

## ON 'SECOND WAVE' SOCIALIST FEMINISM

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The Occupy movement thrilled many who long for stronger progressive movements, and then its wane reminded us of the lack of continuity in the American left. That discontinuity produces a damaging social amnesia about what can be learned from past movements, and none of that memory loss is greater than that surrounding the socialist feminism that formed a particularly transformative part of the New Left. What follows is a brief attempt to rectify that amnesia.

“Second wave” feminism was the largest social movement in US history—at its peak, polls reported that a majority of US women identified with it.<sup>1</sup> From the mid-1960s through its decline in momentum in the 1980s, it was also unusually long as social movements go. A movement of that size naturally encompassed diverse strands, so, unsurprisingly, many scholars and journalists saw only parts of it, like the blind men feeling the elephant.

What’s more surprising is that leftists, mainstream scholars and journalists, and even right-wing adversaries have shared similar misconceptions. One of these is missing the strong socialist feminist stream within women’s liberation. This mistake is symbolized by the anointing of the protest at the Miss America beauty contest in 1969 as the founding moment of the movement. The canonization of that event derives from taking two particular parts of the elephant as the whole: feminism’s struggle against the sexual objectification of women in mass culture, and the particular forms of New York City feminism. The two are related, because New York City’s feminist leadership was long dominated by journalists and others in the media business, so they were especially irritated by media sexism and particularly well positioned to challenge it.

The unremembered socialist feminist stream, like the rest of the Left in the US, has been strong in its episodic power and weak in continuity. It has flowed and ebbed within larger socialist and feminist movements: from the earliest communitarian socialism through 19<sup>th</sup>-century women’s-rights through the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Socialist Party feminists through Communist Party theorists such as Mary Inman. When it re-emerged in the late 1960s, its early members had little knowledge of their ideological ancestors; this history was never taught to us, its writings buried in a few archives. Instead the 1960s socialist feminists began from their experience in the civil rights movement, the mother of the whole American New Left.

In this reinvention, American socialist feminism was distinct from Marxist feminism, and involved no loyalty to any of the regimes that called themselves socialist. Marxist feminism in the US was the ideology of several sectarian Marxist-Leninist groups (such as the IS and SWP) that saw the women’s movement as fertile ground

for recruitment into their parties.<sup>2</sup> These groups tended to retain the orthodox faith that Marxism contained a theory adequate to understand male dominance (and all forms of domination), and they focused pretty exclusively on anti-capitalist strategies. Socialist feminists, by contrast, had concluded that capitalism was by no means the root of male dominance and that new theory was needed to understand its structures and continued reproduction. Socialist feminists rejected Leninism and Maoism and, like the rest of the New Left, understood the allegedly socialist regimes as corrupt, brutal, and undemocratic.

The distinctive mark of socialist feminism was its view that autonomous structures of gender, race and class all participated in constructing inequality and exploitation. Socialist feminists expanded the Marxist notion of exploitation to include other relations in which some benefited from the labor of others, as, for example, in household and child-raising labor. They argued that militarism and conquest, as well as environmental destruction, were propelled by masculinist drives as well as by the search for profit. From conceiving the structures of male domination as somewhat autonomous it followed that, in any given situation, none of them was always the key factor, which in turn meant that gender issues would not always be foremost, nor should they always be a priority. As the Chicago Women's Liberation Union wrote,

*there is a fundamental interconnection between women's struggle and what is traditionally conceived as class struggle. Not all women's struggles have an inherently anti-capitalist direction ... but all those which build collectivity and collective confidence among women are vitally important to the building of class consciousness. Conversely, not all class struggles have an inherently anti-sexist thrust (especially not those that cling to pre-industrial patriarchal values) but all those which seek to build the social and cultural autonomy of the working class are necessarily linked to the struggle for women's liberation.<sup>3</sup>*

Socialist feminists were as anti-capitalist as any other socialists in the New Left, but never conceived capitalism as the sole or always the primary adversary. They offered no design for a socialist economy and thought it unnecessary and un-useful to do that; generally favorable toward public ownership, and especially cooperatives, they believed that a just economy—one that guaranteed equality and wellbeing to all--would have to emerge from a democratic process.

