

# After Thatcher: still trying to piece it all together

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Prospects for change, then and now

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**S**heila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright wrote *Beyond the Fragments* a generation ago. Inspired by the activism of the 1970s and faced with the imminent triumph of the right under Margaret Thatcher, they drew on their experiences as feminists and socialists to offer ideas for a project that would help create stronger bonds of solidarity and alliance, through the formation of a new kind of left movement. Since then the obstacles facing those struggling for radical social transformation have grown formidably: we have seen - among other disasters - the decline of the left as a national force, the massive impact of the neoliberal agenda, the collapse of manufacturing industry, greatly increased environmental problems and a widening inequality gap.

In spring 2013 *Beyond the Fragments* was republished by Merlin Press, with the addition of new essays by the three original writers who once more sought to address the question, more than thirty years later, of how to bring together a range of upsurges of rebellion into effective, open, democratic, left coalitions. At a launch event for the new edition, the authors reflected on some of the key changes that have taken place over the last three decades; and Pragna Patel, who has been a member of Southall Black Sisters since the end of the 1970s, was also invited to give her perspective on the arguments in the book. An edited version of these contributions is reproduced below.

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## Sheila Rowbotham: Beyond the beyond

We have been hearing a lot about scroungers since the recession set in. In the media it really has been scroungers, scroungers, scroungers. It is funny how scroungers are always poor people, whereas the rich get classified as 'deserving'. You could write a fascinating history of scroungers from the sturdy beggars of Tudor times to the present day. I have a strong suspicion that scroungers tend to make their entry when ruling classes are getting twitchy about their grip.

The scroungers of 2013 are being subject to the same abuse as the workers who went on strike in the Winter of Discontent in the late 1970s, when the first edition of *Beyond the Fragments* was published. The myth of the insatiable greed of car workers, gravediggers and NHS public sector workers - many of whom were low-paid women - has always puzzled me. And all the more so because I repeatedly hear it from pundits who are earning far more than the strikers they berate. In fact, in the late 1970s inflation was eating away at the wages of the Winter of Discontent workers, and this followed on from a financial crisis that wasn't of their own making.

Familiar? When I was a child I used to get told to be good - otherwise the bogeyman would come and get me. It took me several years to work out that the bogeyman was just an invention to scare me.

I recently went to a meeting in Tony Benn Hall in Bristol on blacklisting. Electricians, bricklayers, wood workers and transport workers talked about being expelled from jobs for raising queries about pay rises or health and safety concerns that affected both the safety of workers and the public. They described an atmosphere of fear, which constantly loomed over their lives. One said, 'Anyone who is an active trade unionist in the private sector has to be a very brave person'. Because I am old I can remember the days when this would have been inconceivable, and his words made me realise how much had been lost. Nevertheless, workers continue to resist - although only a diminishing minority are willing to risk their livelihoods to do so.

Many people have come to see our gangster-style capitalism as inevitable, the only show in town. It has become internalised, a kind of reflex. The other day I heard two shop assistants in Covent Garden discussing a car parked in Long Acre without a permit. It was red and gleaming and looked as if it was about to take off into space. The young woman thought it was wrong and should be reported but the

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young man explained, 'You have a Ferrari, you park where you like'. Try as I might I could not detect a trace of irony in his voice. And, of course, gangster capitalism's appeal is freedom and respect: the red Ferrari parked where you like.

All this we know. The problem for the left is how to challenge it effectively.

The question of 'how' to do so has many dimensions to it: when we wrote BTF we were mainly preoccupied with the process of change. At that time, we had a credible word for what we wanted: 'socialism'. We saw this not as dogma but as something that could be renewed and recreated through the understandings of a new movement - making the particular an element in the making of a new universality.

Well nothing like that happened of course. Instead there was a fundamental reversal. Socialism came to be seen as incredible.

