

# The Power Of History

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue  
 Who says my hand a needle better fits,  
 A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,  
 For thus despite they cast on female wits:  
 If what I do prove well, it won't advance,  
 They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance.

—Anne Bradstreet  
 17th Century New England Poet

## Kathie Sarachild

### I. EXPERIENCING THE HISTORIC INVISIBILITY TREATMENT

When organizing and formulating theory and strategy for women's liberation began in the 1960's, we had the present experience of women to examine—our personal experience—and women's history. Although theoretically these were not separate areas for us, they were in practice. When we talked about women's history, women acting as a force in history and what happens to women in the historic record, we were not talking about something we ourselves had been involved in, but something we had read about.

The women who have participated in or even just witnessed the birth and growth of the present women's liberation movement have now had direct personal experience with the problems of women's history. We have now all had, to a lesser or greater degree, historic "movement" experience as women, as well as our personal experience as women. And the two, it turns out, are virtually identical.

When the movement began we were aware that women weren't very visible in history—or in present life, for that matter—except for the briefest moments, or simply as images, dramatic images and symbols, sex objects or objects d'art. But there were disagreements about the reason for this invisibility.

Some people said that women were invisible in history because they actually weren't there, in any ways worth mentioning, because they were so oppressed. Others said that though women were invisible in history, they were actually there and working away very hard and, in fact, very well, in any number of ways—both traditional and untraditional—that never got acknowledged. The invisibility was an illusion, an optical illusion artificially generated by political forces in their own controlling interests. The

illusion, as well as the long established power behind it, was preventing women from ever being seen for what they really are and from ever being free.

Shulamith Firestone, in the women's liberation movement's first theoretical journal *Notes From The First Year*, described and wrote about the process of the feminists in general and the radicals in particular being written out of the history of the last century and we ourselves almost immediately began to experience this invisibility happening to us even as we were there. The more successful the radical, feminist women became, the more widespread our slogans and ideas, the more invisible we got—even as what we produced was becoming visible.

It has been only six years since the women's liberation movement mushroomed, and already the radical women who initiated the movement's theory, organizing ideas, and slogans, have been buried from public consciousness and the liberals have taken over, claiming credit for the radicals' achievements. If this goes on much longer feminism will go under once again and we will lose almost all of what we have gained in the last years—both the radical consciousness and many of the practical reforms. It won't be long now until the liberals will be gone, too.

This historic process has overtaken the pioneering achievements so fast in our generation, as historic processes have speeded up in general, that it would seem that we may have had a chance to experience it and understand it soon enough for women finally to have a chance of breaking it.

For one thing, we have experienced the historic invisibility treatment of women, in general, and of feminists, of radical women, in particular, and are still alive to prove it false. (Proving, however, is not the main problem. The feminists of the last century were certainly, provably there. Their writings were there; their actions recorded. And yet they became invisible.) We have also participated in its dynamic and can describe it—from which women can draw important lessons. And we have experienced its consequences, from which there are lessons for all radicals as well.



Let's look at some simple facts, for a start:

- There is something around now called the women's liberation movement that millions of people all over the world know about and have reacted to, for or against, and in which large numbers of women—I shall use the term masses—have been involved, and which more people, men and women, feel themselves supporters of.
- This movement was started by women.
- The movement which bears the name women's liberation was begun by women who considered themselves radicals, and who openly and publicly called themselves radicals.
- This movement was launched by women who deemed it necessary to form women's liberation groups which excluded men from their meetings.
- The open intention of the writings and public actions of these groups was to start a mass movement of women acting for their liberation.
- These women's liberation groups soon publicly began to use the term feminist to describe themselves, as well as radical.
- In the first few years of the women's liberation movement's existence some significant changes were made in the direction the movement was calling for.

These are fairly simple observations to make. Some are available to anybody with a television. Others are clearly on the printed record for anybody who bothers to investigate. And yet the process of making them invisible began to set in almost at the first sign that they might well be important.

In these facts, if we are able to see them, are buried even more facts and much more knowledge and understanding. But the lessons that they contain are being lost and the gains that these lessons brought with them are in danger of going also.

Each one of these observations represented an enormous surprise to many people. People were surprised to see women joining groups that excluded men. People were surprised to see women angry. People were surprised to see women forming radical groups. People were surprised to see other women responding to them in large numbers. In fact there were a whole string of surprises.

The minute the surprise registered on each new consciousness, one of two processes set in. Some who were surprised were glad to be so surprised while others hated and feared the surprises. Because of this, each of these developments, actions and events took place against persistent opposition, as well as with the help of enormous, spontaneous support. (Some were more surprised by the support and others more surprised by the opposition.) The opposition came in many forms and each form had to be fought before the actions and developments could take place which would awaken millions of people. This is another fact, another simple observation, that some do

not want to see. Women had to fight opposition to get these ideas stated and out. And then more people had to fight opposition to support these ideas and to help them spread further.

The developments had to be seen for what they were and projected for what they were, and so the fight has always been from the beginning a fight for seeing what others were rendering invisible. If the development could not be seen, there would be no more such surprises forthcoming. This sometimes assumed, and still does, rather grotesque proportions.

But then again, there was a double process. Some people were glad to have these things made visible to them. And then there were others for whom the new observation was an unpleasant flurry intruding into their vision, if not a downright eyesore.

One process gained momentum at the very same time the other gained momentum. The very creation of the surprise, of the achievement and its spread, sparked efforts to suppress it. Each observation was dynamite that had to be defused. As Isaac Newton, pioneering observer of the laws of movement and a leader of the scientific revolution, put it: for every action there is a reaction.

Certain reactions were not caught or understood at the time and have grown as the movement has grown. If we don't take stock now of the growth of the reaction, we are in danger of losing most of what we have won and of having to start all over again. It is not such an easy task at this point because often the opposition tried to render itself as invisible as what it was trying to make disappear. A lot of the opposition disappeared from sight, if not from reality, in the first, huge groundswell of the women's liberation movement.

The movement has now spread very wide, but it has also spread thin. This is partly due to the inexperience of our movement and partly due to the attacks and strategies of the opposition. The sources of the movement's achievements are unknown—disembodied ideas, slogans, phrases. Though only a few years old, their origins are already seemingly unidentifiable, attributed to nothing more precise than "the women's liberation movement" and, therefore, their meaning is highly debatable and imprecise, their definitions are lost, and with this, the power behind them. But, of course, all these things did have origins and definitions—in groups and in individuals, the books and papers they wrote and actions they carried out—however invisible these origins may now appear. What is more, even though the actual, living people who began the movement are treated as unascertainable, unidentifiable and irrelevant, history itself is not treated as irrelevant. Instead a new, false "feminist" history is blithely created out of mistaken secondary sources to support political strategies long ago discredited by real history (as traced through the original sources).

Women's liberation writers and activists have been mercilessly ripped off by the Establishment, the left, and scads of opportunistic women. The common standards applied to scholarship and history, of going to the original sources or even referring to them, have been totally disregarded when it has come to the women of the women's



Most of our readers will probably learn from these pages for the first time, that there has arisen in the United States, and in the most civilized and enlightened portion of them, an organized agitation on a new question—new, not to thinkers, nor to any one by whom the principles of free and popular government are felt as well as acknowledged, but new, and even unheard-of, as a subject for public meetings and practical political action. This question is, the enfranchisement of women; their admission, in law and in fact, to equality in all rights, political, civil, and social, with the male citizens of the community.

It will add to the surprise with which many will receive this intelligence, that the agitation which has commenced is not a pleading by male writers and orators for women, those who are professedly to be benefited remaining either indifferent or ostensibly hostile. It is a political movement, practical in its objects, carried on in a form which denotes an intention to persevere. And it is a movement not merely *for* women, but *by* them. Its first public manifestation appears to have been a Convention of Women, held in the State of Ohio, in the spring of 1850. Of this meeting we have seen no report. On the 23rd and 24th of October last, a succession of public meetings was held at Worcester in Massachusetts, under the name of a "Women's Rights Convention," of which the president was a woman, and nearly all the chief speakers women: numerously reinforced, however, by men, among whom were some of the most distinguished leaders in the kindred cause of negro emancipation.

. . . It was fitting that the men whose names will remain associated with the extirpation, from the democratic soil of America, of the aristocracy of colour,

should be among the originators, for America and for the rest of the world, of the first collective protest against the aristocracy of sex, a distinction as accidental as that of colour, and fully as irrelevant to all questions of government.

In the present case, the prejudice of custom is doubtless on the unjust side. Great thinkers, indeed, at different times, from Plato to Condorcet, besides some of the most eminent names of the present age, have made emphatic protests in favour of the equality of women. And there have been voluntary societies, religious or secular, of which the Society of Friends is most known, by whom that principle was recognized. But there has been no political community or nation in which, by law and usage, women have not been in a state of political and civil inferiority.

. . . In the United States, at least, there are women, seemingly numerous, and now organized for action on the public mind, who demand equality in the fullest acceptation of the word, and demand it by a straightforward appeal to men's sense of justice, not plead for it with a timid deprecation of their displeasure.

There are indications that the example of America will be followed on this side of the Atlantic; and the first step has been taken in that part of England where every serious movement in the direction of political progress has its commencement—the manufacturing districts of the North.

— Harriet Taylor Mill  
*"Enfranchisement of Women"*  
 London, 1851

liberation movement. Thus reams are written—on the left and the right—about, for instance, the conception "the personal is political," which the WLM introduced into revolutionary politics, without ever referring to the original paper which expressed this formulation, much less citing this paper's definition of the conception. Papers are distributed by "women's studies" outlets like KNOW, INC. on consciousness-raising with no reference to, much less distribution of, the original paper on consciousness-raising.

There have been a few momentary exceptions to the rule—books, for instance, which were themselves first reactions to the original formulations and were swept over by the opportunist wave (the temptations of which even some of these authors succumbed to in their later work).

There is no chance to discover how much the interpreters have distorted and even reversed the original ideas because part of the distortion is the implication that the ideas

had no identifiable sources that a person could check into. When one does realize there are original sources and checks, one discovers that personal variations of the idea are substituted for original versions, and liberal versions for radical versions—all selling under the original names. The interpreters both cash in on and water down the original ideas.

How can women's history ever get written if women systematically "forget" or obliterate the origin of the conceptions that change their lives—whether out of fear of remembering and thus taking a real political stand for the movement or in order to appropriate them as their own for career purposes. The origins of the most influential ideas are blurred or suppressed the fastest by those who see them as a competitive threat. These are not the kinds of careers feminism is trying to win for women, and, in any case, they will be exceedingly short-lived and will die as soon as they kill the movement off first.



Among women, the opportunist use of what feminism has produced—that is, the use by women for their personal profit or factional use of the work and writings other women have produced, and produced for the movement—has been doing its part to blow apart the movement from the inside. The one comforting thing in all of this is that at least some of the mess can be attributed to inexperience and naivete on the part of both those who have led and those who have followed the particular work in question, although inexperience cannot account for how women who gave themselves so much credit as “professionals” could do something like this.

It is also due to a continuing failure to take women seriously, as subjects in their own right rather than as objects for exploitation.

## II. THE WONDERFUL EXPLOSION AND ITS LESSONS

The events of the last decade tell a remarkable and inspiring story. They show that the masses of women every-

where are ready to fight for equal rights with men in work and sex. They show that women, rather than being turned off by the demands, slogans and organizing methods of the radicals who launched the movement, were attracted in explosive numbers. They show that women with a radical commitment to solving the problems of women were able to devise a strategy for launching a mass movement to fight for women's liberation and proceed to carry it out. They show that the radical leaders were not far ahead of women as a whole but just a little bit ahead; that the liberals and male supremacists who didn't think women were ready for it were far behind.

The issues and organizing ideas introduced by the radical feminist movement were what caught fire and spread. Separatist organizing, slogans like “Sisterhood is Powerful” and “Women of the World Unite,” consciousness-raising in small groups and public forums, attacks on exploitation in bed and in housework as well as on jobs, attacks on beauty contests, on artificial and insulting clothing and



from *Sisterhood is Powerful*, 1970



Atlantic City, 1968: First mass demonstration and action by Women's Liberation. *Top*, picketing and guerrilla theater on the boardwalk. *Above*, disruption of live telecast of Miss America Pageant.



from *Mademoiselle*,  
February 1970



physical regulations for women, militant action for women's complete right to all methods of birth control including abortion, opposition to mere reforms in the abortion laws and the demand for total repeal of them, naming male chauvinist pigs for what they were—these are what awakened masses of women, individually and in organized form, to involvement and action all over the world. Nobody had even heard the phrase *women's liberation*, after all, until the women's liberationists came along with it, and with their actions and organizing methods, and with the theory behind them which they also made public and an integral part of the mass struggle, the mass consciousness-raising.

Women's liberation and male chauvinism—terms the radicals gave to the problem and the solution just a few years ago—are now household words and political realities the President of the United States must address:

I will be the President of the black, brown, red and white Americans, of old and young, of women's liberationists and male chauvinists and all the rest of us in between.