The socialism imagined by the socialist feminists returned them in some ways to what Engels had called "utopian" to distinguish it from "scientific" socialism. Suspicious of vanguardism, socialist feminism rested on a commitment to democracy and an opposition to Leninism. Its activists emphasized direct democracy and often rejected hierarchical leadership ladders. Socialist feminists equally rejected American-style democracy, with its passive and substantively disfranchised electorate. The socialist feminist vision called for participatory democracy, a system that required of its citizens active participation in discourse and policy formation. It is closely connected to the principle of prefigurative

politics-- the notion that a democratic end goal cannot justify undemocratic means, because the end would be corrupted by undemocratic means. Economic democracy and working-class power-- socialism's previously dominant ideas—could only be achieved through political democracy and active participation of the citizenry.

This political culture extended beyond those who explicitly called themselves socialist feminists. Many avoided the term because they abhorred the regimes labeled socialist, others because of the continuing impact of red-baiting. By the early 1970s, many activists and several significant organizations did claim that label, but did not always foreground it in their organizing, because their strategies involved building broad, participatory progressive action around women's needs.

The stream called socialist feminism arose, like the rest of the New Left, from the civil rights and student movements of the 1955-65 period. Less well known were the socialist or social-democratic perspectives of some of the female labor leaders who worked for labor organizing and welfare provision from the 1930s on, and later helped create NOW. The Leftist women of the New Deal, such as Mary Dublin Keyserling of the Department of Labor Women's Bureau; labor feminists such as Addie Wyatt of the UPWA, Caroline Davis and Dorothy Haener of the UAW; and former Communists such as Myra Wolfgang, Betty Friedan and Gerda Lerner were as important in establishing NOW as were liberal women. Moreover, NOW continued the labor and social-democratic feminists' focus on workplace organizing of working-class women, pushing unions to the left, constructing support for women's unpaid labor, and—particularly among CP members-- fighting racism.<sup>4</sup>

Closely related to the historical blotting out of socialist feminism is the common myth that the women's liberation movement “broke off” from the New Left. This myth developed, I suspect, out of the reaction *against* feminism, expressing an inability to conceive of women's demands as part of a basic social justice movement. Along with historian Van Gosse, I have argued that we need to conceive of a “long New Left” that began with civil rights and proceeded through the student movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, women's and gay liberation.<sup>5</sup> None of these were simply “identity politics,” although all—including even students—were fighting for rights and recognition that had been denied them. All were connecting their own experience with global injustices. Feminists were examining the gendered roots of violence, poverty, and inequality, from Mississippi to China. All the socialist feminists, and a large proportion of all “women's libbers,” continued active in the anti-war movement, in support for civil rights, welfare rights, civil liberties, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the Brown Berets, the UFW and the grape boycott, the miners' strike, DRUM and ELRUM, community control of schools, and against police brutality, university complicity in the war machine, corporate mistreatment of workers ... the list could be much longer. Socialist feminists organized the 1971 meeting of a thousand North American women with women leaders from Vietnam's National Liberation Front in Vancouver, Canada.

*The women's liberation movement*

To understand socialist feminism we need to consider what it shared with the whole women's liberation movement. The younger stream of socialist feminism developed independently of the NOW women, and that failure of historical continuity produced both losses and gains: The younger feminists had the freedom to invent new ways of organizing and to explore modes of domination previously regarded as "natural" or even "trivial; but they lost the opportunity to learn from their elders about how to operate in the American political structure. The New Left feminists differed from labor and social-democratic feminists both theoretically and strategically. They understood sexism much as the civil rights movement had taught them to understand racism: not as epiphenomena of capitalism but as autonomous economic and cultural structures. These structures--or cultures--pervaded every aspect of life, and thus had to be confronted in every aspect of life. While centuries of racism had invaded the consciousness of many black people, centuries of a male-dominant gender system had been more internalized, imbedding in many women (and men) the assumption that their subordination was natural. Rejecting that assumption through the concept of gender was the most important theoretical contribution of the women's liberation movement; this insight into the social, historical construction of gender denied the naturalness of male dominance, just as anti-racist activists denied biological racism. This theoretical move then required a strategic move, also derived from--and expanded beyond--civil rights: that the primary task was to unlearn gender. This was accomplished through a new method of organizing that came to be called consciousness raising

Some have conceived of consciousness raising as a means of preparing people for activism, but that is a misunderstanding. Consciousness raising was activism. Feminist organizing had to differ from that of the civil rights and labor movements, whose members usually knew that they were disadvantaged. The predominantly white, predominantly middle-class women who began women's liberation had typically been unconscious of their own oppression and limited opportunities because they had accepted the gender system as a "natural" and inevitable outgrowth of their sex. They had to unlearn what Marxists would call a false consciousness.