I still identify with the word 'socialism', but I realise that many others on the left no longer do so. To avoid unnecessary hair-splitting, I will say, then, that a vital component in 'how' is imagining and articulating what else might be possible - what is beyond the beyond? And in outlining what might be, I think the collective, co-operative, associational social vision that emerged from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century working-class movement remains as vital as ever.

However, as we argued in BTF, new social movements had brought other equally vital insights - such as the need to release the potential in everyone and allow the full expression of their individuality, and the need to transform the way human beings relate to and perceive one another. And although these principles were present within the socialist tradition, they were subordinate; they had been buried or had grown increasingly muffled. In contrast, these principles were fundamental necessities to the movements around race, women's liberation and gay liberation. They were embedded in them from the very beginning. It was impossible for these movements to start without these assertions about personal liberation; and their shifting focus uncovered new arenas of resistance. The recognition that we need to retain the strengths of the labour movement, while also being open to new movements' ability to reveal different aspects of injustice and inequality, is as relevant now as it was in the late 1970s.

That we live in a profoundly unfair society is manifest in the continuation of exploitation and the possession of things. But it is also evident in society's inability

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to deliver the means of life - access to fulfilling work, health, fresh air, an unpolluted environment, leisure, beauty, ideas, communication. Less tangibly (and beyond measure) gangster capitalism imprints its values on how people are regarded and how people experience themselves.

I think changing Britain in 2013 means going beyond single issues and specific identities, beyond the left, beyond even the mobilisation of the have-nots: people who have bought into aspirations for freedom and respect that are locked up in acceptance of inequality and individualism must be convinced that self-regard and individuality can be differently known. And we have to expose the selfishness that has been encouraged and enhanced since the late 1970s as a con - as unjust, destructive of human happiness, wasteful, ugly and short-term, and the perpetuator of fear, mistrust and smarm.

Many people who do not see themselves as being on the left feel a strong sense of unease and dissatisfaction in their daily lives, and it is only by connecting with these feelings that we can create a movement and a power that can go beyond protest. We need to imagine transformation through the everyday, in order to awaken new hope that beyond the beyond really could be so much *better*.

### **Lynne Segal: Learning from our defeats**

We all reflect the time we enter politics. And for those of us who were involved in the first edition of *Beyond the Fragments*, this returns us to that period of extraordinarily rich and extraordinarily diverse left politics of the late 1960s. I see this as a politics that was, transiently, so confident and, for the most part, so confidently, even aggressively, so 'masculine', in voice, style and substance. This was despite the numbers of young bushy-tailed women who were taking to the streets in equal numbers with men round and about 1968.

Something had to give! And that, as we now tell our 'grandchildren', was the birth of Women's Liberation. It *had* to happen!

'Goodbye to all that' - proclaimed the startling voice of the American radical feminist and poet Robin Morgan, when occupying the counter-cultural New Left magazine *RAT* in New York in January 1970. However, most of us newly born feminists were less dismissive of that utopian moment in the 1960s. In particular,

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we were less dismissive of the thoughts of the New Left, with its notions of building politics from below, recognition of the importance of culture and personal life in politics, alongside the significance of anti-imperialist struggles and anti-war protests. In many ways, it was precisely the spirit of the New Left, as re-articulated by feminism, which would prove the fullest expression of that form of New Left politics.

With some pleasure, I see that the 1970s are now becoming a little more fashionable; there was even a move to try and relaunch the old *Spare Rib*, begun in 1972 (which for copyright reasons has now appeared as *Feminist Times*). This pleases me, since for many feminists of the left the 1970s really was, and ever will be, our decade. For early second-wavers, it was a time when we argued, campaigned, and studied, ceaselessly, wanting everything to change: equality, personal liberation, community building, peace and international solidarity with the oppressed everywhere, were all equally on our mind. Southall Black Sisters began life in 1979, and although Black feminist voices and the significance of other more distinct women's identities were sometimes submerged within that first decade of women's liberation, the seeds were sown for them to come strongly to the fore in the following decade.