— *Gerald Ford, Inaugural Speech to Congress, 8/12/74*

Many liberals who are now claiming responsibility for starting the "women's liberation movement" even hesitated to call themselves feminists, much less apply the word "women's liberation" to themselves, until the radical women paved the way. And they wouldn't go near the term male supremacy.

At the head of its official history, *NOW Accomplishments*, the National Organization for Women claims. . . "In general -1. We have raised the consciousness of the country to sexism as a critical public problem." But consciousness-raising was introduced as a term and emphasized as a strategy by the radicals. NOW knocked consciousness-raising and theory and rated itself the "action" organization that accomplished concrete changes. And NOW had never even heard the word "sexism" until it was coined in a paper called "Freedom for Movement Girls—Now" (1968) and advanced in the women's liberation movement.\*

NOW more and more used the radical slogans, organizing and action ideas to build its ranks—without acknowledging it. Within a few years of the radical upsurge, it, too, was organizing all-female consciousness-raising groups for new members. I remember attending a NOW Eastern Regional Conference in 1972 emblazoned with "sisterhood is powerful" and "women unite" posters from the radical movement, slogans based on the ideas of a movement of women, for women which were actually in opposition to NOW policies of a movement of men and women for women.

These developments hold important lessons. They show that masses of women support feminism and confirm the assumptions of the radical feminist organizers that the masses of women are not only interested in a radical analysis but only respond to the radical truths. The issues the radicals raised which exploded into a movement con-

nected not only with the lives of the radical activists who were the movement's organizers but with the lives of the masses of women at this time in history. Women's liberation issues, far from representing primarily the interests of white, professional women and college students, as is so often suggested by the opposition to feminism, actually represented the broad masses of working women much more.

College students and the token women professionals have not only been a minority of the movement but have tended to avoid it. In fact, one of the movement's earliest theoretical papers by Beverly Jones in the pamphlet *Toward a Female Liberation Movement* devotes a section to analyzing why young women in college so often fail to understand the oppression of females.

Women's liberation issues introduced by the radical women—sharing the housework, child care centers, birth control and abortion law repeal, and the attack on beauty standards and expensive, uncomfortable dress codes—were issues which, in particular, affected the large numbers of women who have entered the labor force since the end of World War II.<sup>1</sup> During this time, even while the number of women in the professions was scandalously declining there was a steady and enormous increase in the numbers of women in the work force as a whole; the salaried work force has now become 40% female. These issues were far less important to the remaining professional women who could afford household help, and therefore, did not have to battle their husbands about housework. They could also afford private child-care and obtain fairly safe abortions semi-legally, although, of course, all these issues were still troublesome to middle class women whether they admitted it or not.

Black women, if not prominent in the movement's rank and file, played a significant and prominent role in its leadership and history from the beginning. The black liberation movement in general was the source of much of the movement's ideas. The very phrase "women's liberation" came from activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1964 at a workshop during its Wave-land staff conference in Mississippi at which Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and others challenged the position of women in the organization. The speech given by Gloria Martin at the Western Black Youth Conference in 1967 gives an idea of the intellectual ferment, feminist consciousness and political experience among black women from which the women's liberation movement would draw. (See box next page.)

Even many of the issues that liberal organizations like NOW took up represented more the interests of working women as a whole than the interests of professional or white women. Factory women and female office workers, service workers and transportation workers (stewardesses) pioneered the earliest equal opportunity court cases, not

<sup>1</sup>Selma James described the growing individual feminist acts of resistance by the workingwomen of the United States in "The American Family: Decay and Rebirth," an essay she wrote in 1956, published after the upsurge of the women's liberation movement in *Radical America*, Feb. 1970 (reprinted in the anthology *From Feminism to Liberation*, Edith Hoshino Altbach, editor).

\**No More Fun and Games, A Journal of Female Liberation*, #2, Feb. 1969, p. 31.



professional women. Ida Phillips, for instance, of the ground-breaking case Phillips vs. Martin Marietta Corporation, in which the Supreme Court ruled that it was discriminatory for an employer to refuse to hire mothers of pre-school children when they were hiring fathers of such children, was a waitress in Orlando, Florida, applying for a job as an assembly line trainee in the fall of 1966. Of her fight she has said, "It wasn't just for myself, but for other women in the same shoes"—and of the publicity she received, "I suppose this is my way of letting people know I'm more than just a dumb little waitress." (*New York Post*, 1/30/71)

The grass-roots appeal of feminism has been reflected in the composition of liberal feminist organizations like NOW as well as in the mass response to the radical ideas and agitation.

Yet the radical, feminist women faced opposition all the way, with constant advice from all sides that everything they were doing would have the opposite effect: that it would raise antagonism and bitterness, that it was unrealistic and would get nowhere, that it wasn't speaking to where women were at.

What lay behind the successful plans and strategies of the women's liberation activists, what kindled the wonderful

explosion, was simply their commitment to a radical understanding and approach to feminism, to discovering the common issues facing women and addressing them directly at their deepest level. They were not playing political games, trying to figure out whether women or men were ready for this or that, whether this or that would be understood or be popular.

This was going to be a movement in our own self interest, as we said. This was going to be a fight for ourselves, for our own immediate lives, as well as for our dreams — a movement growing from our own experience, addressing the problems we ourselves had encountered. But a fundamental part of this effort to better understand our own situation was the radical understanding that the conditions in our own lives we wanted to change were essentially the common situation for women. This understanding of ourselves was going to be essential to the common fight because it was what put a person in touch with the common fight, connected a person directly to the common fight. We wanted to "change the world" out of our own self-interest, and because we had such a strong sense of this being in our interest, we felt sure we could convey this sense to all who shared the same interests.

With all our talk about self-interest, it was, of course, all

#### ANGRY BLACK WOMAN SPEAKS OUT

It is of tremendous interest and vital concern to me, a woman, that the Western Black Youth Conference will have a workshop on the role of women in the movement. In a sense this question is a soul chilling one, because it should need no discussion in special sessions. This is very much like debating the rights of black people with a group of southern whites. The rights of women and black people should not, in fact cannot, be negotiated or bargained for; as we are finding out, they must be taken.

. . . It is tragic indeed that we have this ever present problem, the problem which has been like a rapier thrust in the living flesh of militant women in every walk of life. Radical women, women in the Civil Rights movement, the Freedom Workers in the south, all have felt the sting of oppression and discrimination. All have had to fight for independent political identity. They have been laughed at, jeered at, and used as bed partners, but one way or another they have met with defeat. Women are, at the very least, victims of grave humiliation and bitterness in this society.

Working women, black and white, are the most oppressed. They work in order that they and their children may starve more . . . SLOWLY.

. . . Every day of their lives women suffer insults, social and economic limitations, scorn and degrada-

tion. Black people suffer much the same oppression. The black people and women are second class citizens. The basis for a great enlightened unity exists if only it is exploited by the movement.

. . . The black liberation movement has been learning and growing day by day. The development of theory and practice is remarkable. The consciousness of the people is growing, very largely due to these struggles. Poor whites are finding that they have no power. Women must realize that they too must take their place alongside the men, as equal partners. This may very well mean a desperate struggle within the movement, as well as full scale all out war with the power structure. Every movement for women's rights has been diverted into other struggles which have appeared more urgent at the times. THIS MUST NOT HAPPEN AGAIN.

. . . If the overall plan is FREEDOM FOR ALL PEOPLE (that must include women), without the deadly soul destroying virus of supremacy of one over the other, then only will we have the makings of a world of justice, freedom and fraternity. AND ANY OTHER KIND OF WORLD IS NOT WORTH FIGHTING FOR.

— Gloria Martin, Astoria, Oregon  
 "Women, Organize Your Own Fighting Forces!"  
 THE MOVEMENT, Nov. 1967



along common interest that we were talking about, the common interest of women.

The intensity of our belief that our own personal interest arose out of the common situation was what made us know that there would be no conflict between standing up for our own impulses and desires and analysis growing out of our own situation, and launching a mass movement. All the politicking, the guessing at the popularity of this or that, the feasibility of this or that with one group or another, would build nothing, really. It would fail to turn women on and maybe even turn them off. We knew this because we acknowledged our own most honest reaction.

The radical, feminist interest in developing and disseminating theory—in raising and spreading consciousness—was scorned, even attacked, by the liberal feminists and non-feminist left alike, who were always calling for “action” and for whom no amount of action we engaged in was ever even acknowledged. They were always posing it as analysis versus action, and priding themselves in being the activists, or the “politicos,” or the steady, on-going

workers who accomplished tangible, concrete gains “in the community,” “in the nation,” for themselves, or what not. They always implied that the radical, “theory” people (as they would sometimes complain about us) didn’t take any action, didn’t produce any actual changes in the everyday lives of women.

“Don’t agonize, organize” was a favorite one liner. Of course, when stated as “Don’t analyze, organize” a lot of the punch goes out of it.

Oddly enough, there was also the totally contradictory charge, usually from the “left,” that the women’s liberation movement “needed some theory,” “hadn’t produced any theory.” Just as the actions of the radical feminists were not seen as actions—they were too “petty,” too sporadic, or what not—their analysis was not seen as analysis or theory.

What we were trying to do was to advance and develop both theory and action, and to unite them, putting theory into action and action into theory. It was this commitment to unity of the two, of course, which made us radicals, and which made us such a threat to liberals, right and “left,”

There are those in our movement who ask, “What is the use of these Conventions? What is the use of this constant iteration of the same things?” When we see what has been already achieved, we learn the use of this “foolishness of preaching:” And after all that we demand has been granted, as it will be soon, *The New York Observer* will piously fold its hands and roll up its eyes and say, “This beneficent movement we have always advocated,” and the pulpits will say “Amen!” (Laughter and applause). Then will come forward women who have gained courage from the efforts and sacrifices of others, and the great world will say, “Here come the women who are going to do something, and not talk.”

—Martha C. Wright

—*HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE*, May 10, 1860

The Press, too has changed its tone. Instead of ridicule, we now have grave debate.

. . . We had in New York a legislative act passed at the last session, securing to married women their rights to their earnings and their children. Other States have taken onward steps. . .

. . . Woman is being so educated that she will feel herself capable of assuming grave responsibilities as lawgiver and administrator. She is crowding into higher avocations and new branches of industry. She already occupies the highest places in literature and art. The more liberal lyceums are open to her, and she is herself the subject of the most popular lectures now before the public. The young women of our academies and high schools are asserting their right to the discipline of declamation and discussion, and the departments of science and mathematics. . . Mass meetings to sympathize with the “strikers” of

Massachusetts are being called in this metropolis by women. Women are ordained ministers and licensed physicians. . . All these are the results of our twenty years of agitation. And it matters not to us, though the men and the women who echo back our thought do fail to recognize the source of power, and while they rejoice in each onward step achieved in the face of ridicule and persecution, ostracize those who have done the work. Who of our literary women has yet ventured one word of praise or recognition of the heroic enunciators of the great idea of women’s equality—of Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright, Ernestine L. Rose, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton? It matters not to those who live for the race, and not for self alone, who has the praise, so that justice be done woman in Church, in State, and at the fireside—an equal everywhere with man—they will not complain, though even *The New York Observer* itself does claim to have done for them the work.

—Susan B. Anthony

*HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE*, May 10, 1860

. . . In the first place, you will meet dozens of men who say, “Oh, woman’s right to property, the right of the wife to her own earnings, we grant that; we always thought that; we have had that idea for a dozen years.” I met a man the other day in the cars, and we read the statute of your New York Legislature. ‘Why,’ said he, “that is nothing; I have assented to that for these fifteen years.” All I could say to that was this: “This agitation has either given you the idea, or it has given you the courage to utter it, for nobody ever heard it from you until to-day.”

—Wendell Phillips

*HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE*, May 10, 1860



Call photo, 2/75



ATLANTA DEMONSTRATION calls for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

who had a hard enough time recognizing and supporting feminism in either the realm of theory or action—and who apparently went blank or haywire when confronted with the combination.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever we were doing just never seemed to fall within the range of the liberal left's vision. But in the beginning it did fall within the range of the TV cameras and newspapers.

In fact, it was the public actions of the radicals, the consciousness-raising section of the movement, that put the WLM on the map. This was true of virtually every category of action you could name—from confrontation, consciousness-raising actions like the picketing and disruption of the Miss America Contest to developing techniques for mass organizing to producing journals, newspapers and books which were widely disseminated.

But the radical theory and strategy was not only the source of widespread mobilization, was not only what sparked the interest of the masses of women, it was also what produced the most in the way of concrete results, the most changes in women's lives. This is another lesson of the past decade whose truth comes clear with access to an authentic history of the movement. The greatest achievements of the women's liberation movement so far, those that have reached the masses of women as a whole—greater freedom in the area of birth control and abortion, greater freedom from oppressive dress codes, and the spread of

<sup>2</sup>Simone de Beauvoir's chapter in her autobiography *Force of Circumstance* about the reception of her book *The Second Sex* contains a fascinating description of this pattern of totally contradictory reactions to feminism.

