Brighton Women’s Peace Camp, 1983: Second Wave Feminism and the Women’s Peace Movement

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Abstract: Brighton Women’s Peace Camp was set up on a stretch of land known as ‘the Level’ in Brighton on 15th February 1983. It was one of many short lived satellite camps that appeared throughout the U.K in support of Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp. This article explores the oral narratives of two women who were involved in the Brighton camp. By examining their motivations, conflicts, resolutions and reflections, this paper illustrates the participants personal and collective identities and how these have evolved over time. Their stories reveal that experiences within the camp strongly reflect some of the experiences and issues raised in research about Greenham; especially concerning the camp’s purpose, it’s limitations of involvement and it’s public face. Many of these issues indicate the wider feminist debates of the time such as the conflicts of Socialist Feminism and Radical Feminism and the emergence of identity politics. This is a small scale, qualitative study which brings to light a previously ignored event in local history.

Keywords: feminism, peace, Greenham, women, Brighton.

Introduction

An historical relationship between feminism and anti-militarism is recorded from before the 1915 Hague’s Women’s International Congress for Peace, to the gates of Greenham Women's Peace Camp and beyond.¹ Feminist Historian Sasha Roseneil’s study Disarming Patriarchy (1995) carefully examined this relationship between Second Wave Feminism and the Women’s Peace Movement in the early 1980's by exploring the oral narratives of women who had been part of Greenham Common Peace Camp. Her outstanding work reveals the life changing experiences of these women, illuminating the hardship and challenges they faced, internal and external conflicts, and the activists seemingly endless conviction. I was in my early ’teens at the time of the Greenham campaign and beginning to think politically. My awareness of the Greenham Women’s Peace Camp arose because I would walk past a small women’s peace camp every day in my home town of Brighton. I was not brave enough to enter, but it’s presence made a lasting impression on me. As an adult, studying for an MA in Life History Research, and inspired by Sasha Roseneil’s work, I decided that I would like to collect some oral history of this Brighton camp. At first I could find no literature anywhere about it (I worked through microfilms of old newspapers, but without a precise date this was impractical) and nobody seemed to remember it. Then after the local radio station allowed me a short appeal, I made contact with a woman who had been a camp visitor and she had the relevant newspaper clippings from 1983. This paper examines the oral narratives of two women that I eventually traced (both through talking to people and eventually email contact) who had been involved in the camp and will address the social and cultural implications of the feminist/ anti-militarist connection with particular reference to the personal and collective identities of two of those involved by examine their motivations and experiences in the light of the wider feminist politics at that time. The life history method is the only effective way that this event might be researched as apart from the newspapers it has otherwise been ignored. These women’s stories will not only bring this piece of history into the light, but also by examining their narrative composure we might get an insight into what their experiences have meant to them.
Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insights into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.  

**Brighton Women’s Peace Camp**

On the 15th February 1983 (Shrove Tuesday) over a hundred women and children arrived at a stretch of land known as ‘The Level’ in the centre of Brighton. A large banner was unfurled which read ‘Women on Trial for Peace’, tents and stalls were erected and pancakes were made and enjoyed. The protest intended to highlight the court appearance of 44 women who had been arrested at Greenham Common for invading the air base, then linking hands and dancing on top of a missile silo. They were being charged with breach of the peace. Sixteen women spent the first night at the camp in subzero temperatures and were expecting to continue their protest as long as the Greenham women’s trial lasted. By the camp’s fourth night, the court case in Newbury had ended; thirty-six women were in prison for refusing to be bound over to keep the peace and four of the others had made their way to the Level to join the Brighton camp. The protesters were now saying that they would stay ‘as long as the encampment was there’. The camp was one of many such peace camps at the time that sprang up all over Britain and lasted for over two months; much longer than originally intended. It provided ‘an opportunity for many women to get to know each other and plan other activities’.

**The interviewees**

It was not easy to find women who had been involved in the Brighton Women’s Peace Camp. The two women that I interviewed were not carefully chosen from a sample, they were in fact the only women with whom I managed to make contact within a reasonable travelling distance. The Brighton Peace Camp attracted a diversity of women and these two are not intended to be typical examples of all those involved. It is fortunate for this project, that they represented contrasting feminist voices with rather different perspectives on the camp’s design and objectives. Their stories do however, represent the views of two women who at that time, associated themselves with either socialist feminism or radical feminism and their narratives which focus mainly on their activity within the Women’s Peace Movement, also indicate the affect this involvement has had on their lives.