Written at the very close of the 1970s, it was the spirit of that decade that BTF tried to capture. Women might still be lacking in confidence - most of us were then - but we were not lacking in hope or the marching spirit to combat inequalities and oppression by whatever non-violent means we could muster.

Both the pamphlet, appearing in 1979, and then the book, in 1980, were striking successes. Even our critics on the left agreed, including those in the Leninist parties, such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose vanguardist practices Sheila's essay was written to critique. Every far-left publication reviewed the initial pamphlet, which sold out in months, after which every left publisher wanted to publish it, until Merlin Press did so in 1980.

What times these were, when we all spoke so confidently about a 'socialist future'.

However, as it turned out, not everyone on the left, whether in the movements or the organised left, was willing, or felt able, to try to unite across their differences. The BTF conference held in Leeds in 1980 was attended by thousands, but Richard

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Kuper, who chaired a large workshop at that event, remembers that the majority of people in his session saw little reason to go beyond the groups they were in. No doubt we could have run the conference with a clearer vision of exactly how we hoped to build on it. However, the point of recalling those times nowadays is only to wonder what, if anything, we might learn from the difficulties of forming coalitions, then or now.

I certainly don't have time to address the rise and fall of all the different attempts that did occur trying to build solidarity and coalitions against the relentless rise of the right over the last thirty-five years. Things fall apart, as we know, for many reasons: sectarianism, marginalisation, exhaustion. Most decisively, however, the growth of the left failed because of defeats, innumerable defeats, during the long years of Tory rule. With the powerful Tory press firmly behind her, Thatcher manoeuvred her forces - directly and indirectly - to crush all sites of protest - above all, the trade unions and the power of local government. She defeated the miners and allowed manufacturing to decline, abolished the GLC - one key site of resistance under Ken Livingstone, sold off public housing, and began the squeeze on welfare, all with the underlying aim of giving free reign to corporate capital and the City.

'Markets know best' was the mantra: promoting corporate capital's increasing stranglehold on nation states and, ironically, in the end, even over any real notion of 'free markets', able to compete with corporate capital. This is the precise economic terrain of neoliberalism.

The backstory of neoliberalism is now familiar. Above all the selling off the public sector to private corporations increasingly undermined the possibilities for any genuine democratic accountability. Under Thatcher, poverty doubled, unemployment tripled, inequality soared and social mobility declined. With such defeats, pessimism grew. Meanwhile, with economic survival more precarious, the social networks sustaining progressive practice withered.

Thatcher never did win a majority, but she undoubtedly helped consolidate a new consensus, which is why Thatcherism survives. Under Thatcher, the left was progressively weakened, while the right and its willing messengers in the media were busily inciting populist divisions: the strong versus the weak, the employed versus the unemployed, authority versus permissiveness, Britain versus the rest of the world (apart from the USA) - in order to maintain the myth of Britain's continuing pre-eminence in a world it no longer ruled.

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Yet in the end New Labour's record in office after being elected in 1997 would prove equally damaging for any re-emergence of the left that Thatcher had defeated. Thirteen years of New Labour in government did so little to reverse the victories of the right under Thatcher, least of all ideologically. Whether on welfare or immigration issues, it remained silent on how little welfare fraud there was compared to those being denied the benefits they were entitled to; it never mentioned how rarely immigrants gained access to housing or other benefits, nor how much they contributed to the UK economy. Worst of all, Labour accepted, indeed furthered, Thatcher's deregulation of finance capital and the opening up the City to an influx of international capital. This in turn fed the speculative frenzy that encouraged the vast quantities of debt that would eventually trigger the global meltdown of 2008, and the economic mess of today.

Nevertheless, after so much banking mayhem, the tabloids today still intone the old falsehoods, allowing this Tory coalition to pretend that the cause of the current economic crisis lies with New Labour's welfare policy, rather than market greed and financial recklessness. Thus, despite the fact that Thatcher's economic legacy failed catastrophically, her tactics of privatisation and ever-deeper welfare cuts as well as her contempt for the poor continue more forcefully than ever.