<sup>3</sup>Cisler also raised the movement's consciousness by pointing out that the requirement being written into the new "reform" laws stipulating that only physicians perform abortions, or that they only be done in hospitals, was an unnecessary restriction—keeping abortions much more expensive than they had to be. Cisler argued that abortion should simply fall under the general medical codes, not under any special ones. Nurses and midwives were already delivering babies under the general codes, a procedure statistically ten times more dangerous than abortion.

feminist theory and consciousness—were all the arenas the radicals first addressed and in which they led.

It was in New York State, the area in which radical feminist analysis, action and organizing ideas were strongest and most advanced, that the first concrete breakthrough of the women's liberation movement in the U.S. was achieved—the abortion law reform which for a few years turned New York State into "the abortion mill of the nation" and upon which the U.S. Supreme Court modeled its guidelines a few years later. It was the radical strategies of 1) opposition to reform and demand for repeal, led by Lucinda Cisler<sup>3</sup> 2) mass consciousness-raising on abortion with women testifying to their "criminal" acts in public and in court 3) the development of the feminist self-help clinic ideas and their promotion of simpler, new abortion techniques that led to the nationwide reform in five years time.

The area of employment, on the other hand, is one in which the liberal feminist groups have concentrated and so far have led, and in which there has been as yet very little progress—for most women anyway. (See "New Ways of Keeping Women Out of Paid Labor" in this book.)

Knowing these things provides information, support and strength for a continuing radical approach and further radical action. But virtually none of it is known.

As soon as the movement began and proved successful, a process set in of wresting control from the women who had started out. And as certain approaches in the movement proved to be popular and successful with other women, the process began of confusing who and what had produced those successful approaches, what thinking, what kinds of people, and specifically which people. There was an assault on the history of the movement—to take it over, to lasso it for one's private ends, to slow it down, to stop it.

Many of the simplest and most powerful elements of the movement's history I listed earlier have disappeared from sight or the connections between them have been severed. Instead, an array of secondary versions, interpretations



and revisions have effaced and replaced the original record.

There are now amazingly different stories of these events, with very different beginnings and very different conclusions. One version doesn't even have women starting the movement but "history" and "changing times" starting it instead. If "history" or "changing times" isn't behind the changes then "technology" is, or "the economy."

The rise of the feminist movement reflected a certain historic context, but this context had to be unlocked by analysis in order to be opened up for attack and work.

The knowledge of who started the movement contains important political lessons for women as does the knowledge of what brought women their gains. That women started the movement and gave it its strength and momentum suggests that it was necessary for women to start the movement, that men would not start the movement, that men don't lead women to their freedom. Women must rely on themselves for that—not because they "should" but because they have to.

Knowing the particular women who initiated the movement, who led the change, is also necessary, and its visibility even less clear. Without the particulars, you will not really feel strong about the general; without knowing which women, you cannot really know that women did it and were necessary to do it.

Knowing the particular women makes the movement very real. It provides real women and actual work to check against distortion, the distortion which prevents women from knowing the movement's sources, knowing the ground-work and learning from it. For instance, without knowing the particular women you cannot know that women did what they did quite deliberately and consciously, operating on the basis of theory, strategy and experience. You may think it was an accident of "history" that those women achieved what they set out to achieve in the first stage of their plan.

If the women who began the WLM didn't have any idea of what would happen, then the whole thing was a miracle, a volcanic eruption perhaps, a natural occurrence, and women didn't really start the WLM after all. And this is just what happens. When women do get some of the credit for the movement—for instance, as one of the historic forces—they are then often described as acting very unconsciously, "spontaneously," or even "instinctively," as part of the historic "upsurge," without any sense of the implications of what they are doing.

By not knowing the particular women very wrong conclusions about what is necessary can be drawn. For instance, one can say, as one woman did in a feminist journal, that the lesson of history is that small groups of women "doing their own thing" built the movement—when, in fact, a look at the original sources shows that women dedicated to building a movement built the movement.

To see that women were in motion and commotion, to see that they were in a whirlwind was one thing, but to see who and what had set the whirlwind in motion, to see the radical feminists at its center, was another. And though the connection between women and the movement has had this

tendency to slip from sight since the beginning, the specific women who started the movement had an even harder time seeing the light of day.

At first people only saw women getting together to talk, and would not see the politics behind what they were doing. Next, they only saw a political upsurge and would not see the women behind it.

Other versions representing an even more direct assault on truth—the disturbing or exciting truths of the last few years—have particular people starting the women's liberation movement, but the wrong ones. The idea was to invert who had created whom. This total reversal when you first began to encounter it could really leave you speechless.

They have lesbians "leading" the movement, for instance, when actually it was tackling the problems in relationships with men that drew women to the movement in droves. Far from actually leading the movement many lesbians complained that they were excluded from the movement in the beginning often by simple virtue of the fact that the women in it spent so much time talking about such boring or irrelevant or disturbing to them subjects as sex with men, getting men to do the housework, and such related problems as abortions and childcare. What drew women to the movement in droves were the consciousness-raising sessions that these lesbians, the liberals and the anti-feminist leftists couldn't stand, the consciousness-raising sessions organized by the radical feminist women.

Sometimes even men come out as having started the movement. The analysis that "history" started the movement is actually a version of this since grand historic forces are still generally assumed to have been created by men. But sometimes more specific men are substituted, such as the male liberals who helped the fight for abortion rights.

Knowing the origins of the movement—which women, which politics—leads to very particular political conclusions. In the arguments among radical women between "feminists" and those women who considered themselves more "political" and who wanted to stay more closely linked with the existing left<sup>4</sup>, history shows it was not the "politics" but the feminists who fired masses of women, awoke the world

<sup>4</sup>For different views of this debate and its development see "A Kind of Memo from Casey Hayden & Mary King" in *Liberation*, April 1966; "Women: The Longest Revolution," by Juliet Mitchell, *New Left Review*, London, Dec. 1966; "Women and the Radical Movement" by Ann Koedt and "Women of the World Unite, We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Men" by Carol Hanisch and Elizabeth Sutherland in *Notes From The First Year*, 1968; Shulamith Firestone, editor; "Toward A Female Liberation Movement" by Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, 1968 (reprinted in full in *Voices From Women's Liberation*, Leslie Tanner, editor, Signet, 1971); Roxanne Dunbar, Dana Densmore and others in *No More Fun and Games, A Journal of Female Liberation*, Nos. 1-3, 1968-70; SPAZM Newsletter, 1969 (Women's History Research Center, Berkeley); "The Left Debate," 1969-70 in *Notes From The Second Year*, Firestone, Koedt, eds.; "Bread and Roses" by Kathy McAfee and Myrna Wood, 1969 (reprinted in full in Tanner, *op. cit.*); "Consumerism and Women" by Ellen Willis, 1969 (Tanner, *op. cit.*); "Where Are We Going: On Women's Liberation," by Marlene Dixon in *Radical America*, Feb. 1970; "Goodbye To All That" by Robin Morgan, *Rat*, Feb. 1970 (reprinted in full in Tanner, *op. cit.*); *The Dialectic of Sex* by Firestone, 1970; *Red Star*, Organ of the Red Women's Detachment, Catherine Henry, editor, New York, 1970-71; *Women's Estate* by Juliet Mitchell, 1971.



to the woman question again and sparked the women's liberation movement. Blacking this out allows the same old arguments to come up again and again.

If there is resistance to identifying origins of the movement, there is even more resistance to identifying results. This, too, is part of the veritable rush to prove that a movement by women and for women isn't really necessary.

People may acknowledge that women have started a movement but then argue that it's not necessary anyway. They deny that the movement has anything to do with the changes that are occurring. They even argue that the movement is hurting women's hopes and chances of effecting any further change. One example is the frequent denial by male employers that it was feminist "complaints" that forced them to begin hiring or promoting women. After the Metropolitan Museum of Art signed an affirmative action agreement with the New York State Attorney General to stop discrimination in hiring, a museum official described the predominance of women on the new promotion roster as "a coincidence" and "happenstance." (*New York Times*, 7/25/74) Or they may try to prove that the changes began before they really did—that they had already begun to take action before the movement or before the arm of the law hit them. At home men will claim that they'd do the housework more, if only the women would stop asking.

Or people will try to show that proving oneself, not militancy, is what caused the changes. "We had a late start in the business world: barriers to high executive achievement still stand. But they are coming down faster every year—I believe this happened not because women shouted and demanded jobs, but because a handful of highly able women have proved their value to business organizations," said a woman corporate executive in the *New York Times*. But this is an argument that is only possible by blotting out of history all of the times women have proved themselves before.

When there isn't a rush to prove a movement isn't necessary, that the movement didn't accomplish the changes that have accrued and which it called for, that it actually hurt its own cause—there is a rush to deny that the radicals were behind women's liberation's successes, or, again, to try to argue that the radicals hurt their own cause and to claim credit for the liberal approach, for moderation.

To do this requires standing history on its head. The amazing statement by Jane E. Brody in a *New York Times* review of four books about abortion is an example:

"It is surprising to find that radicalism played such a minor part in the most successful social change in recent years—the abortion revolution." (8/8/73)

As we have seen, in New York, the state that led the nation in abortion law reform, activists opposed reforms in the law, even breaking up reform hearings, in order to demand total repeal of the abortion law. The movement to repeal the abortion laws got nowhere until the radical women's liberation movement came along, with women consciousness-raising in public about their abortions, march-

ing thousands strong and pressing mass action court cases against the laws.

In fact, it was both because of the work of the radicals and to stop the radicals that the reform came into being. In the close New York State vote, some legislators testified that they had voted for the reform legislation in order to moot the women's mass action case then in the courts, and the possibility that it would bring about total repeal of the law. Nelson Rockefeller, as Governor, vetoed a bill to stiffen the law again two years later saying, among other things, that his action was designed to prevent the possibility of "no law at all." (*New York Times*, 5/14/72)

When the reform bill was passed, the Establishment virtually swung into full gear to cut off further agitation for total repeal of abortion laws and to keep control with its "liberal" reform law. Suddenly, it became impossible for the women's liberation movement's stand in favor of repeal to get any media coverage. In what amounted to a total blackout of radical feminist agitation, the media began 1) a blackout on news of genuine repeal bills, and 2) the institution of the systematic use of the word "repeal" to mean either the *reform* laws, or the even stricter bills being introduced in the state legislatures. This happened throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> Hence powerful Establishment institutions went into operation to wipe the effectiveness of the radical repeal efforts not only out of history, but out of the very language.

There was a media blitz of the version of history that liberals, not radicals, were behind the movement's achievements. This, in fact, turned out to be the most serious of all the assaults on the simple, obvious elements of the wonderful explosion because it had such resources of wealth and power behind it. It was part of the strategy of installing a new leadership on the movement to tone it down, to block the chain reaction—by substituting different women, the Establishment's own women, into people's vision, and have them speak for the movement.

The strategy was to wipe the original, authentic feminism and radicalism out of visibility and, with it, to wipe out the lessons that could be learned from the popularity and effectiveness of radical, feminist ideas. This would be done by excluding from consciousness the activities, past and present, of the radical feminists and presenting their popular ideas only through intermediaries who were then oddly enough called the ideas' popularizers. The way history was written to justify and explain this was to say: the radical feminists (usually nameless) did start things, they woke everybody up, but they were unpopular with the masses of people and ineffective.

In addition, recognition was given to a new, liberal leadership in the movement which was supposedly more "professional" and more responsible and would alienate the public less. This new, usually female, leadership—the

<sup>5</sup>For a fuller account of the way this unfolded in New York State see "The Conspiracy Vs. Repeal; Abortion and the Media" by Colette Price, *Woman's World*, July, 1972. For the story in Florida, see the March 1972 issue of *Woman's World*, "Abortion in Florida" by Margaret Reynolds, Delia Anderson and Carol Hanisch.



wealthy and powerful women, tied to the wealthy and powerful by marriage or token careers—came into the movement in full force and openly at the end of 1970, at what was to become the crest of the movement in power and strength, if not in numbers.

The very fashionable women who came into the movement because of its popularity, after it had been proved popular and powerful, then set about trying to prove that they were the ones who made the very popularity that had brought them in. They came in when 25,000 women marched down Fifth Avenue on Aug. 26, 1970 and countless others marched all across the United States. They came in after the groundbreaking abortion reform in New York had been won that July. They came in after the Equal Rights Amendment had been passed by Congress for the first time in history that August. They came in after a special supplement to the *Ladies Home Journal* produced by the women's liberation activists themselves as a result of the sit-in they held that spring had reached almost seven million women. They came in after a half a dozen books by women's liberationists or about the movement had been written and were hitting the mass market. After all these things the liberal Establishment women came in—to make the movement effective!