By changing women, consciousness raising changed all sorts of relations, often without conscious plan. Women's changed consciousness changed relations with fathers, mothers, siblings, boyfriends, husbands, children, bosses, supervisors, teachers, auto mechanics, shop clerks ... Of course these changes were neither complete nor easy, and backsliding has proven far too easy. My point is, however, that the women's liberation movement grasped and exposed the ubiquitousness of the relationships, formal and informal, that structure domination and inequality.

Exploring the hidden injuries of gender was commonly accomplished in small and women-only groups. The groups provided permission to complain and vent anger without fear of consequences, and freedom to explore the intimate. They also provided comparisons that gave rise to analyses. Women were learning by

interrogating the conventions of gender and male dominance. It was as if they became anthropologists, studying themselves and their communities, unearthing the processes of gender and male dominance.<sup>6</sup> Their meetings were not therapy, although they were supportive; they were not bitch sessions, although plenty of anger and pain was let loose. Paradoxically, consciousness raising attracted women because they were socialized toward intimate talk with other women, but now that intimate talk was undermining their socialization. When consciousness raising worked well, it gave rise to the slogan “the personal is political,” because it created the discovery that sexism—another word created by the movement and now universally understood—operated in every sphere, including kitchen and bedroom. The process was, ideally, one of group discovery, of shared empirical learning that led to generalization and theory.

The women's liberation movement was constituted overwhelmingly by young, white, middle-class, college-educated women. This class and racial basis replicated that of the student New Left, and there were reasons for it. Working-class and nonwhite women faced class and race discrimination daily, and feared the fragmentation that might have resulted from a public embrace of feminism; many women of color faced anti-feminist pressure from men that was worse than that experienced by white women. But separate streams of black, Latina, Asian and American Indian feminisms arose and almost always shared the base socialist-feminist perspectives. The most influential was African American feminism, which appeared in 1968 in the Third World Women's Alliance, started by Fran Beal.<sup>7</sup> The TWWA's core analysis--that women of color had to struggle against race, class and gender domination at the same time—was common among all feminists of color. But there was no more homogeneity among them than among white women. In 1975 Boston's Combahee River collective produced the most influential statement of black socialist feminism, expressing its core premise thus:

*We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.*<sup>8</sup>

Combahee was responding, like many feminists of color, to forms of nationalism that defined and promoted women's second-place, supporting-the-men position as part of their racial/ethnic identity and charged that feminism was a white ideology. Many white feminists also bent under these pressures--for example, most socialist feminists supported uncritically the Black Panthers' armed posturing.

Many feminists of color also accused white feminists of racism. There can be no doubt that many middle-class white feminists were oblivious to the depth and strength of racism to the daily lives of working-class and poor women. The very energy of self-discovery only fed this oblivion. Some accused white feminists of excluding women of color, an exaggerated accusation, given that women's liberationists were eager to reach women of color and developed many projects

focused on anti-racism and the needs of working-class women. (In fact, middle-class white feminists, feeling guilty about their privileges, made many of these accusations.) But the experiences and priorities of middle-class whites were at times so privileged, and their conversations so insular, that their groups felt exclusionary to many women of color.

Organizationally, socialist feminism was never able to create cross-class and interracial organizations. But that should not be our only criterion for evaluating its successes and failures. Far from weakening the overall women's movement, the presence of racially separate feminist groups strengthened the impact of the women's movement.<sup>9</sup>

### *Socialist feminism in action*

One reason for the eclipse that has obscured socialist feminism is that this sector of the movement produced less writing than others. New York City's "radical feminists" were often writers by vocation, and they turned out numerous manifestos. University-based feminist groups often started small underground newspapers. The socialist feminist groups tended to focus on activism at the expense of theorizing. As the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) wrote, "We do not find helpful the constant cry that before we organize, we need to develop a complete theory of the nature of our oppression or find the prime contradiction of our oppression (as if there is just one). Some analyses, in fact, have led us only to further inaction ..."<sup>10</sup>