However, resistance has been growing. Indeed, it has been breaking out everywhere. Moreover, feminism - and definitely a radical form of feminism - is on the rise again. There is increased resistance to the endemic, indeed growing, violence and sexual abuse of women across the globe, as well as the austerity measures that can be seen to be hitting women hardest.

Thus from the East to the West, South to North, there have been upsurges of the unemployed, trade unionists and green activists, as well as feminists, all demanding a fairer share of their country's resources, beyond restrictions of class, gender, religion, sexuality.

Yet to succeed now, even more than forty years ago, these modes of resistance have once more to reach beyond the fragments, and beyond the heat of action, to build movements or coalitions that can survive, before defeat, fragmentation and exhaustion again take their toll on rebellious spirits. They also need to engage with the state and have some impact on government policies if they are to confront the worst brutalities of the neoliberal agenda that is currently hegemonic. The question is, with so little faith in the social democratic practices of the past, can 'democracy

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in action' be preserved to form a coherent, forceful and intelligible opposition to corporate capital, and to the wars, inequalities and oppression it both produces and tolerates?

If we actually believe in the possibility of a peaceful and fairer distribution of the world's resources, and less environmentally polluting uses of them so as to preserve the possibility of a sustainable future, protest must somehow, some of the time, cohere into something more enduring and able to keep pushing for change; it must find ways to influence those in government, potentially in government, or in some other way close to the levers of power. Can it be done?

New Labour's failure to reverse Thatcherite policies - from continued privatisation of state assets, to neglect of housing, not to mention the invasion of Iraq - reinforced contempt for party politics. Moreover, if we factor in knowledge of the effects of climate change and the prospect of imminent water and food deprivation across swathes of the world, it becomes hard to know whether fear of possible catastrophic futures will strengthen or weaken the seeds of hope in the possibilities for a better, more democratic and egalitarian world. Reasons for despair lie in how easily people can be polarised, turning on all those less fortunate than themselves and declaring them enemies. The greater the levels of inequality between people the easier this is to accomplish. Moreover, this production of enemies happens not just in the rhetoric of the right but also on the left, if we turn potential allies into opponents.

Reasons for hope in the possibilities for any new and more vibrant left, again, will only come from attempts to consolidate ties between any and all still sharing a vision of a more democratic and egalitarian world. This means cherishing rather than disdain our different forms of resistance in the face of the heedless hegemony of contemporary corporate capital, and the pollution that comes in its wake.

The last point I would make, however, is that the old anti-statism of some of the left seems far too closely attuned to the dominant refrains of neoliberalism - with its versions of 'getting government off our backs' - to be useful as a form of resistance. We have to keep fighting for at least some notion of the caring, redistributive state that this current government is so determined to destroy. With our still unchanged electoral system, in the UK this means once more trying to strengthen the left of the Labour Party (whether from the inside or the outside). Or for some it will mean strengthening left forces within the Green Party, operating in coalition with Labour,

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combining joint goals of working for a safer environment within a more egalitarian and peaceful world.

Different strategies are possible, and the most effective always hard to gauge, given our formidable defeats in confronting the economic triumph of neoliberalism, with its undermining of democratic structures. All one can hold on to is that the future always in some sense remains open, as we try to learn from our past at a time when progressive solutions overall get only harder to envisage and implement.

### **Hilary Wainwright: Breaking the bond between knowledge and authority**

At the moment there are many exciting signs of activists and movements converging, of people working out ways of strengthening scattered resistance - in initiatives like the People's Assembly, the Kilburn Manifesto and Ken Loach's attempt to open debate about a left party.

And this also includes initiatives coming out of specific campaigns, for example from the camp to reclaim power outside the West Burton Power Station in Nottingham, which is linking climate change to struggles against authority and the rethinking of power. Or the linking up of local struggles harnessing fury against the bedroom tax, which is driving people to work together around welfare and housing campaigns.