After their "support"—and especially after the institution of *Ms.* Magazine's regular publication which began in 1972—the radical women's liberation activists were never again able to get direct access to the media. The history of the preceding years was re-written and inverted to make it appear that the liberals were the popularizers of women's liberation. In an incredible article in the *New York Times* (2/25/73) writer Eileen Shanahan contradicts her own facts in order to press this prevailing inversion of history and truth. In it she compares the 1973 national conventions of NOW and the Women's Political Caucus, calling them both "feminist groups," but NOW, the radical one. This radicalism, she then goes on to claim, "has made NOW unpopular with both men and women." Yet the NOW convention is—by her own numbers—twice as large as the Caucus's convention, not to mention twice as militant. And the figure she gives for NOW national membership, 35,000, is larger than the figure she gives for the Caucus's membership.

The very headline of the article "Now a Wide Spectrum of Groups" illustrates the male Establishment's desire for the spectrum to shift so that the liberal feminist group NOW, originally the right of the movement, becomes the left, and the radical groups disappear completely—first from sight, and then hopefully, from reality also.

After comparing NOW and the Caucus, Shanahan then goes on to discuss the even more moderate, "staid" League of Women Voters which, she notes, in 1972 voted to support the Equal Rights Amendment "after decades of avoiding purely feminist issues." Shanahan's major point, the assumption that lies behind her entire article, that radical groups may break the ground on this kind of issue, but liberal groups are necessary to carry it through, to "persuade the political establishment to act," is contradicted by the very example she gives of the League. In this case, the League is actually larger than the other groups, but the fact

was the Equal Rights Amendment was carried through Congress in March 1972, *before* the liberal group she's talking about endorsed it. It was the radical leaders' militancy that got the ERA through Congress, and the "popularizers" do not seem to have been much help in carrying it any further.

Shanahan's statement of what she considers the major achievement of the Caucus's convention illustrates another facet of the liberal re-write of the radical, feminist explosion. After first trying to get rid of the radicalism by making it appear unpopular and ineffective, they then try to get rid of the feminism by making it appear narrow and not radical enough. As Shanahan put it, "Perhaps the (Caucus) convention's most significant action, however, was the decision to re-dedicate the Caucus to broad social objectives, not solely feminist aims."

The assault on radical feminism in the name of radical concern by the ruling institutions of the society has occasionally gotten quite staggering. Take, for instance, the following editorial from the *New York Times* apparently taking up the cudgels for the poor and down-trodden masses of American women against the nasty, selfish feminist movement.

"The woman alone in American society, struggling with the breakdown of social institutions and the need to raise a family on unequal pay and under covert discrimination, has very real problems—considerably more serious than those of the overprivileged few who worry about specialized forms of sexual liberation and exalted executive expectations." (*New York Times*, 6/27/75)

Are we to believe that the "overprivileged few" of the *New York Times* were really worried that feminism was too conservative, too narrow—or were they actually concerned with protecting their *own* executive positions?

Wonderful, tenacious women will not be diverted from their "selfish" aims and their "exalted ambitions" for liberty and equality!

These liberal groups, need I remind you, are not calling for a communist revolution, an end to private ownership of the land and industry—and a classless society—as what they mean by a broadening of the objectives of women (. . . beyond women's liberation!). They want to get women back to tending their normal business of putting patches on the wounds of the same old rotten system of male supremacy, racism and capitalism. For these people, "narrow" old feminism, "selfish" old feminism, is a little too hard-hitting, a little too effective—and also, though they won't admit it, a little too broad in terms of numbers.

After all the fashionable, token women "joined" the movement and took it over, the numbers of women on the Aug. 26th marches began to plummet. Never again did 25,000 women march down Fifth Avenue. And there were fewer and fewer significant breakthroughs in legal achievements.

Radical feminists set masses of women in motion all over



the world. That women had responded could hardly be denied anymore. That women had taken the initiative was perhaps technically true. That there was a connection between the radical feminist women who took the initiative and the other women who responded was what could be denied.

The male supremacist left wanted to deny that feminism was necessary for the mass movement and necessary for women to continue as radicals. The Establishment liberals wanted to deny that radicalism was popular and behind the women's liberation movement. Hence both the left and the right put all their hopes in what each commonly called "the second stage" or "phase 2" of the movement. For the left, this was the stage when feminism would no longer be visible. For the right, it was the stage when both feminism and radicalism would no longer be visible.

This meant breaking connections, right and left, as it were. Breaking connections between the women and the ideas they produced; breaking connections between the women and those who came after them; breaking connections between those ideas and other radical forces at the time, between those women and other people who had contributed to those ideas; breaking connections between women and the women's liberation movement itself, and between the movement and the changes that took place.

Without access to knowledge of who led the movement and what produced the changes it called for, the following conclusions became possible:

- A movement isn't necessary.
- A radical movement isn't necessary.
- A feminist movement isn't necessary.
- A movement by women isn't necessary.

With access to the history of the first years of the women's liberation movement, of the wonderful explosion, the opposite conclusions would be drawn: that more radical, more feminist programs, not less, are necessary to win women's liberation—and more radical feminist strategy and action will make the movement even larger and more powerful.

### III. SETTING UP FOR THE KILL

Under the leadership of radical feminists in the first six years, the movement made tremendous gains in consciousness, as well as concrete reforms. But the movement's history is now in the hands of those who opposed these historical developments. And the movement is also. The radical movement has been dismembered and the gains for women in general of the last few years are in danger, as well.

There is no doubt that the liberal Establishment would have made every effort to take the movement over anyway, to slow it down and stop it, that liberal opportunists right and "left" would have done everything they could to steal the fruits of the radical feminist struggle; but it would not have happened virtually without a battle, and could not have happened to such a great extent, if there

had not been a crucial, underlying issue the movement's organizers failed to understand, unite around and defend. That issue was history itself. Despite all the rhetoric, we didn't really understand the issues involving the history of the past. And our own history—the present—we barely regarded as history.

The women's liberation movement has not been alone in this. The papers, pamphlets and journals from the black liberation movement have been full of accounts of discovering the mistake of disregarding the importance of the movement's history, the continuous tradition—right up through the most recent efforts. As usual, black militants are quite a few years ahead of all the other radicals in the country in discovering this. The activists in the peace movement, too, had to experience the wonderful surge of power of the genuine, radical mass movement, to feel the revolutionary potential of this country, and then see it being taken away from the people again—through history—to learn the power of history in anything but a rhetorical sense. All of us apparently have had to go through the school of hard knocks to learn this lesson. Simply reading about "the importance of history" doesn't seem to do it, unfortunately.

As a result, far too much of the women's liberation movement's history and ideas went unformulated and unrecorded by the movement itself. Much of that which was recorded and developed by outsiders claiming to represent the movement's history was incomplete. That which was recorded and seen has been systematically disassociated and ripped off from its origins, both personal and political, in the movement by the very opponents of the developments.

Because of the movement's neglect of this issue of history (and some confusion about it), that crucial battlefield was gained by others. In fact, in general, the only people who didn't rush to take credit for the achievements, who didn't join the opportunistic rush, were the very genuine, sincere activists who had created them. This was a terrible mistake, the price for which feminism is still paying. Because of it radical women are in danger of winning every battle but losing the war.

As in unity—in the organized movement—there is power, so in continuity—or history—there is power. If unity is hard to achieve, continuity may be even harder. Continuity, in fact, is a form of unity, is an essential part of unity and a higher form because it also involves the power of persistence. To win, women uniting is not enough. Women must unite and persist! But without a history, persistence is impossible.

As soon as the radicals started the women's liberation movement it began to acquire a history, a history of extreme political importance, because it represented, among other things, the accumulation of movement experience, not to mention the reality of what women were actually doing. And yet a liberal line with respect to history both from inside and outside the movement proceeded to treat this very real history and experience as if it weren't there.

The early attack on the history of the present women's liberation movement came from a "left" form of liberalism, under the cover of what purported to be a radical, socialist or egalitarian approach to feminism. The attack from the



right came later (though things happened very rapidly as the movement mushroomed) after the attack from the "left" had sown confusion, disunity and disarray.

First came the assault on the feminist militants from other "radicals," and then the right liberals took the movement over. (Of course the radical feminists never got completely destroyed nor the movement completely taken over.)

There were various "left" forms of the liberal attack on present feminist history. An important one was the refusal of the rest of the left to recognize the women's liberation movement as radical—as anti-capitalist and anti-racist, as well as anti-male supremacist—though the founding radical women's groups were all clear about their position, as evidenced in papers and journals.

The founding groups all openly called themselves radical women for the express purpose of stating their commitment to total revolution, and most women came from various sections of the left. Their express purpose in initiating a women's liberation movement—expressed to no avail, it would seem, to the deaf ears of the liberal left—was to insure that the revolution would, in fact, be total and include the full liberation of women.

The radicalism of feminist women was simply not acknowledged and sometimes the connection of women's liberationists to general radical struggles was erased from history. As the picture below illustrates, the left virtually

couldn't see the women who were there—or absolutely bold-facedly refused to recognize them.

This male supremacist blindness of left-wing men and their effort to ignore and isolate the women's liberation militants, whom they saw as upstarts, from the left tradition and from the present left, made it that much easier for the right later, for its own reasons, to try to wipe out from public memory and consciousness that the popular women's liberation movement was started and led by the radicals and that, in fact, it had been the ideas of these radicals that had been the most popular with the masses—often, actually, with the masses of men as well as the masses of women. The trouble with these radical ideas to the opportunist, male supremacist left, of course, was that they were also feminist.

The women's liberationists were upsetting the proper place of the woman question. To the left, the woman question was either relegated to the past as long since solved or relegated to the future—of socialism. If it had any place in the present at all, it was private, not public, for the select few, not the masses. The feminists were doing their best to unearth the woman question and the left was doing whatever it could to keep it buried.

Even when many on the left finally changed some of their positions and began to acknowledge the woman question as a current radical issue, even taking many of the early feminist positions, they would not acknowledge who

*Southern Patriot*, Nov. 1972



This picture was part of an article describing a wave of strikes which hit the Atlanta area, led by black workers and set off by the issue of discrimination. "In almost every case, smaller numbers of whites joined the walkouts. Support also came from black organizations, students, socialists, and communists." Women's liberation or any kind of women's or feminist groups are omitted from mention in the article. Yet a women's liberation symbol is clearly evident hanging around the neck of a woman in the accompanying picture. The *Patriot* picture is an example of the left seeing and showing women being radical but rendering their feminism invisible. This way, also, feminists never get down in history as radical.



and what it was that changed them — women and feminism. It would seem that it is still extremely difficult for men to acknowledge that they have learned things from women, especially extremely important things. The entire left worldwide has changed because of the women's liberation movement, but until they recognize the history, the source of their change, it is only temporary and more apparent than real. Until they acknowledge what made them change, they haven't really changed.

Another major "left" form of attack on feminist history, and one which came for the most part from inside the women's liberation movement—though also couched in "left" sounding terms like "anarchism," "equality," "internal democracy," "class"—was the attack on the very idea of leadership. Some of the results of this were the failure to acknowledge for the public, historic record the reality of leadership whenever genuine leadership occurred, the reluctance of groups and individuals to lay claim to their ideas, and hence their failure, in a sense, to defend them. Worse yet was the embarrassment about and sometimes attack on the women who were trying to clarify as precisely as they could, for the public record, and for other women to know, who and where ideas and actions were coming from.

Because of the leaderless ideal in the movement, a whole range of events, processes, connections—the spectrum and history, in fact—of what was going on in the women's liberation movement could not be acknowledged. Denying leadership meant denying a lot of other reality along with it. It meant not acknowledging who and what sparked your interest. It meant not acknowledging the connections between ideas and people, actions and people. It meant not acknowledging *ideas*. Because there was resistance to making judgments between what one person said and what someone else said, one could not acknowledge an idea as superior to another.

Denying that any one woman could speak for the interests of all women or analyze what these interests were meant denying that there could be a theory of woman's common situation. It ended up denying that there was a common situation for women. Denying the idea of leadership meant not recognizing the existence of sources of things, not recognizing theory and not recognizing history. It led to timelessness and mindlessness.

Behind this was the failure to understand the true, radical meaning of the word leadership. The simplest most down-to-earth definition of leadership is actually chronological: in terms of history, she who goes first; in terms of hard work, she who paves the way; in terms of getting to one's destination, she who guides. Often leadership was simply not recognized for what it was—because it was coming from a woman or because it was so unfamiliar, so radical, so "simple."

Leadership in this sense was actually happening from the beginning of the movement, whether or not people understood this to be leadership. The movement was launched by women who saw that women were oppressed—and not all women saw this. It was launched by women who wanted to try to do something for the situation of women as a whole, who decided they could not free themselves by

themselves; and not all women understood this. In this very simple, radical sense leadership existed and because it was real, it was valuable and necessary—even precious. Without that leadership in theory and without that initiative in action, and without people's joining and supporting—"following"—other people's initiatives, there couldn't have been a movement, nor could there continue to be one.

