

FEMINIST REVOLUTION *Development Through Struggle*

Today hardly anyone speaks of feminist revolution. Thinking that revolution would happen simply and quickly, militant feminist activists felt that the great surges of activity—protest, organizing, and consciousness-raising—that characterized the early contemporary feminist movement were all it would take to establish a new social order. Although feminist radicals have always recognized that society must be transformed if sexist oppression is to be eliminated, feminist successes have been mainly in the area of reforms (this is due primarily to the efforts and visions of radical groups like Bread and Roses and the Combahee River Collective, etc.). Such reforms have helped many women make significant strides towards social equality with men in a number of areas within the present white supremacist, patriarchal system, but these reforms have not corresponded with decreased sexist exploitation and/or oppression. Prevailing sexist values and assumptions remain intact, and it has been easy for politically conservative anti-feminists to undermine feminist reforms. Many politically progressive critics of feminist movement see the impulse towards reforms as counterproductive. Arguing in favor of reforms as a stage in revolutionary process in her essay “Feminism: Reform or Revolution,” Sandra Harding writes:

It could well be that the reformers have in mind a long-range goal, which is something like a picture of a new society. The reforms fill in that picture bit by bit. Some pieces can be filled in with

comparatively little trouble (e.g., equal pay for equal work), other pieces are filled in only with great difficulty (e.g., equal access to every job). But whether the difficulty is great or small, there is always a precedent in the society—somewhere—for each kind of change, and the only changes demanded are those which fill in the picture of the desired new society. Thus at the end of a long series of small quantitative changes, everything would have changed gradually so that the whole system was completely different. . . . On this alternative model a series of reforms might constitute a revolution.

Reforms can be a vital part of the movement towards revolution, but what is important are the types of reforms that are initiated. Feminist focus on reforms to improve the social status of women within the existing social structure allowed women and men to lose sight of the need for total transformation of society. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) campaign, for example, diverted a great deal of money and human resources towards a reform effort that should have been a massive political campaign to build a feminist constituency. This constituency would have guaranteed the success of the ERA. Unfortunately, revolutionary reforms focused first and foremost on educating masses of women and men about feminist movement, showing them ways it would transform their lives for the better, were not initiated. Instead, women involved with feminist reforms were inclined to think less about transforming society and more about fighting for equality and equal rights with men.

Many radical activists in the women's movement who were not interested in obtaining social equality with men in the existing social structure chose to attack exploitative and oppressive sexist behavior. Identifying men as the villains, the "enemy," they concentrated their attention on exposing male "evil." One example of this has been the critique and attack on pornography. It is obvious that pornography promotes degradation of women, sexism, and sexualized violence. It is also obvious that endless denunciations of pornography are fruitless if there is not greater emphasis on transforming society and, by implication, sexuality. This more significant struggle has not been seriously attended to by feminist movement. (A fuller

discussion of the politics of feminist anti-pornography effort may be found in Alice Echols's essay "Cultural Feminism: Feminist Capitalism and the Anti-Pornography Movement.") The focus on "men" and "male behavior" has overshadowed emphasis on women developing themselves politically so that we can begin making the cultural transformations that would pave the way for the establishment of a new social order. Much feminist consciousness-raising has centered on helping women to understand the nature of sexism in personal life, especially as it relates to male dominance. While this is a necessary task, it is not the only task for consciousness-raising.

Feminist consciousness-raising has not significantly pushed women in the direction of revolutionary politics. For the most part, it has not helped women understand capitalism—how it works as a system that exploits female labor and its interconnections with sexist oppression. It has not urged women to learn about different political systems like socialism or encouraged women to invent and envision new political systems. It has not attacked materialism and our society's addiction to overconsumption. It has not shown women how we benefit from the exploitation and oppression of women and men globally or shown us ways to oppose imperialism. Most importantly, it has not continually confronted women with the understanding that feminist movement to end sexist oppression can be successful only if we are committed to revolution, to the establishment of a new social order.

New social orders are established gradually. This is hard for individuals in the United States to accept. We have either been socialized to believe that revolutions are always characterized by extreme violence between the oppressed and their oppressors or that revolutions happen quickly. We have also been taught to crave immediate gratification of our desires and swift responses to our demands. Like every other liberation movement in this society, feminism has suffered because these attitudes keep participants from forming the kind of commitment to protracted struggle that makes revolution possible. As a consequence, feminist movement has not sustained its revolutionary momentum. It has been a successful rebellion. Dif-

ferentiating between rebellion and revolution, Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs emphasize:

Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution, but it is not revolution. It is an important stage because it represents the "standing up," the assertion of their humanity on the part of the oppressed. Rebellion informs both the oppressed and everybody else that a situation has become intolerable. They establish a form of communication among the oppressed themselves and at the same time open the eyes and ears of people who have been blind and deaf to the fate of their fellow citizens. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question the legitimacy and the supposed permanence of existing institutions. They shake up old values so that relations between individuals and between groups within the society are unlikely ever to be the same again. The inertia of the society has been interrupted. Only by understanding what a rebellion accomplishes can we see its limitations. A rebellion disrupts the society, but it does not provide what is necessary to establish a new social order.

