of the recurring motifs of the novel: the search for love and companionship. It is shared by almost everyone in the story—capitalist and worker alike. It is as if this condition of existential alienation affects everyone in the big city. There is little hope of closing the gap completely between the private and the public. However, it is also in the lives of the women that its lack is felt most poignantly. John King claims that in the novel there is one exception, however: “Everyone is looking for love, whatever their backgrounds, but it is John and Martine who are happiest together—making do, Martine shopping in Portobello Road market while John grafts at the factory, appreciating what they have because it has been earned” (King 2010: 14). This idealisation of the married couple ignores the fact that there are serious ideological disagreements between them, something that is never resolved in the story. It is as though the personal is always at odds with the political. James, a sailor and another Communist in the novel, admits to the same kind of lack of private fulfilment, albeit one he tries to relieve in a typically male chauvinist manner:

‘I’ve always had an idea of a girl, a comrade, you know, someone you could talk things over with ... But I never seem to meet them. And when I come ashore, like I am now, feeling randy and with money in my pocket, I seem to get hold of the first good-looking tart I meet, and she lasts me till my money’s gone and I’ve got to get to sea again.’ (Sommerfield 2010: 115)

While this particular gender issue remains, the pivotal scenes in the novel’s political trajectory shift more and more towards the working conditions of the women themselves, where the speed-up of production leads to an accident involving a girl fainting over her machine. This is the moment when the general dissatisfaction of the women boils over and they are impelled into group action. It is also Ivy who is at the centre of this development in which the nexus between individual and collective takes on a transformatory momentum, not least after a decisive intervention by her. Thus, the novel’s ideological premiss about the interdependence of leaders and followers is played out on the factory floor, providing the political lesson that is at the core of the novel:

Ivy Cutford gripped the edges of her seat tightly: her moment had come, and she didn't feel prepared to take it. She was trembling with excitement and nervousness. She knew so clearly what she had to do, it wasn't anything hard. She tried to think of Lenin, of Dimitrov in the Nazi court-room, of the heroes of her class who had not flinched before anything when their moment came. What she had to do was nothing ... 'I must get up, I must get up,' she was saying to herself, and suddenly she sprang up and stood on the form. 'Girls,' she said, 'listen to me a minute.'

(Sommerfield 2010: 157)

While the male role models she refers to would not have hesitated politically, there is the gendered convention of her own lack of confidence as a woman about how the other girls will react to her speech. It is nevertheless a key intersectional development when the factory women begin to see that they not only share common interests, but that they also have the power to protest. The voice of the narrator also intrudes at this critical juncture in order to bring home the ideological significance of such a moment for the instruction of the reader:

Everywhere the accumulated bitterness of weeks and months and years, the dammed-up, painfully anaesthetized resentments of hardship and poverty, were bursting forth like this.

'Men make history – but not as they please.' This is what happens, a speech, an accident, an insult, a word that seems to initiate events, is like a switch releasing electric power. (Sommerfield 2010: 160)

Despite this dramatic shift in female consciousness, it is typical, however, that the militancy of the women is quickly channelled into a works committee, which is run by the men. Even though it is the women who start the action, the implication is that it is the men who will take over from now on. When Ivy asks for a joint committee, the response of the men is at first one of predictable surprise at this new-found female solidarity. There is, without doubt, a male principle working through the novel that even if the women finally get to act, it is as foot soldiers: it is the men who will ultimately lead them to victory. Nevertheless, at this stage, it is the women who act as catalysts of the struggle:

There was an uncertain, approving murmur, and Millman jumped up quickly and said, very fast, 'Look 'ere, we've talked and talked about this works committee, and we've nearly all been for it, only lots of us've said it's no use without the girls and they'd never stand together with us. Well, they've shown us they've got more guts than wot we 'ave –'

'They've bloody well given us a lead and it's up to us to follow it,' Bill Ridley chipped in. (Sommerfield 2010: 159)

However, as the novel moves towards a climactic clash with the police at the very end, the thoughts and actions of the women are more and more subordinated to those of the men. When another horrendous accident occurs on the production line, this time tearing off the scalp a girl at a machine, the event finally galvanises the whole factory to come out on strike. It is once again Ivy who reacts with another crucial speech, but it is the last individual female voice we hear in the story. Moreover, it is Ivy making a case for unity between women and men as workers, where the women are appealed to because of their class and not their sex. Thus the "big change" that is projected is on a social level, not one of gender.

'Fellow workers,' she said, her voice rather shrill and unsteady at first but gathering strength and confidence as she went on. 'Today is May Day. It's a day when our class demonstrates against the bosses all over the world. We know about the busmen and the other strikes, in some places there's a general strike and everything's stopped for today while the workers are marching in the streets. Well, we've come out today too, against our rotten conditions and to revenge poor Mabel. And now we're out I think our place is along with the others in the demonstration. I know the papers say it's all a stunt of the Communists to stir up trouble. But I know too that the men and women who are marching to the park now are the same as us – workers, workers protesting against their bad conditions, just as we are, and marching to demand that things should be better, that there should be a change. There *is* a big change needed and it's only our class that'll make it. I'd like to say a lot more, but time's short, and I'm not used to speaking. I'm going to ask Alf Millman to put it to the vote for us to join in with the others and march to the park.'