The attack on the idea of feminist leadership, and hence on the real feminist militants and pioneers, came out of some people's own fear of being marked—and punished—as leaders. With others it came out of an idealistic overreaction to bad experience with irresponsible and dogmatic (usually male) radical leadership or from experience with the conservative idea of the one "great leader," miraculous and all powerful. Many saw leadership in terms of the authority of the power structure instead of the authority of truth. With some it came out of efforts to prove that women were more equal than anybody had ever dreamed, to emphasize the mass aspects of the movement (a false, defensive reaction to the enemy's time worn tactic of trying to blame a rebellion on a few leaders). With still others, it came from efforts to control the movement for one's own personal purposes, to advance oneself, or to prevent what was seen as any other woman advancing beyond oneself; or it came from outside "left" purposes: to prevent the separate mass women's liberation movement from recognizing its own leadership—tested over time—and hence from being truly autonomous and independent.

We had to learn the importance of recognizing our reality, and the importance of our history. And we had to learn the importance of recognizing the reality of both in building our organization instead of suppressing both in the name of keeping up appearances of one kind or another. Only if we based our struggle on reality—not appearances—could we really free ourselves.

The left denied that radicalism was there. The women's liberation movement denied that leadership was there, and hence radical, feminist leadership. Both these "left"—or falsely radical — denials of reality, denials that feminist leadership was even there made it easier for the right to deny the effectiveness of radical, feminist leadership in creating and spreading the very thing the radical feminists did create and spread—the mass movement — and made it easier for the right liberals to take the movement over.

It is amazing that as much of the true picture of the history of the beginning of the movement was able to get out as has, in the face of all these obstacles, as well as the widespread ignorance of and failure really to understand its importance. That it did is due virtually single-handedly to the leadership of Shulamith Firestone—who, in the face of all kinds of attack (not to mention lack of support) from inside as well as outside the movement, proceeded to dare to embarrass herself by taking the history of the movement, taking herself and the others who began it, absolutely seriously.

I know I liked the simplicity and accuracy of the title Firestone, as editor, chose for our group's journal *Notes From The First Year*. But I remember also thinking it was "cute," a little premature, even presumptuous to put ourselves in a historical context so soon. I jumped into a "left"



version of the pro-woman line saying something like to call ourselves "first" was in a way to put down all the feminists who went before us, and all the individual struggles of women which never stopped going on. Firestone, in fact, was the only one in the group to write an extensive article about the earlier feminists in the 19th century, pointing out that they were predecessors we could be proud of, and far more radical than has been acknowledged, in this very same journal she was calling "First Year." What is more, "First Year" referred simply to the record of our group, which was accurate and descriptive, and even somewhat limited in its description. As the first theoretical journal of radical women, later to call themselves radical feminists, it really did reflect the first year of visible stirrings of the independent radical women's liberation movement.

But somehow I missed these things in my criticism, though not in the feeling of excitement Firestone's directness generated in me. Later, in *Notes From The Second Year*, Firestone's efforts at documenting the movement work of contributors stirred more of these contradictory feelings. Even though I felt my "consciousness-raised" by the appraisal and acknowledgement, I also felt embarrassed by it. I found myself wondering whether it hadn't probably just been chance that brought us all together in that group, at that time, to produce that work in a climate that allowed it to spread rapidly, and "receive the credit" for being the first, and, besides, I knew that getting acknowledged publicly in this way was going to cause some trouble for me in Redstockings as it was then functioning.

If I was afraid of trouble from the outside and further isolation inside the movement for being acknowledged, you can imagine the flak Firestone faced for being the one to do all the acknowledging Outsiders—reporters and non-movement writers—had done it before, usually with terrible inaccuracies. This had caused some internal frictions and jealousies—as well as some feelings of social pride in "the group." But this was nothing compared to what would hit an insider who tried to record the history of the movement. For someone inside the movement to do it (and to do it far more accurately) was actually a change in the nature—the depth, breadth, seriousness and daring—of the organizational format of the movement up to that point. For instance, despite all the essays on the movement's leaderlessness in *Notes*, those editor's introductions to the articles actually pointed out and documented leadership—to the women already involved in the movement and to those thinking of becoming involved.

Virtually every detail of what Firestone did in establishing and documenting the history of the beginning of the women's liberation movement had political significance and salvaged some radical political power for women—not to mention simple truth and historic reality—in the attempted takeover by the Liberal Establishment, in both theory and the concrete reality that would follow.

- Starting a theoretical journal for the movement—the first one—putting movement theory and experience in print on the public record.
- Calling the journal *Notes From The First Year* and

thereby asserting immediate consciousness of present history, daring to take herself seriously and the present generation seriously.

- Writing in this first journal a historical essay on the 19th century Women's Rights Movement, affirming the women who had gone before us, and revealing that they were far more radical than the history books—those that mention them at all—let on.
- Identifying the group in the title of the journal as New York Radical Women and establishing for the public scrutiny as well as the historical record that we considered ourselves radicals, with all the breadth and depth of scope that word committed us to. This is also evident in any number of the articles in the journal, which discuss the relationship of women's liberation to the black liberation movement and to socialist revolutions. The later change to the term radical feminist did not represent a narrowing of the scope, but an affirmation of feminism in the face of the pseudo-left disparagement of it.
- In *Notes From the Second Year*, identifying as accurately as possible—and publicly, for the people, too—the contributions of the women whose work and writings had been at the center of the opening round of the women's liberation movement.
- Writing the Organizing Principles of New York Radical Feminists and including reading and action on feminist history as a requirement for joining the group. This requirement was one of the first to be revised out of existence in the liberal takeover of the organization, when the founders were forced to resign and the Organizing Principles eliminated.
- In dedicating her book *The Dialectic of Sex* to Simone de Beauvoir, Firestone displayed again her sense of history and derivation and established in one of the few places on the public record that the feminism of the radical women who put the women's liberation movement on the map and into the world vocabulary derived from the radical Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex*, not the liberal Betty Friedan—with all the political implications this involves. In fact, Simone de Beauvoir is the mother of Betty Friedan, which is only dimly acknowledged in Friedan's book. Although so many of the radical activists in the beginning of the movement had confessed to each other the enormous impact *The Second Sex* had had on our lives, we were tending to see this as more important personally than politically. We knew, of course, that personally we derived from Beauvoir, not Friedan. But too few of us had enough of a sense of history, particularly our own history, to see the political importance of making our tradition clear:

Beauvoir's book laid the groundwork for the post-suffrage, post-socialism analysis of male supremacy. Some



of the key elements of Beauvoir's analysis upon which the WLM later built its work included:

1. Women have always before been oppressed. The basis of this was biological and historical—rooted in the problems of being the childbearers under primitive conditions. Matriarchy, in the sense of women having either superior or equal political power with men, did not exist then or at any later time, as some have falsely alleged on both the right and the left.
2. Socialism has not been sufficient to eliminate the oppression of women, though great advances have occurred under its revolutionary impact.
3. A vivid description of male domination and its effects on women vs. Friedan's "problem that has no name," which Friedan then named as "the feminine mystique" and analyzed as an amalgam of Freud, the advertising industry's need to sell products, and capitalism's post-war need to get women back into the home.

Beauvoir's book was the best, most radical and comprehensive analysis up to its time and remains so. It was crucial to the development of the WLM.

Beauvoir describes the problem, although in some ways insufficiently, liberally. The rest of the left, despite all its talk about combatting backward ideas, doesn't even describe the problem—rarely giving it more than a one sentence description.

The beginning of the solution, the synthesis, came in the United States with the combination of Beauvoir's analysis, black liberation, particularly, Black Power thinking and experience, and Maoism—the theory coming out of the Chinese Revolution.

The political importance of establishing our historical derivation from Beauvoir wasn't clear enough to us at the beginning of the movement. We didn't much understand the importance of historic line and development except in a personal way. We knew we had to re-establish Stanton and Anthony. But we took our more recent derivation for granted—Beauvoir and the black movement. It wasn't until after we began to experience an assault on derivation that we began to understand how important it was.

#### IV. KILLING OFF THE PIONEERS

I remember seeing myself referred to in *Ms. Magazine* as if I were dead. It was a strange feeling. There I was being described as "an early pioneer of consciousness-raising" with no reference to what I was doing now, to any connections I might still have with the women's liberation movement.

Of course, even earlier I had felt something akin to it, when I felt stunned dismay and confusion in another issue of *Ms. magazine*. It was in an article introducing the "radicalization of Simone de Beauvoir," describing her as having "joined women at last." (7/72) Of course, this was something a little different. Beauvoir herself wasn't being killed

For many of us Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* changed our lives. This book was written at a time (1948) when feminism had been thoroughly discredited as a movement, and women were being shuttled back into domestic slavery. Many "liberated" women scoff at Simone de Beauvoir's "bitterness" and her "envy" for men. . . . That fear of "bitterness" in women exhibited by American men and women reflects their social programming; a woman is supposed to be "fulfilled," "satisfied" and "happy." It would seem that a little bitterness is due in America.

*The Second Sex* is still the most intelligent, human and thorough document written on Female oppression and masculine supremacy.

— Roxanne Dunbar  
NO MORE FUN AND GAMES,  
A JOURNAL OF FEMALE LIBERATION, Issue 2  
Boston, February, 1969

off, but her "early work," her book *The Second Sex* which started it all, which had created the radical women who sparked the women's liberation movement, and which is still a living goldmine of insight and information for feminism, was being killed off. It was so wrong, had so stunned me, that I hardly reacted to the article on C-R that appeared in the same issue, the article to which I was a strangely disembodied footnote months later in an answer to a letter to the editor. But this article, too, cut the heart out of the truth of consciousness-raising, which was still vitally important to the movement.

I already knew something strange was happening in and to the movement the year I began to notice that *The Second Sex* and Shulamith Firestone's book *The Dialectic of Sex* were being left off feminist reading lists. I think I first began to observe this phenomenon in 1972, in the second edition of *The Liberated Woman's Appointment Calendar* when I noticed those two books were no longer listed in the recommended reading. I was startled, felt a little flutter in my heart, in fact, at I must confess, my immediate assumption that this was significant. In my opinion, you see, the best books of women's liberation analysis had just been taken off the list.

Why did I assume that the deletion represented more than the impulse of these two compilers of this women's liberation calendar? I don't know for sure. But I began to notice it happening more and more that usually both, though sometimes one or the other, of these two books would be left off the bibliographies of the new books and publications coming out claiming to represent "women's liberation" and "feminist" thinking.

I also began to notice another book beginning to appear on the lists more and more, a book I couldn't help noticing if only because its title *The First Sex* was so startlingly the



opposite of Beauvoir's book which was disappearing from the lists. I soon learned, even without reading it, that this new book promoted a theory of an ancient matriarchy and the fall—in fact, the steady decline—of woman from her ancient grandeur and was therefore opposing, not only in its title, but in its political line much of Beauvoir's liberating analysis and grand achievement. In fact, Beauvoir's book traces virtually the opposite history for females—a history of oppression but nevertheless continuing and significant progress in women's conditions and possibilities.

This had been an essential observation on which the 19th century feminists had based their analysis, also.

Woman's steady march forward, and her growing desire for a broader outlook prove that she has not reached her normal condition, and that society has not yet conceded all that is necessary for its attainment.

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1881

Although touted as returning woman to her rightful place in history, *The First Sex* actually does much to deprive women of their place in history. Only a pre-history is discovered for women. When recorded history begins, it's all down hill. The book completely leaves out any record of the feminist struggle and advance in the 19th century. None of the 19th century feminists—Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth—or any others are mentioned in the book. Instead, Davis's chapter on the 19th century entitled "Not Quite People" opens with the observation "... the nineteenth century proceeded to annihilate woman's very identity as a human being ... now came the final reduction to absolute zero of her value as a person."

I'm not going into all the reasons here for concluding that the rise of *The First Sex* represented a reversal of the feminist analysis but I got to the point that whenever a new "feminist" or "women's liberation" book would come along, I'd go straight to the back to see what they had or hadn't listed in the bibliography.

When Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* had appeared, about a half dozen years after *The Second Sex* had changed my life, I hadn't really liked it. Though I was glad to see another feminist book, it seemed "thin and commercial" to me, not as deep and emotionally moving as *The Second Sex*, and I couldn't understand why a number of women hated Simone de Beauvoir and loved *The Feminine Mystique*. I must say, I got an inkling of why Friedan's book disturbed me when I saw its book jacket quoting Virgilia Peterson saying "far and away more real, truer and more moving than Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*."

But it wasn't until I became involved in the women's liberation movement that I was able to express the very simple, obvious criticism of Friedan's book that I must have been feeling all along—that it left men out of its analysis, it somehow blamed the psyches and intelligence of the women themselves for what they and she constantly refer to as "the problem without a name," never once giving it the name Beauvoir gave it: male supremacy.