The socialist feminist organizations often spawned workplace organizing. The CWLU gave birth to Women Employed, a group that lobbied for decent wages and working conditions. Another group, DARE (Direct Action for Rights in Employment), conducted a campaign for women janitors that forced the Chicago City Council to hold hearings at which these workers testified about unfair labor practices and unequal pay. Boston's Bread and Roses women started organizing waitresses and clerical workers and ultimately gave birth to the organization, then union, 9 to 5. When an anti-war moratorium on university activities was being planned for October 1970 (the "Moratorium"), one B & R consciousness-raising group realized that the male organizers had, unsurprisingly, reached out to students and faculty but not clerical workers, so the group quickly produced a leaflet inviting office staff at universities to come to a lunchtime discussion about the action.<sup>11</sup> Agitating for affordable child care was a priority of many women's liberation groups. One important study showed that women's movements have had a greater progressive impact on pro-labor policy at the state level than did labor unions.<sup>12</sup>

Equally important, the reproductive rights and anti-violence work of these groups was of fundamental importance to poor women and women of color. Among the CWLU's projects was the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse. For decades poor women, and particularly people of color, had been sometimes subjected to involuntary sterilization. State authorities could threaten to cut women off welfare

if they did not agree to be sterilized, or get them to sign consent forms at moments of painful labor and delivery.<sup>13</sup> Chicago activists joined socialist feminists across the country in campaigns based on the principle that reproductive “choice” required the right to bear children as well as not to, and economic and social as well as legal rights—including economic help for raising children when necessary and for accessing contraception and abortion. This campaign was able to get the federal government to issue stringent regulations designed to prevent involuntary sterilization in 1978 (but not to repeal the federal ban on Medicaid funding for abortion). Activists frequently tried to establish free or low-cost health clinics for women—something Black Panther women also worked for--though they usually foundered for lack of funding. The most lasting and influential health project was the book *Our Bodies Ourselves*. Originally a 190-page stapled booklet, printed on cheap, newsprint paper, sold for 75 cents, and distributed by a New Left underground press; banned by schools and public libraries and denounced as “obscene trash” by conservatives;<sup>14</sup> it became a commercial-press bestseller 10 years later—with all profits going into the women’s health movement. It offered information on alcohol and other drugs, occupational health and safety, birth control, violence, childbirth and parenting, and critiques of corporate medical insurance and big pharmaceuticals. Tens of millions of women of all social classes first got honest information and radical analyses of power structures from these books.

In organizational matters the younger feminists differed sharply from the older NOW feminists. Like much of the New Left, socialist feminists were committed to participatory democracy, a demanding and somewhat utopian organizing approach. (It corresponds to what Occupy came to call horizontalism, while NOW was vertical.) As modeled primarily by SNCC, it meant active participation of all participants in developing strategy and goals. No one should be a silent member merely casting a vote. From this followed a notion of leadership quite different from that of, say, Lenin or Alinsky: the duty of leadership, as promulgated by civil rights intellectual Ella Baker, was to create new leaders, to erase as much as possible the distinction between leaders and followers. Organizations should exemplify in their daily practice the egalitarian democratic society they wanted for the future. Although this ideal may be practicable only in small organizations, it is valuable as a goal even in large ones, because it insists on listening and accountability to non-leaders, that is, with followers. In the interest of participatory democracy, women's liberation groups rejected both bigness and centralization, and their decentralized organizational structures made possible creative tactical experimentation. Even in large citywide socialist feminist organizations such as those in Chicago and Boston, small project groups could produce quick actions without having to wait for approval from central leaders, and could explore new ventures. They taught courses ranging from auto mechanics to Marxist economics, set up consciousness raising groups with working class teenagers, produced silk-screen posters, created women's liberation rock bands, and—in the closest the movement came to “violence”—planted stink bombs at Dow Chemical headquarters.