(Sommerfield 2010: 230-1)

Thus, in another intersectional twist, class prevails, but it is at the expense of gender. It is significant for example that Ivy asks Alf Millman to put the strike vote to the women instead of her, even though it would seem more logical for her to do it. It is another sign of the shift in power to the men, now that the women are mobilised. Moreover, on the works committee, the women representatives will be in a minority, even though the work force is made up of a majority of women. Another small but significant intersectional detail in the novel is that there are no immigrants in the factory, the working class is constructed as ethnically homogeneous in the novel. Martine, who is French, is the one exception

in the story, but she personifies a domestic resistance, not to the bosses, but to militant struggle in general. It seems that on this international workers' day in London, the revolution will be very much an English one.<sup>1</sup>

The climax of the novel is, as its title suggests, the May Day demonstration itself that culminates in a violent confrontation. Again, typically, it is the force and initiative of the male workers fighting with the police that define the event. Even though there is a vague reference to the way all workers are being radicalised by their participation in the march: "Men and women who have never marched in a demonstration are becoming revolutionaries in the course of a few hours" (Sommerfield 2010: 239), it is the men who provide the active leadership: Wilson, the Chief Marshal, Bill Riley, John and Jock. Even more decisively, when James is beaten over the head and killed by a mounted policeman, this ultimate sacrifice is of a man, something that immediately supersedes Mabel's horrific injury earlier in the factory. In contrast also, James's death becomes the iconic event that transforms everything, providing the novel with a heroic conclusion, a passage full of male revolutionary mobilisation and stormy maritime imagery:

The Marble Arch is islanded in a dark sea of caps in whose midst slowly move forward the red sails of banners. For two hours the contingents have been marching in.

Last of all come the East London marchers, the band playing slowly, a revolutionary song to a funeral beat. The workers seethe around the base of the Arch like an angry sea, and the noise comes up to the men at the top like the sound of a storm as James's flag-draped body is held up and saluted by a hundred thousand clenched fists raised in the air, a hundred thousand shouts of 'Red Front' [...]

Everyone has agreed on the need for a big change. (Sommerfield 2010: 240-1)

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect of the novel's ethnic homogeneity could in part be explained by the changes in policy of the Communist Party towards a broader united front with the Labour Party at this time. In order to promote the Communist Party's democratic credentials, there was the beginning of a shift in political emphasis towards a more British road to socialism, a debate in which Sommerfield himself was an active participant (see Croft 1984:xiii and Bounds 2012: 179-233.).

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In her contribution to the ongoing intersectional debate, Beverley Skeggs discusses in an ideologically more discerning way some of the underlying reasons for the neglect of the link between gender and class and the critical imbalance that this can produce:

[C]lass has almost disappeared from feminist analyses, even those claiming a materialist feminist position (see, for instance, Hennessy, 1993). This may be because in the past the majority of feminist debates on class have focused on very detailed Marxist analysis of the family, the labour market and the value of domestic labour (Breugal, 1979; Brenner and Ramas, 1984) or it may be that it has disappeared because class itself is so hard to define [...] The retreat from class in feminist theory, McRobbie (1982) argues, has had an important function of enabling other spheres of women's lives to be investigated such as the state and the law. But it seems that the baby has been thrown out with the bath water. To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it. It does not mean that women would experience inequality any differently; rather, it would make it more difficult for them to identify and challenge the basis of the inequality which they experience. Class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representation. (Skeggs 1997: 6)

More recently, she has returned to this same critical question to reaffirm the need for gender studies to focus more on class as a key site of both representation and resistance: "Analysis of class should therefore aim to capture the ambiguity produced through struggle and fuzzy boundaries, rather than to fix it in place in order to measure and know it. Class formation is dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic" (Skeggs 2004: 5). In Skeggs's intersectional view, it is high time for a re-evaluation of class and gender as complementary concepts, but now on equal terms.

One of the aims of this essay on John Sommerfield's *May Day* has been to show how such an intersectional refocusing on both gender and class can provide a point of critical departure in order to explore not only the way the novel portrays the power relations within patriarchal structures both at home and at work. It also allows for an unpicking of the fabric of these connections between the women and men affected by them. As Ann Garry writes: "Intersectionality helps to point us to fruitful and complex marginalized locations. It does not do the work for us, but tells us where to start and suggests kinds of questions to ask" (Garry 2011: 828). While previous critics of the Sommerfield's novel have

tended to ignore these aspects, it has been the adoption of an intersectional approach that has alerted my own reading to some of these deeper contradictions within the text. Previously, no one seems to have noticed the prominent thematic part the women play in the novel. Thus, when gender and class impact on one another, it is the task of the intersectional critic to try to reveal more fully the implications of this encounter: “This means that the intersectional approach challenges us to look at the different social positioning of women (and men) and to reflect on the different ways in which they participate in the reproduction of these relations” (Lutz et al. 2011: 8).

In his 1984 postscript to his novel, John Sommerfield described it as a piece of “early 30s communist romanticism” (Sommerfield 1984: xix), a reference perhaps in part to the prominent role given to members of the British Communist Party in the story. In this way, he declared, “it has become an historical novel” (Ibid). However, the story offers much more than a nostalgic glimpse back to the leftwing political commitment of the 1930s. By shifting attention to the women in the novel, I have tried to show how Sommerfield’s collective portrayal manages to capture the nuances of gender and class experience by providing some rare insights into what it is like to be a working-class woman in a world of patriarchal capitalism. Since these oppressive structures remain very much alive and kicking in society today, Sommerfield’s novel represents more than mere literary and social history. As an attempt to dramatise those situations when the personal becomes political, where gender and class consciousness overlap, it still has the power to illuminate the modern condition.

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