Friedan's book, however, did make a very important contribution in setting the stage for the present movement. Friedan set about implementing a very specific and important task that Beauvoir's book inspired. She set out to show that the people who said that American women are escaping the kind of second-class treatment Beauvoir's book so sharply exposed, who said that American women were the most emancipated in the world, were wrong. She also did groundbreaking research, digging out facts about the post-war suppression of women in the United States and many, if not all, the forces involved in that. Normally this book was included on all the new, revisionist "feminist" reading lists that began to appear and confuse and flood the market after the original burst of feminist theory and interest in the women's liberation movement, the lists from which *The Second Sex* was disappearing. But from *The First Ms. Reader*, even Friedan, authentic leader of "moderate" feminism, got the treatment and hatchet job.

If you go to the suggested reading list of *The First Ms. Reader* you will find the following inversion, misrepresentation and virtual wipe out of the main, published leaders of the feminist movement and their work:

1. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is left off completely.
2. *The First Sex* is included, and praised, of course.
3. Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* is listed, but described as "a feminist adapts Marxist analytical techniques to the needs of women and children." When I saw this, my blood went a little cold. Perhaps because at the time I saw it, the Chilean military coup had just occurred and the newspapers were full of accounts of formerly "non-political" generals shouting "kill all Marxists." Or perhaps my blood froze because it was so untrue ... almost the opposite of the truth, or rather a strange inversion or actually a revision of it. Firestone, in stating that she was synthesizing Marx and Freud, had never called herself a Marxist. In fact, her book had critiqued Marxism for failing to incorporate adequately the oppression of women in its analysis. It was a description that would divide Firestone from her readership, from the very women who would want to read her. It seemed to be a smear—I'm tempted to say a set-up.
4. *The Feminine Mystique*, by Friedan, on the other hand, is described as "Freudian interpretations of women." That, too, made my head spin because a large portion of Friedan's book is spent actually attacking Freudian interpretations of women. This description would likewise cut Friedan off from the women who otherwise would want to read her.

Of course, in the case of the *Ms. Reader*, the collection and annotation of its bibliography had two effects. Not only was original and authentic radical and liberal feminism eliminated and a number of important feminist leaders grossly misrepresented (and isolated), but wiping out the very much still alive pioneers left Gloria Steinem primarily at the helm. It wasn't just a case of wiping out the pioneers, it was a case of replacing them with a substitute: Gloria Steinem, editor of *Ms*.



Two papers were early published in Virginia by women. Each was established in Williamsburg, and each was called *The Virginia Gazette*. The first, started by Clementina Reid, in 1772, favored the Colonial Cause giving great offense to many royalists. To counteract its influence, Mrs. H. Boyle, of the same place, started another paper in 1774, in the interests of the Crown, and desirous that it should seem to represent the true principles of the colony, she borrowed the name of the colonial paper. It lived but a short time. The Colonial *Virginia Gazette* was the first paper in which was printed the Declaration of Independence,

*Matilda Joslyn Gage,*  
*HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE, 1881*

## V. THE TRIUMPH OF THE SECONDARY SOURCES

The opportunist, male supremacist left, to the extent they acknowledged the oppression of women at all, tried to use women to project something else—that something else being what they thought was radicalism, what they thought was anti-capitalism, what they thought was socialism. The women's liberation militants, on the other hand, were doing

just what they were saying they were doing. They were talking about women and trying to do something about women and do it *radically*. Some of the commercial media responded to that authenticity either by projecting it, or sometimes even by helping it express itself better, such as the strange case of the *Daily News* which captioned the photographs it ran of the Miss America protest with: "These women are not against beauty, just beauty contests, and they have taken their case to the people." Of course the same paper also carried the bra-burning invention, in both cases projecting their own judgment of what made "good copy."

But the exaggerated stuff was more prevalent than the other, and in most cases the movement—feminism, the women's liberation core—spoke for itself far better than the media did. And whenever the movement—at least the early activists—did have a chance to speak for itself to the public, there was an enormous response. The response to the radical ideas must have really surprised the media. This was true, anyway, as long as the movement was speaking for itself.

Then came the period when feminists virtually stopped speaking. It came with the ascendancy of the ultra-egalitarian and lesbian lines in the burgeoning movement and the accompanying attack from within on the movement's founders, most outspoken leadership, and much of

Photo: Mary Ellen Mark



In an apartment on the Lower East Side, Redstockings, a group which takes its name from "Blue Stockings," a term used in the past for intellectual women, meets each Sunday. A poster on the wall reads: "Speak pains to recall pains—the Chinese Revolution. Tell it like it is—the black revolution. Bitch, sisters, bitch!—the final revolution." The group employs consciousness-raising, or the bitch session, to gain political insights from shared feelings. More than 30 young women sit crowded on the floor of the small, stuffy room for five to six hours. A question is posed, such as, "Did you choose to stay single or marry?" Each girl relates specific incidents in her life, and at the end, the "testimony" is analyzed. They find that problems they thought were their own private sorrows are shared by everyone in the group. "If all women share the same problem, how can it be personal? Women's pain is not personal, it's political."

Redstockings meet for a "consciousness-raising" session. "Women aren't in a position to make demands now," one says. "We have to build a mass movement first."

— Photo and text from *Life*, 12/12/69  
© 1969 by Time, Inc.



its original direction. The line was mechanically egalitarian: for dividing labor without analysis. It insisted that all must speak or none at all, that everything must be done by lot and consensus, and that writing and speaking were middle class privileges. The lesbian line insisted that women going to bed with women was the ultimate conclusion of feminism, part of "women loving women," and that "sisterhood" meant lesbianism.

Together—and often they went together, with claims to speak for "the lower class"—they were temporarily able to shut feminists up and frighten women away from the women's liberation movement. Interestingly enough, both these lines came rather dramatically from members of the reformist group NOW who defected with a big bang and joined the radicals. Most notably among them were Ti-Grace Atkinson who resigned from N.Y. NOW with a big anti-hierarchy statement<sup>6</sup> and then started the "Oct. 17th Movement," later to become the group The Feminists, and Rita Mae Brown who resigned from the same chapter of NOW with a big lesbian and anti-hierarchy statement.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, many of the pseudo-left organizations were pushing an anti-leader line for the WLM (but never for their own organizations) and entering the WLM to lead it themselves and to recruit from it. The gay liberation front was suddenly another outside force at this time and it, too, like the pseudo-left and actually a part of the pseudo-left, was entering the WLM with its line that lesbians were the proper leaders and to recruit. It was at this time that a real alliance seemed to be forged in which women from the pseudo-left became lesbians and a lot of the lesbians joined with the pseudo-left. It was at this time also that NOW became less singlemindedly feminist. It not only became more tolerant of lesbians in its membership, it also was convinced by them to take a stand on the issue of homosexual rights. Similarly, NOW leaders began to call for an end to such an exclusive interest in "women's issues" and a shift to a more "left" general social welfare approach.

The radical feminists nearly went under completely from attacks for being "leaders" and "middle class." Their feminist consciousness had been high enough to withstand attacks as "manhater," "domineering," "like men," and "lesbians." But they were thrown by the attacks that came under the new "radical" cover, including for instance the startling assertion, not that feminists were lesbians, as earlier they had been charged with being, but that they *should* be. Lesbian chants and social welfare moans began leading the marches instead of radical, feminist fire and the numbers plummeted in just two years.

By the time the radical feminists had gotten over the route from the lesbian/pseudo-left attack and were beginning to speak up again, they discovered that radicals no longer had access to the media. The radical feminist contributions were everywhere but nowhere were the radicals.

Meanwhile, many media women themselves were becom-

### MEDIA BLACKOUT ON MILITANCY

The Urban Research Corporation of Chicago may be the only organization to try to get around the drawbacks of polling by surveying actual behavior. For several years now Urban Research has been doing the gargantuan job of clipping 200 daily newspapers in as many cities.

... It shouldn't be surprising to see that the America picked up by "The Trend Report" is quite different from the one we get in the major national media. For example, while television news implies marches and demonstrations are things of the past, "The Trend Report" tells us they are occurring with increasing frequency all over the country.

— Nicholas Von Hoffman  
Fall, 1974

It is impossible for a strike to remain a secret to those participating in it and to those immediately associated with it, but it may (and in the majority of cases does) remain a "secret" to the masses of the Russian workers, because the government takes care to cut all communication with the strikers, to prevent all news of strikes from spreading. Here indeed is where a special "struggle against the political police" is required . . . we socialists would be failing in our direct duty to the masses if we did not prevent the police from making a secret of every strike and every demonstration (and if we did not ourselves from time to time secretly prepare strikes and demonstrations).

— V.I. Lenin,  
"Primitiveness and Economism"  
WHAT IS TO BE DONE, 1902

ing the movement's representatives to the media, whether self-arranged or picked by the men in control. Most notable and powerful among these is Gloria Steinem, who started as a reporter for *New York*, the magazine which then backed the first preview issue of *Ms.* magazine. But there were others who first reported on it, then joined it, and then became the main source of feminist opinion instead of the founders they used to quote. They suddenly found the anti-leader line convenient whereas formerly they had searched for leaders to write about, attacking women who resisted uncontrolled exposure as examples of alleged female passivity. But suddenly a means of establishing authentic—that is, chosen leaders and groups that actually represented themselves—would threaten their unique and newly acquired position of access to media channels themselves. Gloria Steinem, so clearly the main feminist political leader chosen from the media and for the media, began to come out for "leaderlessness," using her position as leader to enforce that trend for others. Professional women in the media were becoming "professional" at being objects of the media as well. They had decided that they were the best representatives of the feminist movement, the most reason-

<sup>6</sup> Statement of resignation made to NOW, 10/21/68, distributed by THE FEMINISTS, 120 Liberty St., N.Y., N.Y. 10006. A press release announcing Atkinson's resignation appears in her book of speeches and essays *Amazon Odyssey*, New York, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> New York NOW Newsletter, January, 1970.



able, articulate, etc., and their male colleagues tended to support them in this opinion, even to encourage them in it. Though it could be said that these women had the right to present their views on feminism to the public, they were essentially preventing equal time to opposing feminist views and virtually not even covering them. The media women—and there are more of them now, thanks to the movement—were much more helpful to the movement during the days when they were reporting on it, rather than trying to lead it.

It was as if they were judging the movement in the pages of the *New York Times* and other media institutions as semi-observers, semi-participants, claiming that their professional obligations to the corporations paying them in no way influenced their political line.

Their line, not surprisingly, tended to be the individual "model" theory of feminism—they being the models, of course, and other women being excluded from the Establishment because of their "socialization." Of course, they are "models" or actually tokens, whose existence is used as proof that discrimination doesn't exist, that the trouble with all the other women is that they don't work hard enough or aren't good enough or that they just don't have a "talent" for raising funds from corporations.

Gloria Steinem, for instance, first made her appearance as a media spokesman for the women's liberation movement at the time of the August 26th Strike march, 1970. Before then, in the numerous overview articles written in the mass media about the women's liberation movement, she is never quoted or discussed.<sup>8</sup> After August 26th, this situation changes completely. A look at the way the launching of Steinem began in the media is instructive. In the *Time* Essay she is commissioned to write for the August 31 issue, the issue with Kate Millett on the cover, Steinem is introduced as both "a critical observer" and "a concerned advocate" of the feminist revolt. She wins every which way, and so does the media which gets the kind of feminist leader it wants, although it is out of keeping with journalism's official policy of objectivity. What does a partial-but-impartial observer mean when the terms would appear to be mutually exclusive and contradictory? Colette Price's explanation is good for a start. "It means she'll tell the truth about women even if it's not for women."

This, I think, was the one problem with the media that the radicals in the WLM did not foresee in all their wildest paranoia: that the female members of the media would actually take the movement over—speaking for it, rather than reporting on it, and, worse yet, doing both. That had never happened in radical movements before, to the best of my knowledge. Movement people joined the media,

<sup>8</sup> Lucinda Cisler's *Women: A Bibliography "About Today's Women's Movement,"* Edition 6, July-October 1970. Also personal collections of Kathie Sarachild and Carol Hanisch. (The bibliography is available from Cisler, 165 W. 91st., N.Y.C. 10024 for \$.60.)

### THE "SYMPATHETIC-BUT-OBJECTIVE" TAKE-OVER

Ellen Frankfort likes to picture herself midway between the medical establishment and the "naive" women of the Self-Help Clinics. Although the middle-ness of her course may be debated, the direction she is facing is clear. *Vaginal Politics* is a book written to, for, and about the medical establishment.

... "Vaginal Politics" was the title of an article about self-examination in *Everywoman* by Peggy Grau that was reprinted and distributed by Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman at the original Self-Help demonstrations a year ago November. Frankfort's borrowing of this title for her first *Voice* article on the subject, and now for this book, could lead women all over the country to believe that this book is sponsored, endorsed or related to the Self-Help Clinics. Of course, it is not. In fact, in her fifteen acknowledgments, Frankfort doesn't even cite Carol Downer or Lorraine Rothman.