Daisy, a socialist feminist was born in 1949 to white middle-class parents in a small market town in Cheshire. Her parents were not religious (although she was christened in the Church of England) and they did not have any obvious political or moral convictions. She was religious for a short time in her youth and rejected this aged 15 becoming an atheist. Along with her older brother and their mutual friends she became interested in folk music, CND and protests about the Vietnam War. She attained a degree in English and American Literature at Warwick University (where she was tutored by feminist writer Germaine Greer) and went on to become a teacher, a speech therapist and now works in adult education and has recently completed a D Phil. She had a long involvement with the Labour party, at times holding office as Secretary of her local branch and Chair of the Women’s section. She has been with her partner since 1972 and they have one son who was born in 1985.

Kat was a radical feminist, although she did not advocate separatism. She is a lesbian, born in Bristol in 1963, also to white middle-class parents. Her father did not have any significant religious, political or moral convictions, but her mother was a Quaker who was actively involved in campaigns against the arms trade. Kat went along to meetings with her mother and became involved herself at an early age. She has an older brother and a younger...
sister, neither of whom were very interested in Quakerism. In her ’teens she was involved with ‘Rock against Racism’ and also the Punk movement. She studied for a degree at the University of Sussex in English focusing on women’s literature and homosexual subculture. She has since trained in martial arts and women’s self defence and now sets up learning programmes and teaches her skills to other women.

The Interviewer

*It is important to acknowledge how our own culture, class position and political world view shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is an historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee.*

Feminist oral history also recognises the importance of addressing issues involved in the interview relationship such as ethics, power and agency. I am a white woman with a working-class background and I have had strong sympathies with both Second Wave Feminism and the Women’s Peace Movement. As the two interviewees were educated at least to degree level I would imagine that they had an understanding of my agenda and were comfortable in the interview setting. I greatly admired both the women and was aware in meeting them of an unspoken sense of camaraderie.

Personal and Collective Identities

Sasha Roseneil (1995) argues that ‘The challenging and reconstruction of consciousness and identity are both the medium and the outcome of feminist politics’.

The fundamental debates of Second Wave Feminism such as the liberation from patriarchy of women, the politics of reproduction and issues of male sexual and domestic violence created an environment in which many women were eager for change. It is not necessarily easy however, as a person alone, to express such desire and to put it into practice. An individual such as Ann Pettitt who in 1981 initiated the march to Greenham Common, is quite an exception and most people, especially if they have been subject to oppression, will require a little prompting or collective action before they are motivated to act. Greenham Common Peace Camp, especially when it became women only, was a cynosure for women who were hoping to express this feminist theory, challenge the consciousness and identities imposed upon them by patriarchy and to work politically and ideologically with women without the dominant influence of men.

It was also a place where women went solely to protest about the nuclear threat and they, whether they cared to or not would become drawn in, at least on some level, to the feminist debate. The Brighton Peace Camp reflected many of these issues. There has been much written about women’s experiences and identities within Greenham Common Peace Camp and yet virtually nothing about the satellite camps such as Brighton. This paper intends to amend this by exploring these two women’s narratives and examining their motivations, conflicts, resolutions and reflections as a means to understanding their individual and collective identities within the Women’s Movement and wider society at the time. It also aims to bring to light a hidden local history that has its roots in Second Wave Feminism.

Motivations

Daisy and Kat had already visited Greenham Common Peace Camp before the Brighton Camp began and were both interested in women’s politics and the anti-nuclear debate. Daisy was one of the first 16 women to spend the night at the Level and she remembers it as being a spontaneous protest that was only meant to last a few days:
It was set up as a protest against things that were happening at Greenham, specific events.... Things happened spontaneously. It would just happen word of mouth, you’d just hear that something was happening, you’d just go, I don’t remember anybody leading or organising…

This notion that the camp was started without organisation reflects the anti-hierarchical and autonomous ethos of both the Women’s Liberation Movement and indeed Greenham Common Peace Camp. Daisy saw the day as being a short term fun event:

There was quite a few people there, women and children, it kind of felt like a sort of family event and I remember I stayed. I didn’t really stay more than a night or two and then I kind of drew away.... I thought it was meant to be a publicity event basically and I didn’t really see the point in prolonging it.