The whole New Left exaggerated its participatory-democratic principle, but no group did so as intensely as the young feminists. Women had had extensive experience with being disregarded, disrespected, and shunted into clerical and janitorial work in male-dominated environments. Precisely because of their socialist politics, they did not assume that women were necessarily free of egotism or power hunger. So they sometimes brought into their feminist organizing an excessive suspicion of strong leaders and insistence on radically democratic practices. In Bread and Roses, some of those who displayed the greatest capacity for leadership were maligned and undercut in an intemperate demand for formal egalitarianism, a kind of leveling that failed to recognize the need for order, efficiency and continuity. But this also resulted from an organizational insistence on direct instead of representative democracy, and failure to institute formal programs for training leadership and holding it accountable. The results was at times organizational disorder: meetings lasted too long, discussions wandered, chairs were unpracticed; and these problems led smaller project groups to greater autonomy from their parent organization. By contrast, the CWLU handled well the inevitable tensions between effectiveness and democracy, and it lasted for eight years—a remarkably long period for a social movement organization that made heavy demands on its members.<sup>15</sup>

No social movements last long. By definition, they require intensive mass activism, and few participants can sustain those commitments over the long term. So it is a mistake to measure the success or failure of social movements by their persistence. We need instead to consider the enduring changes effected by social movements --in consciousness, practices, and institutions; and to remember that the size of the backlash is often proportional to those changes. Second-wave feminism radically transformed medical research and services, sports, education, family life, the professions, law, popular culture, literature and the performing arts, social work, international development thinking, and even religion, and made possible the gay liberation movement.

It is difficult to distinguish the contribution of socialist feminism from that of the whole women's movement, but one indication can be found in opinion polls. While left political preferences are of course stronger among lower-income people, women of all classes are more progressive across the board than men. Today's sex difference in opinion on the Iraq war, gun control, torture, death penalty, drones, homeland security, civil liberties, welfare, poverty, economic policy, education, policing, global warming, etc.—often a 20 point difference between women and men-- shows women further left on all issues, not just those labeled “women’s issues.” In fact, women are eight points more positive toward “socialism” and more negative toward “capitalism” than men.<sup>16</sup> Women don’t often call themselves socialist, and few of us even think we know what socialism could be, but there are many who try to move our capitalism in the direction of social justice.

Meanwhile, the astronomic rise in economic and political inequality has hurt women most. So today women and men with socialist feminist politics are most often

fighting defensive battles, not in broad feminist organizations but in single-issue groups—campaigning to hang on to civil liberties, abortion rights, labor unions, health care, and to stop privatization, drones, stop-and-frisk policing, the growth of surveillance and carceral policies and the global rule of corporations. These are where socialist feminists can be found in 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> A 1986 Gallup poll found that 56% of women, and 2 of every 3 “nonwhite” women identified as feminists. Reported in *Newsweek* 3/31/86, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of the SWP’s attempt to take over the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, see Margaret Strobel, “Organizational Learning in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women’s Movement*, ed. Mary Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (Phila: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 145-164.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, “What is Socialist Feminism,” 1976, at <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwlherstory/CWLUArchive/socialfem.html>

<sup>4</sup> Landon Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left* (NY: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004); Linda Gordon, “Participatory Democracy From SNCC through Port Huron to the Women’s Liberation Movement: The Strengths and Problems of Prefigurative Politics,” in Tom Hayden, *Inspiring Participatory Democracy: Student Movements from Port Huron to Today* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Some locate the origin of the term in Mao’s “speak bitterness” campaigns, ironically, since the women’s liberation movement version could not have been more anti-Marxist-Leninist-Maoist. But the term had also been used in the “Old Left,” in speaking of raising the consciousness of workers who did not know they were oppressed.

<sup>7</sup> The third-worldist analysis, which grew also from civil rights, considered people of color in the US as structurally part of a global Third World, the regions condemned by poverty by the influence of US and European imperialism.

<sup>8</sup> Available at <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

<sup>9</sup> S. Laurel Weldon, *When Protest Makes Policy: How Socialist Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 120-121.

<sup>10</sup> CWLU, Hyde Park chapter, “Socialist Feminism—A Strategy for the Women’s Liberation Movement,” 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> Weldon, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> One egregious case brought the widespread practice into view in 1973: Alabama authorities had African Americans Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf, aged 14 and 12, sterilized without even their or their mother’s knowledge, let alone consent, on the grounds that they were “at risk” of early sexual activity, the National Welfare Rights Organization protested loudly enough to get a federal investigation into what were widely known as “Mississippi appendectomies.”

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/about/timeline.asp>

<sup>15</sup> The CWLU required its members to participate both in a chapter and a work project.

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research Center, release of 5/4/2010, at <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/610.pdf>, accessed 5/6/2013