But any sense of excitement is also tempered with a sombre awareness of the rise of the populist right. And there is also an awareness that, up until now, we have failed to find a way of co-ordinating the collective strength of resistance in a way which reaches out to all those feeling unease and disaffection with dominant powers. We have often been involved in what at first seemed very promising moments of convergence - the Beyond the Fragments conference, the founding of the Socialist Movement after the 1984/85 miners strike, for example. But these have not been sustained. We have failed to find appropriate ways to combine, bring together or connect, in a sustained and thoughtful way, all of the different forms of dissent that have arisen in response to the inhumanity of neoliberalism; we have not found the means to connect the widely shared desire for social justice with a truly egalitarian and emancipatory alternative.

Despite the death of Thatcher, Thatcherism persists. After her death, eulogies

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were delivered by political leaders from across the political spectrum, who remained in awe of her ability to drive change as if there was only one direction of change, driven by the market. On top of the destruction that Thatcher wrought, she also managed to establish that change only meant the unleashing of the market. There can be no alternatives. And New Labour followed her lead. But the idea that there was no alternative to Thatcherism is a lie, a still active, deeply embedded lie, almost an institutional lie. I want to reassert the fact that there *was* an alternative - the choice was not bureaucratic collectivism versus market-based individualism. Alternatives were emerging in the 1970s and early 1980s, and it was these helped inspire us to write *Beyond the Fragments*. There was potential then for a different course beyond both the command economy and the 'free' in fact corporate-dominated market.

Before Thatcherism there were already changes beginning of a completely different kind: from 1968 onwards, people were involved in the process of democratising the state, rather than privatising it; in restructuring the manufacturing industry for socially useful purposes, developing new technology for socially creative purposes (including the alternative plan for socially useful production drawn up and campaigned for by shop stewards across Lucas Aerospace). These experiences came from a similar, shared, imagination of what was possible.

One common set of ideas underpinning these alternatives was a radically new and pluralist understanding of knowledge and its production - challenging orthodox assumptions in public institutions and in corporate management alike about what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge matters. This new understanding was fundamental both to our vision and to our ways of organising - it meant interconnecting the means with the ends, prefiguring our goals in the ways we worked for them and demonstrating in the process the potential fusion between self-change and social change. We were witnessing a break in what had been an unchallenged bond between authority and knowledge. The authority of the expert was no longer taken for granted. Instead of looking up to authority as a source of knowledge, we were starting to look across, look to ourselves, to each other and to sharing practical and normally tacit knowledge, and to explore - eclectically, creatively - how to realise and developing our collective capacity. This knowledge sharing became central to building a movement.

This was one of the main things that inspired me to become involved in *Beyond the Fragments*. At that time I could see a common feature in the movements that

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I was part of or close to. I'm not being nostalgic here: what I am thinking about is a resource, a way of thinking that has been deleted from history - and one that is crucial to our rethinking of the left now, and can help us develop a confident alternative. What was common to the movements I was part of in the 1970s was that they all organised in ways that made possible the production of knowledge - knowledge that was essential to their struggles and to defining their vision; that was integral to their distinctive power as movements, and to this idea of self-realisation as essential to political change.

There are three examples of this that were important to me then and still have lessons for today. Firstly, there was the importance of consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement. Consciousness raising: the fusion of self-change and social change, the discovery of knowledge embedded in emotion and experience, conventionally dismissed as 'gossip' and not even accepted as even being a form of knowledge. We recognised this as a vital and profound source of knowledge, to be creatively combined with other sources - historical, scientific, etc - to produce new policies and ways of organising, around health, social policies, education, the confronting of violence against women. In other words, this was a source of a political vision, of alternative policies that met women's needs.