There was a good deal of public and media support at the beginning of the camp and this was a major consideration for Daisy. She had been living in the town for quite a few years and saw it as a locally collective show of approval for the Women’s Peace Movement and the Greenham women:

I just remember the media attention at that time, you know the Argus coming and thinking “Oh that’s really good, you know because this is really highlighting again the events at Greenham and the strength of feeling that there is in Brighton”

Another motivation for Daisy was the importance of women acting independently from men and this was in contrast with much of her work within mainstream politics:

I was very strongly in favour at that time about women organising separately, I think it was a really important issue... because men did dominate the debate and we needed that space to clarify our own voice and we knew the sort of things we were saying were different, we had a different voice, a different focus.

As a socialist feminist Daisy’s involvement with the Brighton Peace Camp centred on building positive images about the anti-nuclear actions at Greenham and women’s autonomy. Her motivations were essentially consciousness-raising, pro-women and not anti-male. She was working with men in both her career and her politics and she was in a long-standing relationship with a man.

In contrast to this, Kat’s motivations in joining the camp centred on an active protest against male violence (which she believed to include the nuclear threat) and a personal inclination to explore new ideas. She came to Brighton as a student and didn’t have any local connections. It was in it’s early days when she first approached the camp.

I suppose I was just curious first of all and I went with a friend who was also at the university...we went over there and had a cup of tea around the fire I’d always been very attracted to any political activity really and things with some energy and it was quite practical as well you know, I wasn’t a big theorist and I suppose I had a gut instinct attraction.

At University Kat was reading feminist and lesbian literature and she found that by spending time at the camp she could put into practice some of the discourse concerning women living collectively. There was a strong radical lesbian presence in the town and this was beginning to become reflected in the camp. For Kat this was both a compelling and pivotal experience:

Theory into practice, yes....in terms of feminist discourse you know, we were trying to act out some of that, because I was studying a lot of this stuff at University...we tried to listen and be co-operative and have no hierarchy.. and some people had really interesting ideas. I was new to a lot of it, but from a Quaker background it felt very familiar.
Although Kat didn’t agree with separatism she was interested in radical feminist theory and involved herself with actions that put this into practice:

We devoted a lot of time to attacking sex shops and a lot of graffitiing so we were quite visible in the City centre... I was very, very, very strongly against male violence and that was one of my big motivations, I mean my thoughts were very linked with seeing weapons and nuclear bombs as another form of male violence.\(^\text{19}\)

Kat was aware of mainly two distinct types of women at the camp. The first group she described as ‘Mothers for Peace’ who originally set up the camp.\(^\text{20}\) She saw them as being supportive in providing supplies and being an acceptable face for the media, but they often had other commitments that restricted their involvement. The other group, which included herself, were younger, mostly lesbian, and were able to provide an ongoing presence. Although visibility was an important issue, it seems that for her, collective living and the experiences within that were at times even more so:

We’d just be there and carry on really and we were quite introspective you know...because we’d be sort of having our own little life and you’d forget you were in the middle of the City centre...I had no relationship with the town, for me it didn’t matter what they said or thought in a way.\(^\text{21}\)

The camp also provided an environment where Kat could be comfortable with her sexuality; ‘For me the lesbianism was very important you know, quite a few women came out at the camp or had a safe place to be’.\(^\text{22}\) With a lack of other commitments she was able to completely emerge herself into the camp and the women’s actions that went with it. What she was studying served to enhance her involvement and clearly the idea of raising consciousness was a predominant concern, both for those around her and for her own personal growth.