Although feminist rebellion has been a success, it is not leading to further revolutionary development. Internally its progress is retarded by those feminist activists who do not feel that the movement exists for the advancement of all women and men, who seem to think it exists to advance individual participants, who are threatened by opinions and ideas that differ from the dominant feminist ideology, who seek to suppress and silence dissenting voices, who do not acknowledge the necessity for continued effort to create a liberatory ideology. These women resist efforts to critically examine prevailing feminist ideology and refuse to acknowledge its limitations. Externally the progress of feminist movement is retarded by organized anti-feminist activity and by the political indifference of masses of women and men who are not well-enough acquainted with either side of the issue to take a stand.

To move beyond the stage of feminist rebellion, to move past the impasse that characterizes contemporary feminist movement, women must recognize the need for reorganization. Without dismissing the positive dimensions of feminist movement up to this

point, we need to accept that there was never a strategy on the part of feminist organizers and participants to build mass awareness of the need for feminist movement through political education. Such a strategy is needed if feminism is to be a political movement impacting on society as a whole in a revolutionary and transformative way. We also need to face the fact that many of the dilemmas facing feminist movement today were created by bourgeois women who shaped the movement in ways that served their opportunistic class interests. We must now work to change its direction so that women of all classes can see that their interest in ending sexist oppression is served by feminist movement. Recognizing that bourgeois opportunists have exploited feminist movement should not be seen as an attack upon all bourgeois women. There are individual bourgeois women who are repudiating class privilege; who are politically progressive; who have given, are giving, or are willing to give of themselves in a revolutionary way to advance feminist movement. Reshaping the class politics of feminist movement is strategy that will lead women from all classes to join feminist struggle.

To build a mass-based feminist movement, we need to have a liberatory ideology that can be shared with everyone. That revolutionary ideology can be created only if the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed, and incorporated. They must participate in feminist movement as makers of theory and as leaders of action. In past feminist practice, we have been satisfied with relying on self-appointed individuals, some of whom are more concerned about exercising authority and power than with communicating with people from various backgrounds and political perspectives. Such individuals do not choose to learn about collective female experience, but impose their own ideas and values. Leaders are needed, and should be individuals who acknowledge their relationship to the group and who are accountable to it. They should have the ability to show love and compassion, show this love through their actions, and be able to engage in successful dialogue. Such love, Paulo Freire suggests, acts to transform domination:

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for women and men. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical.

Women must begin the work of feminist reorganization with the understanding that we have all (irrespective of our race, sex, or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system. We all need to make a conscious break with the system. Some of us make this break sooner than others. The compassion we extend to ourselves, the recognition that our change in consciousness and action has been a process, must characterize our approach to those individuals who are politically unconscious. We cannot motivate them to join feminist struggle by asserting a political superiority that makes the movement just another oppressive hierarchy.

Before we can address the masses, we must recapture the attention, the support, the participation of the many women who were once active in feminist movement and who left disillusioned. Too many women have abandoned feminist movement because they cannot support the ideas of a small minority of women who have hegemonic control over feminist discourse—the development of the theory that informs practice. Too many women who have caring bonds with men have drifted away from feminist movement because they feel that identification of “man as enemy” is an unconstructive paradigm. Too many women have ceased to support feminist struggle because the ideology has been too dogmatic, too absolutist, too closed. Too many women have left feminist movement because they were identified as the “enemy.” Feminist activists would do well to heed the words of Susan Griffin when she reminds

us in her essay “The Way of All Ideology”:

A deeply political knowledge of the world does not lead to a creation of an enemy. Indeed, to create monsters unexplained by circumstance is to forget the political vision which above all explains behavior as emanating from circumstance, a vision which believes in a capacity born to all human beings for creation, joys, and kindness, in a human nature which, under the right circumstances, can bloom.

When a movement for liberation inspires itself chiefly by a hatred for an enemy rather than from this vision of possibility, it begins to defeat itself. Its very notions cease to be healing. Despite the fact that it declares itself in favor of liberation, its language is no longer liberatory. It begins to require a censorship within itself. Its ideas of truth become more and more narrow. And the movement that began with a moving evocation of truth begins to appear fraudulent from the outside, begins to mirror all that it says it opposes, for now it, too, is an oppressor of certain truths, and speakers, and begins, like the old oppressors, to hide from itself.

To restore the revolutionary life force to feminist movement, women and men must begin to rethink and reshape its direction. While we must recognize, acknowledge, and appreciate the significance of feminist rebellion and the women (and men) who made it happen, we must be willing to criticize, re-examine, and begin feminist work anew, a challenging task because we lack historical precedents. There are many ways to make revolution. Revolutions can be and usually are initiated by violent overthrow of an existing political structure. In the United States, women and men committed to feminist struggle know that we are far outpowered by our opponents, that they not only have access to every type of weaponry known to humankind, but they have both the learned consciousness to do and accept violence as well as the skill to perpetuate it. Therefore, this cannot be the basis for feminist revolution in this society. Our emphasis must be on cultural transformation: destroying dualism, eradicating systems of domination. Our struggle will be gradual and protracted. Any effort to make feminist revolution here can be aided

by the example of liberation struggles led by oppressed peoples globally who resist formidable powers.

The formation of an oppositional world view is necessary for feminist struggle. This means that the world we have most intimately known, the world in which we feel "safe" (even if such feelings are based on illusions), must be radically changed. Perhaps it is the knowledge that everyone must change, not just those we label enemies or oppressors, that has so far served to check our revolutionary impulses. Those revolutionary impulses must freely inform our theory and practice if feminist movement to end existing oppression is to progress, if we are to transform our present reality.

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