Secondly, I was working at the time with shop stewards in the engineering industry who were facing closures and redundancies. And the way they responded was both with resistance and with an insistence that they had an alternative; and this was an alternative that was not just about strategies drawn up on an academic or traditional policy basis. These were alternatives that drew on and valued the knowledge - 'tacit knowledge' - of those that were actually producing, who were at the heart of the manufacturing industry. When I was sitting in those male-dominated meetings, the language, the way people related to each other, the way they valued each other's practical knowledge - all these seemed to echo things I'd experienced in the women's movement.

The third experience was with tenants' organisations working with council workers responsible for repairs. They were working together, trying to improve the ability of the council to respond to tenants' needs and desires. This linked in with alliances elsewhere to develop a strategy for public housing that showed how public housing could be democratically managed to be responsive both to individual needs and to social needs. It seemed to me that we had here a notion of social,

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political and industrial trade union organisation that was about more than unity and discipline - or, at least, that these were made subordinate to a more ambitious version of organisation, which had the goal of fully realising the capacities of all. This took that notion of Marx - the fulfilment of each being the condition of the fulfilment of all - not just as the vision of an alternative socialist society, but as essential for how we work towards socialism in the here and now.

That understanding was by no means evident in the traditional organisations of the left, who saw knowledge in a much more centralised, expert-dominated way. These new ways of doing things implied a completely different understanding of leadership from those which dominated much of the left. Leadership was not about being the font of all authority so much being as the instigator of investigations; it was to be a driver, the source of curiosity. For example, the combined leadership of the Ford workers, in the face of redundancies and the strategies of the corporation, would seek to investigate the company, to identify different sources of workers' leverage and establish the bases for organising across Europe.

I remember puzzling over Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy', which always seemed like a complete put-down of the idea of social and political change from below. While this might sound obvious now, it took me a while to realise that it rested on the presumption of the inherent ignorance of the rank and file, the belief that the mass of people were incapable of doing more than choosing between elites; only the leadership could have expertise.

I then looked to the Labour Party in the late 1970s, and saw the Labour leadership's absolute outrage; its overwhelming fury (leading to the split that produced the SDP) at the idea that the membership wanted a more powerful say in the selection of MPs and in the policies of a Labour government. The idea that trade unionists and workers could have an alternative vision, that they had their own sources of knowledge about what was to be done, pointed to a very different kind of Labour Party, one in which the membership were active, were recognised as knowing producers of social change, and hence were producers of politics, to whom MPs should therefore be accountable. The idea was treated as an abomination.

This leads us to a distinction between on the one hand power as transformative capacity - an understanding implicit in the valuing of practical and tacit knowledge and of the capacity of people to be producers of social change - and on the other hand power as domination. The left has been traditionally organised around this

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latter conception of power, with the emphasis on politics being based on struggling for control over the power of domination - government - and using it to achieve socialism.

The challenge for a radical political organisation is to turn power as domination into a resource for transformation. We do need to get hold of powers of domination - government - but in order to use them to protect and to support transformative power against the power of capital and the corporate market. This is, for example, illustrated starkly right now in Greece, where Syriza, the left opposition party - the likely future government - understands 80 per cent of change as coming from society, and 20 per cent through legislation and government, and is campaigning to win the election on this basis, simultaneously electioneering and supporting practically the growing networks of economic and social solidarity as part of its day-to-day work.

This implies a notion of the state, and therefore the notion of political organisation, as a resource and a platform, rather than as having a monopoly over the process of change. It is this spirit which also guides what we are trying to do with *Red Pepper*, which is in many ways a surviving organisational legacy of *Beyond the Fragments*.

### **Pragna Patel: Which dots are we joining?**

Southall Black Sisters began its life under the all-consuming shadow of Thatcherism, but we were also a child and beneficiary of the Greater London Council. SBS was always organised autonomously as a black feminist, anti-communalist, anti-racist, progressive organisation. Despite this, we always located ourselves within a broad left socialist-feminist tradition as we took our black political, secular feminist identity for granted.

Beyond the Fragments (BTF) spoke to us on many levels because it both reflected and endorsed the activities of autonomous feminist organisations whilst simultaneously calling for diverse groups to build progressive alliances and coalitions.