It can be seen then, that these two women had different motivations for their part in the camp and this is reflected in their levels of involvement. Their narratives suggest that like Greenham, the Brighton camp was initiated by a wider mix of women than it eventually became.\(^\text{23}\) The “Mothers for Peace” and many working women like Daisy were restricted in the time they could participate and they had not intended on it continuing as it did. For the radical lesbian women who were involved it became focus for action, a meeting place, a safe environment and a home. For both Daisy and Kat, the fact that it was a women-only protest (men could visit in daylight hours, although very few did) was of fundamental importance. It was a visible, empowering experience for these women and it even changed the environment for local women who were not associated with the Brighton camp:

Some women said they really liked us being there because it made them feel safer in that area at night...They didn’t necessarily agree or have interest in what we were doing....\(^\text{24}\)

Like Greenham it was a place where women could express themselves and be taken seriously, raise awareness, plan actions, debate ideas and enjoy themselves together, without men.\(^\text{25}\) It provided a feminist environment where personal identities were challenged and reconstructed and consciousness was raised.

**Conflicts and Resolutions**

It is important to acknowledge that the distinctions made between the two groups within the camp are by no means definite. There were certainly crossovers; women who fitted neither group as ‘Mothers’ or Lesbians, as Socialists or Radical feminists. There were also some who changed dramatically over time.

Women were leaving their husbands and coming out and leaving and going to Greenham, leaving their kids and it was mad...\(^\text{26}\)
There was also inevitably some conflict. At Greenham divisions were made by groups of women who had different ideas of how they wished to live. They camped at different gates which had particular collective identities within their wider recognition as Greenham women, and there were still disputes. There was also inevitably some conflict. At Greenham divisions were made by groups of women who had different ideas of how they wished to live. They camped at different gates which had particular collective identities within their wider recognition as Greenham women, and there were still disputes. The Brighton camp was small and confined with close interaction and for the women taking part there would have been conflicts of identity on both an individual and collective level. Daisy’s involvement with the camp, apart from the occasional visit, was limited to the first few days. She withdrew her active support as she was concerned that it might divert attention from the ‘serious politics’ of Greenham:

\[ I \text{ suppose a concern was that what was going on at Greenham should continue to get public support and that if people got distracted looking at what was going on at the Level… and sort of saw it as a bit silly you know.}\]

She didn’t have any major objections to the camp continuing. It was that she didn’t personally identify with what they were doing. She recalled:

\[ I \text{ didn’t make any big statement and it was probably just ‘oh see ya folks’… I probably went and stopped for cups of tea and brought food and felt guilty about it.}\]

Kat was in no conflict about being involved in the camp, she had a high regard for all those involved, but she recalls some contentious incidents:

\[ There was a lot of separatists at the camp. I wasn’t myself, but they wanted it as a separatist space so that was quite difficult for some of the other Brighton Mothers for Peace… they seemed to be divided in themselves because they could see what strong energy it was keeping the camp going… at the same time they found some of the behaviour quite difficult like… seeing women kissing or you know, ‘this was bad for the public’.\]

Daisy also disagreed with some of the arguments of radical feminism, ‘I did have some trouble with those notions of, you know, all men are basically rapists and they’ve got to constantly prove themselves otherwise’. The issue of sexuality in wider women’s politics in Brighton created some personal conflict. The radical feminist voice was so powerful in the town that at times she felt almost apologetic for being heterosexual:

\[ There was maybe, a slight anxiety around at that time about being straight… of ‘oh dear, I don’t want to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing’ and ‘Is it okay for me to be here because I’m straight’.\]

In retrospect she believes that a factor in this may have had something to do with her being more mature and not a student:

\[ I \text{ had younger socialist friends who didn’t have those hang-ups that I had because they maybe would have been at university with other radical feminists and I was coming at it a little bit older and from the outside.}\]

Daisy also mentions however, that when she knew people well, she had very little awkwardness:

\[ My \text{ experience on a personal level with people who define themselves more as radical feminists was always very amicable…. I think it’s just in the nature of Brighton you’d all just rub along together.}\]

The Women’s Peace Movement was bringing a diversity of women together and this was happening for the first time on such a major scale. At the same time there were internal struggles and problems of people feeling misrepresented and unaccounted for. Some women blamed the Women’s Peace Movement itself for causing a decline of feminism. The conflicts that emerged for the Brighton women were indicative of some of the wider debates taking
place. The Women’s Liberation Movement and it’s demands were seen to be becoming fragmented and the differences in power within the movement were not being addressed. A Student Women’s Conference at Goldsmith College came to a uncomfortable end when many lesbians, black women and women with disabilities stood down from election after a motion for positive discrimination was defeated.