I think the use of the title is a rip-off. Other more charitable sisters like to believe that the title was forced on her by greedy, insensitive male editors and publishers. In fact, I met the publisher quite by chance at a party. When I complained about the title, he told me *he* had thought it up and had no knowledge of its ever being used before. (He told me that one of the other suggestions for the book was *Pussy Power*. Was that supposed to be a joke? I can't tell anymore. I didn't laugh.) Someone else told me that there's an editor at the *Voice* who thinks the title was his bright idea. Well, I don't care what those men think. Frankfort knows where that title came from, and presumably she knows the financial, if not political implications of using it.

... In writing about the Self-Help Clinics, she reprints as the prologue her original piece from the *Voice* written after the presentation at the Brooklyn NOW meeting last year. That piece is just as bad as I remembered it. It is insulting in its overall tone as well as several specifics. She consistently refers to the women of the Los Angeles Self-Help Clinic as "Carol" and "Lorraine," a put-down so obvious as to require no comment and, as Lorraine Rothman commented to me, a strange contrast to the fact that her own full name is at the top of every other page in this book.

— Kathy Grady  
MAJORITY REPORT, 2/73



perhaps. But for the media people to join the movement openly and publicly and then *be* the movement for the media, would normally, if they were duly and legitimately elected representatives of the people, subject them to conflict of interest charges and statutes. It is a far cry from the liberal tradition of an independent media and neutral reporting. This is definitely further to the right than liberalism, and it hasn't happened yet to any other movements in this country where the reporters are identified as movement partisans and supported in such a capacity

by their employers and former employers rather than by the movement. It was an unholy alliance between alleged representatives of a political movement and big business. This "Phase 2" of the women's movement wasn't liberalism. It was a wipe-out of radicalism and an attempt at a takeover of a mass movement by big business. Whereas in the past the media have tried to guide movements or simply bury them from sight, this is the first time the media have tried to take one over, putting their own people in as spokesmen to lead it.

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### RESISTING AN HISTORICAL APPROACH

Not acknowledging what's been done before, either by critiquing it or building on it further. This undercuts unity and strength.

Relying on interpreters and intermediaries to find out what's been done before you rather than going directly to those you are following and may want to hook up with.

"Doing your own thing" without linking up. Coordination and unity then become impossible.

"Reinventing the wheel," doing something without checking to see whether it's been done before. This renders the earlier energy of women irrelevant and depletes your own. It holds the movement back rather than advancing it.

Imitating the earlier work instead of breaking new ground. One woman discovers something—like quilts—and then a million articles are written about the same subject instead of new research in new areas. And they aren't critiques of the earlier articles, explaining why this new one is necessary. They don't even acknowledge the other articles.

Only taking up something after it's been proved possible, when the movement needs leaders who do things before they're proved possible. Not realizing that "everyone who takes a step forward is a pioneer."

Denying the value of the pioneering work and being embarrassed by it. Or competing with it, claiming to be doing a better (smoother) job. Of course something actually can be better—clearer, more powerful, more radical—than the first efforts. But if it actually is better in an authentic, radical way, it does not deny its roots, but appreciates them.

Exchanging favors rather than supporting good work and politics. Movement forward becomes impossible.

Disassociating from the pioneers, trying to reap the benefits without any risk, without returning anything to the movement.

Claiming that what someone pioneers is "no big deal," "nothing new." Not understanding the difference between saying something publicly and keeping it private.

Wanting to do what the pioneers have done but not wanting to learn from them. Not wanting the direction of the pioneers but not wanting to open up and pioneer a new area yourself either. Not realizing you need those who go before you in order to do something new yourself.

Of course, if you are going to initiate an action that must be independent, don't go to anyone, don't ask anybody for permission, just go ahead and do it! Support will come. Unity will follow.



## THE USE OF HISTORY

## BURYING HISTORY

Vietnam is probably one of the contemporary world's purest examples of a history-dependent, history-obsessed society, in which even the most routine day-to-day political decision-making seems practically unimaginable without some reference to history. The United States is probably the contemporary world's purest example of a society which is perpetually trying to abolish history, to avoid thinking in historical terms, to associate dynamism with premeditated amnesia.

— Alexander Woodside  
Harvard Professor of Sino-Vietnamese History  
NEW YORK TIMES, 5/11/75

*Question:* What are the lessons of Vietnam in terms of the Presidency, the Congress and the American people in terms of secret diplomacy and fighting a land war in Asia, and also, would you welcome a Congressional inquiry into how we got in and how we got out of Vietnam?

*The President:* I think the lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned, learned by Presidents, learned by Congress, learned by the American people, and we should have our focus on the future. As far as I am concerned, that is where we will concentrate.

— Press conference, 5/6/75

Those in the Women's Liberation Movement are looking to the past and are still giving a tiresome litany of problems which have been solved decades ago. You have to have psychological problems to go around the country crying because women once could not vote.

— Phyllis Schlafly  
Opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment  
PALO ALTO TIMES, 2/12/75

## DISCOVERING HISTORY

Writers, be wary of those who tell you to leave the past alone and confine yourselves to the present moment. Our story has not been told in any moment. Have you seen us in any portrayal of the Civil War? *Gone With The Wind* is not our story. And our history is not gone with the wind, it is still with us.

— Alice Childress  
FREEDOMWAYS, Winter, 1966

As Dimitrov states in the report to the 7th Congress of the Communist International, fascist forces always try to rob the working class of its history in order to subjugate it.

— James Forman  
THE GUARDIAN, 7/24/74

I'd like to remind you, that the same media that brought you the distortions about the reality of Indo-China is bringing you the distortions about the reality of your own history. The media and the government have no interest in portraying the anti-war movement as having been effective. And if one believes the history given of the '60's, one will be paralyzed by that history in the same way that people have been paralyzed by the history in other matters which has led women to demand new forms of history, blacks to demand new forms of history.

History will only be told properly by the people who participated in it, not by the media that scorned it, and we are only in the beginning stages of being able to understand our own history, because it is so recent, we don't usually think of yesterday as history.

... I found out from friends in the Indo-China Peace Campaign where we work in Los Angeles, who were doing research, that there were 4 million demonstrators in the streets in 1970 alone. More people demonstrated in the streets in the period of the anti-war movement than in any other movement in American history. Those numbers were contagious apparently because they spread also to the Armed Forces, and there is Pentagon testimony to the effect that anti-war feeling was one of the basic reasons that troops had to be withdrawn.

— Tom Hayden, Speech, Fall 1973

## VI THE POWER OF HISTORY

Call it maybe a freedom fighting history book. But before doing that, make a freedom fight.

— charlie cobb, 1965  
NEGROES IN AMERICAN HISTORY:  
A FREEDOM PRIMER

It took experience in the feminist movement for me to begin to understand what history was all about.

Seeing the original ideas and achievements of the movement being distorted and lost taught me the practical importance of history, its strategic importance for securing the movement's gains. I realized that history was a record of experience for holding onto what we'd worked for and won and moving forward.

Experience taught me the way to use the past for present action. I learned the use of history not as an au-



thority, but as a source of experience. When I realized that the purpose of history, is to illuminate our experience, not to deny it, that the present must rule the use of the past, history opened up as a great, rich source from which to draw.

There was certainly plenty of rhetoric in the women's liberation movement about uncovering women's buried history and recording our own. But there was also a persistent lack of interest and even resistance to doing either coming from inside the movement, as well as the distortion and suppression from the outside I have already described—and very little was actually done. In fact, despite the rhetoric, the issue of history was never fully understood by the women who raised it.

As one of these women, I know that I had a very contradictory attitude toward history. While I advocated resurrecting women's history as an important goal for the movement, I had my doubts about how much there really was or how relevant history could ever be. I felt that I could learn more from examining my own experience and hearing the experience of other women than I could from reading about the past.

A lot of the history I read seemed to lead nowhere; though sometimes interesting and inspiring, I found much of it strangely boring. It left one feeling unsatisfied, with what appeared to be some new information but with no new insights, no leads for action. The history felt disembodied, as if an episode were over; the information itself, even about the past, seemed irritatingly inconclusive.

Although *The Second Sex* had changed my life and I recommended it to everybody, I didn't think of it as feminist history as much as theory. It was, after all, more about what was done to women than what women had done, and more about women's situation presently. I was aware, in theory, of studying history for possible methods of struggle. But we were at the point where even the provocative, illuminating theory and history we read had to be filled in with flesh and blood experience and an examination of current reality.

History as an issue also did not seem so important in the beginning—not as important as consciousness-raising—partly because the main problem was to show that women were still oppressed. The notion that women's emancipation was complete with the winning of vote, or after socialism was achieved in some countries, was stopping further advance and leading women backward into individualism, isolation and submission. The myth of emancipation denied the reality of women's oppression. It made feminist collective action appear to be unnecessary; militancy, uncalled for; and women's continuing failure to find success in love and work, their own fault. We had to see through all the new "liberal" ways male supremacy had lived on (and some of the old ones) to begin organizing for women's liberation. Studying history didn't seem to connect too immediately with the burning issue of the moment, the question of how to start a women's liberation movement from the present situation.

But there were other reasons for the neglect and resistance to history. People began to use it who turned the priorities around and, in order to avoid studying the present

Let's look at the three general categories of people who have a stake in the distortion of the history of the women's liberation movement.

1) *Those in power who want to stop the movement* use history to deny that the revolution is necessary or possible. They point to the gains made through consistent and exhausting struggle and declare that those gains had nothing to do with the uprising of the oppressed but are a product of "the changing times" or some such nonsense.

2) *Moderates who want change but are held back by fear or misinformation* use history to falsely show that it is their very moderation that has won all progressive advances. They may give credit to the radical feminists for getting things started, but they then contend that it is time for the "responsible" sector to take over. In many cases they are used by the oppressor for doing the work of "moderating" radical ideas before they are taken up by the masses of women and pose a real threat to his power. They are often rewarded for this work with jobs in women's studies, jobs as writers about the movement, jobs doing bureaucratic research and investigation on women's problems, etc. (Women need and deserve good jobs, but the politics of women in these positions should be carefully examined before they are recognized as authorities on, and leaders of, women.) Some may actually think that their work is in the best interest of the women's movement. Others could care less about the movement, except as something to cash in on. The left liberals, despite their claims to being more radical than the women's liberation activists and more scientific are actually moderates. Moderates, despite their current stand, are potential allies and an effort must be made to win them to our side by exposing their mistakes and their fear.

3) *Opportunists who know exactly what they are doing* and have decided to join the oppressor to stop the movement. They are the conscious saboteurs of the movement and are thus our enemies. They must be rendered ineffective as speedily and thoroughly as possible by publicly exposing their alliance with the oppressor. They use history in whatever way is most effective in keeping radical ideas from the masses and generating confusion.

—Carol Hanisch  
November, 1973

or doing anything about it, focused on history. Before the radical feminist exposure and attack on present conditions, there had been no history of women, no lessons to draw from; but now we were being swamped with the wrong ones.



Most of the theories citing history that we encountered from both the right and the left essentially counseled the abandonment of feminism. History was invoked to praise the "valiant struggles of the past to give us what we have today," or to tell us "You've come a long way, baby" and don't really need any more, and you'd better be grateful for what you have. Other times it was invoked to warn against the past: "You are making the same mistakes the early feminists did when you attack men," advised one female historian of women in the United States after the first action of the independent women's liberation movement during the Jeannette Rankin Brigade march.

The right used history to imply that feminism had gotten us everything and hence wasn't necessary anymore; and the left told us the feminist movement had only made mistakes, had gotten women—or at least the masses of women—nothing important and shouldn't be taken up again.

Both advocated the study of history, but to stop the movement, not to help it. "Revere history," the right told us. "Study history before you do anything," the left intoned.

On the right and the left, many would write reverently of the women of the past, of past glories—mostly ancient and unrecorded—but with contempt for the women of the present and recent past. This kind of new historian of women could go on with enthusiasm about women's leadership in a past effort in a certain area—women as midwives and abortionists, for instance, and women's role in people's medical self-help in the 19th century—but neglect even to acknowledge, much less support, similar efforts going on currently in the women's liberation movement.

There was also the tactic of isolating feminist history and women's history from each other as if they were two different ideas. Yet the very subject of resurrecting women's history owed its existence to feminism—the organized movement for women's liberation.

On the part of both the right and the anti-feminist left this distinction between feminist history and women's history was an attempt to set up two categories of women—those who were "in" the woman's rights movement and those who were not, as if there were no connection between one and the other, as if those who were at the center of the woman's rights organizing efforts failed to represent those who were not.

As a result of all this, many of the radical feminists who raised the issue of reviving feminist history found themselves steering clear of it. All this new history and so little that connected with present day action, so little that was supportive of feminism, and so little that seemed solid, just reinforced the illusion that there was not much there, or nothing really useful for us.

We hadn't thought studying history would help us because those citing it to us were doing so to try to stop us from what our thinking, reading and experience was telling us to do, because history was being used dogmatically.

It wasn't until my personal experience began to include

feminist efforts to change history that the adage about learning from history acquired real meaning for me.