Even though it was always contested, at the height of black feminist and anti-racist struggles during the 1980s, black secular identity was accepted as a unifying identity which enabled us to forge connections and solidarity that transcended divisions of class, ethnicity, caste and religion, especially within black and minority

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communities. We always maintained that identity and coalition building were closely connected because identity positions can limit or increase the potential for alliances. I think this remains a key message for these troubling times.

When I look back at the history of the activism of Southall Black Sisters I have to catch my breath - we were involved in such a heady mixture of what was, in essence, horizontal coalition building, both within and outside our communities, on a wide range of issues.

We campaigned for all women to be free from violence; we stood on picket lines with Asian women striking for equal pay and better working conditions, and we marched in protests against police brutality and racist immigration controls. In addition to this, we took part in black delegations to the mining communities and Northern Ireland and we occupied Camden Town Hall in support of Bangladeshi homeless people. What drove us was the desire to be a part of a wider left democratic, emancipatory project.

I don't want to paint a romantic picture of the nature of solidarity that existed in those days, but a key moment in which coalition politics played out was when we found ourselves standing up to the anti-Rushdie demonstrations in 1989. We campaigned with Women Against Fundamentalism, a small group of black and white women who came together to oppose racism and assert the rights of women to control their own minds and bodies in the face of the alarming rise of fundamentalism in all religions.

These were genuine attempts to forge alliances between the different struggles we were involved in. Progressive alliances, which, at least from our standpoint, tried to confront, not just state oppression, but also the internal divisions of power within our communities - which led us to question notions of community and community representation.

For many of us, the attempt, in recent times, to be part of a broad left coalition has become more and more difficult. There are however shoots of optimism - we are seeing the resurgence of activism locally, nationally and globally on a range of issues from struggles against rape and sexual violence against women to the impact of neoliberal politics.

Recently Southall Black Sisters have been working with UK Uncut to occupy Starbucks, and we were also part of the 'From Delhi to Southall' march in 2013,

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protesting against violence towards women and girls. But there are also some real dangers and pitfalls that we have to navigate along the way. Unlike the 1980s and 1990s, we are now forced to confront the rise of religious identity politics, which has been fostered and embraced not only by the state but also by sections of the left. In turn, this has often left us secular, progressive feminists isolated and bereft of the allies on whom we could once count for support.

In the context of the 'War on Terror', many on the left have joined hands with the ethnic minority right. This poses new dilemmas because gains that we have made are increasingly under threat not only from the state but also from old and new social movements. Many involved in these movements have uncritically embraced the religious right, and, in turn, their power and influence in our communities has grown. It has been said that the promotion of faith-based alternatives to welfare is a classic case of coalition building on the right, but I ask what happens when coalitions on the left embrace the ethnic minority right in ways that are naive at best and opportunistic at worst?

Our communities have undergone a thorough process of communalisation. Spaces opened up by the state in pursuit of austerity and neoliberal objectives have allowed the religious right to posit themselves as providers of welfare services and arbitrators of justice. The religious right has penetrated all levels of society, and now uses the language of anti-racism, human rights, equality and discrimination with consummate ease - to promote intolerant, misogynistic, homophobic and anti-democratic politics. And they have been able to carry their authoritarian if not fundamentalist agendas into other forums, including left forums, where they are uncritically accepted as being the authentic voice of the communities they claim to represent.

Beyond the Fragments continues to speak to us, reminding us that there are multiple and intersectional sites of power. This encourages us to seize the opportunities of these challenging times and try to connect the various fragments of renewed activism. But before we can join the dots, we need to be aware that some of the dots we seek to join threaten to erase the very principles on which we hope to build a more democratic, feminist, anti-racist and progressive left coalition or alliance.

**Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright** are authors of *Beyond the Fragments*, originally published by Merlin in 1979, a new edition of which was issued in 2013. **Pragna Patel** is a founding member, and director, of Southall Black Sisters.