*Invoking sisterhood as a way of glossing over the privileges, that white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual women have assured that those who fall outside these categories never have a voice.*

Such problems were causing divisions throughout the Women’s Movement. Daisy recalled this as being ‘a crisis of feminism’, saying ‘I think feminism lost it’s way, maybe inevitably because it couldn’t continue to support all those diverse interests’. Kat recalled how conflicts caused women to leave the camp at Brighton.

*There was a lot of issues coming up. A lot of issues around class, a lot of issues around race, things were really bubbling up.... and this was reflected across the country, it became very insular and we were like fighting ourselves... and then it exploded and women moved to London and left a real vacuum and we became quite invisible...*

The camp came to an end in Brighton by ‘running out of energy’. Both women continued their involvement in Greenham and the Women’s Movement but it was a time of extensive and intense change for women from all walks of life. Women against Pit Closures, environmentalists, pacifists and women from overseas were all coming together and exchanging ideas. For it’s great successes in popularity and expansion, any form of consensus in the Women’s Movement and was becoming more remote. Feminism began to look more divided; described as a ‘fractured sisterhood’, as women separated in different interest groups. This pro-woman challenging of identities for many had transformed into identity politics.

**Reflections**

An interesting aspect of oral history interviewing is that it is possible to present a change in identity over time. An interviewee can describe both how they saw themselves and their actions in the past and then relate this to their present composure. In their narratives both Daisy and Kat look back insightfully at their pasts and describe how their opinions have developed. Daisy did not regret leaving the Brighton camp but in retrospect she saw more clearly why others stayed on:

*Thinking back I can see much more sympathetically why people would have wanted to stay there and prolong it, particularly as it is Brighton, and there was so much support. Women’s politics were really quite strong.*

Her involvement in women’s politics continued and now instead of being involved in direct action she has achieved some success getting her views across in a more conventional manner; ‘It’s quite interesting how my involvement with politics has become sort of formalised and respectable, like I’m on management committees and things’. The years that she was involved in Greenham and the Women’s Peace Movement however, were to her both essential and successful:

*I think it was a very important moment in feminism and the whole peace campaign was a very important part of that...a lot of the thinking we had in those days has become mainstream, I wouldn’t say that women are necessarily in a stronger position you know, we are still paid less, women are still subject to domestic violence, there’s still lots of issues. I don’t want to sound complacent about it, but I think there’s been an awful lot of change in the thinking, so just being part of that has been quite good.*
Looking back Kat sees the Brighton camp like Greenham as having quite a major impact:

*Brighton I think without a doubt, it changed awareness. A lot of people got a lot of information because we were there a long time...they could pick up leaflets they could come and talk to us, we were a visual representation.*

Being visible and taking part in actions against what she saw as male violence was very much how Kat saw her role in the movement. Over the years she has been involved in many campaigns and that is ongoing even though her methods have changed. She still works opposing male violence but in the much less confrontational manner of teaching self-defence to women. In training to get to this position she has modified her outlook.

*Before I was always angry...now I like come sideways a little, you know, it’s much more about protecting myself as well and not hitting against. That’s through a lot of my martial arts training.. I’ve trained in Japan quite a lot under a male instructor, my Grand Master’s male so I’ve had to understand a lot more about feeling okay being with men.*

Both of these women place a lot of importance on their involvement in the Women’s Peace Movement, seeing it as a powerful time of change for women collectively and for them as individuals. They link it inextricably to wider feminist politics seeing it as a time of raising awareness and a challenge to women’s perceived position in society. Over the years they have become less contrasting in their approaches to feminism and they both feel that they now have some more acceptable influence. A mature voice is evident in the way the two have composed their narratives; showing elements of self analysis and retrospection that display an understanding of their personal identities at the time that relates to how they see themselves now. History has recorded Greenham Peace Camp as a major event in women’s history. It is interesting to note that when asked if they had any regrets, they both mentioned the same thing. That they would have liked to have spent more time at Greenham Common Peace Camp than they did.

**Conclusion**

There are issues that must be addressed when using oral history. These two women are a limited sample of those involved, memories are fallible and of course chosen stories are subjective accounts. It is also important to acknowledge the researcher’s partiality, as the questions asked and the excerpts chosen for the analysis will be influential on the presented outcome. It has been argued however, that such problems are also evident in traditional, written sources which at the same time have often neglected the lives of women. The newspaper reports concerning Brighton Peace Camp give a positive media account of it’s first few days; pictures show smiling faces, pancake tossing, tea drinking around fires and even the opinions of local passers-by. I found no evidence of any seriously negative media reaction to the camp such as that endured by Greenham women. This may well have been due to the relatively short duration of the protest, but it may also reflect a more liberal attitude of the residents of Brighton compared to the Berkshire neighbours of a military base. The newspaper accounts do not, in any depth, address the factors that inspired these women to take action either on a personal level or in response to the wider social and political debate. The recording of these two accounts has attended to these points revealing more about the internal dynamics of the camp and how the women saw themselves within it and the women’s movement as a whole. It has also provided a means to regard their present identities and how they themselves reflect upon their pasts.

Daisy and Kat’s stories show many similarities along with their differences. They both were intent on raising awareness, having a voice and organising without men or heirarchy.
Beyond their contrasting motivations and theoretical standpoints they were both pushing in the same direction and this reflects what was happening for women right across the movement. The debates and conflicts were all integral parts of this anarchic synthesis. Women were coming together autonomously on an unprecedented scale; challenging their own, each other’s personal identities and at the same time being swept along with an ever changing collective identity. This in itself was revolutionary. The Women’s Peace Movement at this time was a vast network with Greenham Common as its nucleus. The satellite camps and women’s groups that supported this network reflected Greenham in ethos and objective, and these in turn reflected much of Second Wave feminist theory. When considering the relationship between the two movements it is clear that they were profoundly linked. At Greenham and indeed Brighton, women were putting the feminist theory into practice and at the same time the feminist debate was being delivered to innumerable women throughout the network. Sasha Roseneil argued that the Women’s Peace Movement did not undermine feminism; ‘Instead Greenham both quantitavely and qualitatively extended feminist consciousness, at both a collective and an individual level’. It is true that feminism as a movement in some ways lost its’ unified voice as a diversity of self interest groups began to emerge. This is due to feminism’s new representation of many women who differed from the white, educated, able-bodied middle classes that preceded them. It is precisely this expansion and diverse inclusion that gave the movement real impetus, making many important changes both socially and culturally to the consciousness and identities of women as a whole. On a practical level women didn’t find themselves suddenly promoted into equal citizenship, but ideologically, patriarchy had been challenged and would never be the same again.

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7A. Cook and G. Kirk, Greenham women everywhere (Pluto Press, 1983) p 60.  
8Interview with Kat, born in Bristol 1963, recorded by the author 11 March 2003.  
9Sangster, J. Telling our Stories, p 92.  
11Finch, S.et al. Socialist-Feminists and Greenham. in Feminist Review, No. 23, June 1986  
12Interview with Daisy, born in Cheshire 1949, recorded by the author, 2 April 2003  
13Roseneil, S. Disarming Patriarchy, pp.62 and 64.  
14Interview with Daisy.  
15ibid.  
16ibid.  
17Interview with Kat.  
18ibid.  
19ibid.  
20ibid.  
21ibid.  
22ibid.  
23As time went on Greenham became more and more of a Lesbian environment. See Roseneil, S. Disarming Patriarchy , p 56  
24Interview with Kat.  
26Interview with Kat.
27 Roseneil, S, *Disarming Patriarchy*. p75.
28 Interview with Daisy.
29 *ibid*.
30 Interview with Kat.
31 Interview with Daisy
32 *Lysistrata*, a popular local women’s peace magazine added to the strength of this voice and women’s action within the town.
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34 *ibid*.
35 *ibid*.
39 Interview with Daisy.
40 Interview with Kat.
41 *ibid*.
42 Finch, S et al. *Socialist Feminists and Greenham*. p96
44 Interview with Daisy.
45 *ibid*.
46 *ibid*.
47 Interview with Kat.
48 *ibid*.
49 Sangster, J. *Telling our stories*, p8
50 Evening Argus. Tuesday 15th February, 1983.
51 Roseneil, S. *Disarming Patriarchy*. p 171.