Experience taught me how to use the past for taking present action and mapping future change. History became simply a tool, not an authority—an aid to deepen our perceptions, not to determining them.<sup>9</sup>

Also necessary for the feminist history to begin to seem valuable in a real way to the new movement and to break through whatever fear of it the activists might have, was not only movement experience, the movement's growing history of its own, but the discovery of the feminist theory and history written by the 19th century feminists themselves. As long as I didn't understand from my experience that reading about "history" should mean reading the original sources, I didn't find reading feminist history useful for much more than entertainment and a feeling of personal sustenance.

As radicals we knew, at least theoretically, about the need for going to the original sources of history for understanding and more solidity about our knowledge. And there was certainly lip service to this idea. But it was pretty generally assumed that there was no body of theory and historic analysis by feminist leaders such as existed in other revolutionary movements.

That which did exist was thought to be so buried and scattered as to take an exorbitant amount of time to unearth and put together with no guarantee that very much that was clear cut and definite would result. It was this lack of access to the original feminist sources which put us on such weak ground with respect to history—both in terms of any necessary defense of our predecessors or any critique of them.

Largely responsible for this feeling—so far from being true—were the liberal feminist historians, the professionals in the field of feminist history on whom the radical feminists, caught up in movement activity not to mention earning a living, were relying for work in history. Unlike the antifeminist "radicals" on the left who weren't even interested, they appeared to be doing the work that needed to be done, the work that the radical feminist movement was calling on women to do. Because of their posture of support for feminist history, their effect was more subtle, if equally disastrous. Like some of the media women, they played the role of taking over feminist history from the feminists themselves. They created a barrier of ignorance—ignorance of the existence of extensive writings and historical documentation and analysis by the earlier feminist movement itself.

We were prepared for outrageous distortions by out and out opponents. But we weren't prepared for distortions by people claiming to be sympathizers. We assumed, that if the feminist leaders of the 19th century had written books we would be told about them by the feminist historians

<sup>9</sup>Some of the same issues concerning the use of history are debated from the experience of the Chinese Proletarian Cultural Revolution in *On Studying World History* and *On Philosophy*, Yennan Books, 2506 Haste St., Berkeley, Calif. 94704 (75¢).



and so their absence from history books meant there weren't any. We had to discover the problem of revisionism.

All radicals—especially Marxists—talk about revisionism. It is a big word in the radical vocabulary being, in a sense, the opposite of radicalism. Whereas radical means going to the original sources, to the roots, revisionism changes and distorts the original sources and thereby cuts people off from them.

At times revisionism has meant blocking people from access to the original sources of knowledge by literally pasting over them—as the scholastics in the Middle Ages scribbled over the classical works of Greece and Rome, doctoring them beyond recognition to make them fit the interests and fashions of those in power. Rediscovering these better ancient texts underneath the scribbled over versions helped lead to the great flowering of knowledge of the Renaissance.

But revisionism has an additional meaning that's even more serious because it means posing as radical. It's like co-optation, except co-optation is done by power structure and revisionism is done by allegedly anti-Establishment groups.

Behind revisionism is often the claim of improving on the original, improving on the early radical work, but it only embellishes— or tones down— what's been done rather than building from it.

Revisionism prevents growing, it prevents the new, by preventing people from knowing what they need to know in order to move forward. What people need to know is what has already been done in the area in which they want to work. Revisionism blocks this knowledge by claiming to support the past work and represent it, but using it for a different purpose and cutting people off from access to the original content.

The revisionist feminist and revisionist left historians turned us off to radical historical analysis by making feminist history and left history and history, in general, seem less useful for us than they really were. In fact, they made the very ideas of feminism, in particular, and radical ideas, in general, seem less useful than they really were.

The left, for instance, told feminists they couldn't understand the present without understanding the past so they should stop consciousness-raising and study history instead. But one of the tenets of Marxism is that knowledge comes first of all from the real world, from an analysis of present reality. History can only be an aid in deepening what one knows from experience. It cannot determine what one sees in the present or one may be missing something right in front of one's nose.

We had to discover these things ourselves at serious cost to our movement. I know that I couldn't get into anything more than a rhetorical interest in history until I was able to get a flavor of the original sources.

Having access to radical theory is not all it takes to understand it, however. Connected with revisionism is also the problem of people who do read and recite the original works but cannot understand them because they never experienced what the revolutionaries are writing about. They

lack experience, movement experience, action experience. What awakens interest in the original, revolutionary sources—and what awakens comprehension, sometimes quite suddenly changing a dark, dense page into brilliant light—is personal experience in trying to change history.

The anti-feminism and revisionism the left was riddled with, and the anti-feminist dogmatism they bombarded us with in the name of historical analysis and our own lack of independent radical political experience, made it that much more difficult for us to understand the real importance history had.

But the left at least told us about the historical writings and classics of virtually all the various left revolutionary traditions they considered important and gave them lip service, even as they revised and misunderstood them.

Knowledge of—simple information about, not to mention understanding and analysis of—the writings and political analysis of the 19th century feminists was left out of Establishment male history, left out of radical history, and even left out of the newly born feminist history.

Apparently the new feminist historians were not really so sure of these feminists whom they were committed to resurrecting as the subjects of history. They were so unsure that they were unwilling to present them to us directly and they did not really sympathize with or at least understand what the feminists were and felt that they had to cover for them.

Thus radical feminists weren't aware of the historical analysis produced by the feminist movement—particularly by Stanton, Anthony and the other leading activist-theoreticians, the feminist revolutionary leaders who turned the new born feminist theory of their period into a political movement.

Even in most of the documentary anthologies that appeared which made use of some of the original materials for their collections, there was no sense of what the original work was all about even though they contained the "original sources." Most of the excerpts in the anthologies were severely truncated versions of documentary sources and not as good as what I discovered had been left out. In any case, excerpts so often give the feeling of being weaker than the originals. What is more, almost all the selections were about women's situation in general. Rarely were there any on the issues and debates of the women's movement, on feminist history itself.

Often there was not even a mention of the existence of original writing in the new liberal feminist histories that were written. Otherwise, there was no hint of how fantastic it was.

If the left had eliminated feminism from radicalism, the liberal feminists had eliminated radicalism from feminism.

Most serious as an example of this has been what was most done to the *History of Woman Suffrage* compiled and extensively written by Stanton, Anthony and Gage, and later by Anthony and Harper, which was the source of almost all the quotations in the various feminist histories that were coming out and of so many of the selections in the documentary anthologies that were appearing. Had we got-



ten any idea of what that work was all about—it's purpose and the breadth of its contents and even its method—we would have been spared much of the confusion about the historical ground on which we were standing and would have felt much stronger than we had known possible. But, and equally important, our knowledge of the whole issue of history would have been strengthened, as well as our consciousness of the correctness and necessity of the "new" movement's writing its own history and writing it accurately. Many of the issues of history that have come up in our wave of the movement, Stanton, Anthony and Gage address as well.

In the introduction to their first volume, Stanton, Anthony and Gage develop the radical understanding of history not just as a record of victory, but as the record for the fight, history written not so much to give personal credit, but as a source of experience with political uses. In fact, it becomes clear that the *History of Woman Suffrage* was a major political tactic in itself, a tactic for achieving it. The work is also firm and fascinating evidence of some of the mistakes as well as the successes of that period. The emphasis on suffrage in the title, though the first three volumes contain a far wider ranging contents than suffrage alone, was an example of such a mistake and may be one reason why radical feminists did not look into it sooner. But it was clear that these feminist predecessors were very aware of the need to write the history of the movement and had a clear cut radical, feminist consciousness of why it was necessary. It is evident that no one in our period can argue that the feminists disappeared from history because they failed to write their own history. They wrote the history and disappeared anyway. Nor can it be legitimately argued that women have never before been in history, that women are just "beginning" to have their collective history and to write one, because that collective history was written before, was begun almost 100 years ago at least, if not many times before that, in a conscious, political way.

But virtually nothing of the nature of this historical work, and often nothing even of its existence, is even hinted at much less conveyed in the work that all came to us to revive knowledge of the feminist movement and restore it to its rightful place in history.

Betty Friedan's chapter on feminist history in *The Feminine Mystique* doesn't mention that the pioneers she is writing about did any writing of their own, much less writing history books about themselves. (Her historical analysis of what she sees as their mistakes—a tendency toward "excesses" including "talking too much" which she tries to sympathetically explain away may be the reason why she hardly gives you any clues to what they had to say.) Friedan's chapter is a perfect example of a stirring essay—the most moving in her book—that leaves you with a feeling of no need to look any further into what the women before you had worked out. It also leaves you with no knowledge of the original sources.

Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle* first published in 1959, is heralded as the first in the current revival of feminist history, and Friedan singles it out and praises it as the major source of her chapter on feminist history in *The Feminine Mystique*. *Century of Struggle* was also a major

source of historical knowledge for the women involved in starting the Women's Liberation Movement, a standard reference and always high on the recommended reading lists of the liberals and radicals alike.

Yet Flexner mentions the existence of the Stanton, Anthony and Gage history only in her bibliography when, from a look at the work itself, it is clear that these three leading feminist theoreticians and organizers saw it as a major political action in the fight for suffrage, devoting a decade of their political lives out of the century of struggle and considerable funds to writing the first three volumes. Putting together this history at the time they did was a significant part of their overall feminist strategy. It was intended not only to give the movement a history for the first time—but to revive the movement from the doldrums it was then in.

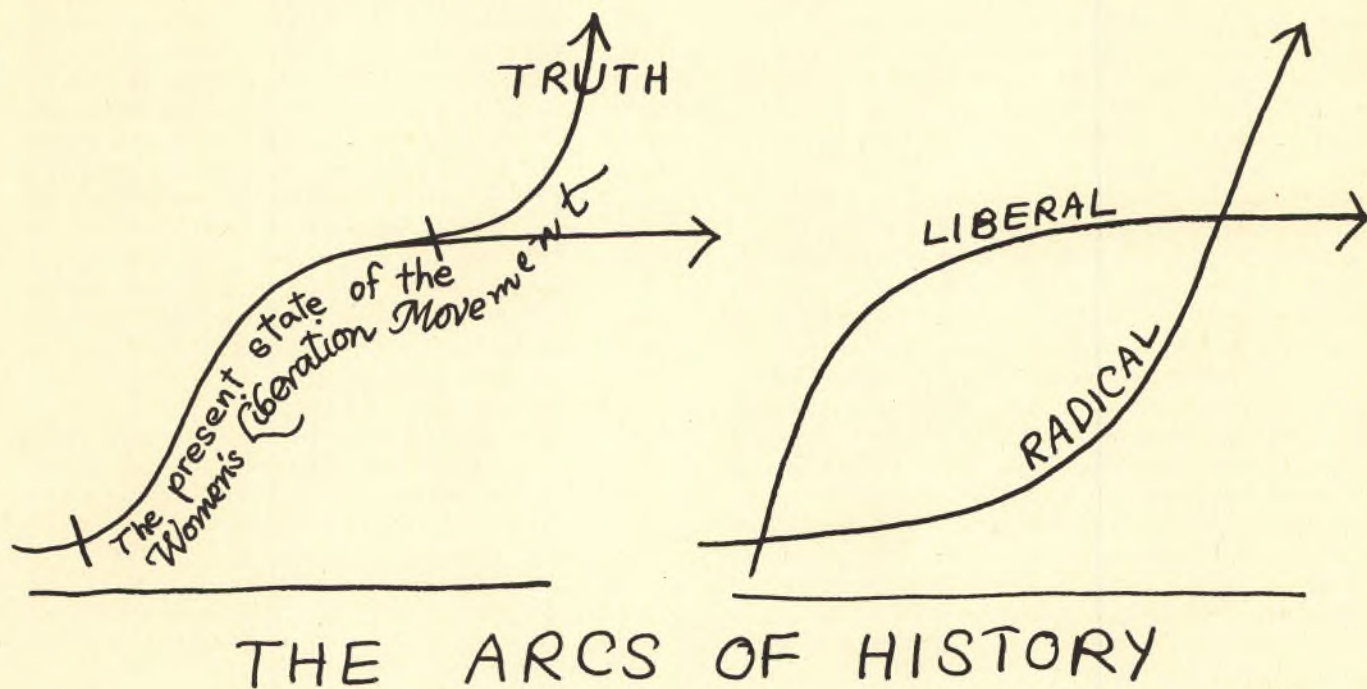
When Flexner does finally mention this enormous project of Stanton, Anthony and Gage, it is in a tone of apology and disparagement.

"The monumental six-volume *History of Woman Suffrage* stands in a class by itself. Its first three volumes were put together—the phrase is used advisedly—by Mrs. Stanton, Miss Anthony and Mrs. Mathilda Gage. These women were not professional writers; but they were inveterate hoarders of newspaper clippings, speeches and letters. What they lacked in literary craft, objectivity and style, they made up for by creating an immense grab-bag of source material, much of which would otherwise have been lost or remained difficult of access to the later writer. The women made some mistakes and omissions, but no scholar has done better up to now."

No one would know from reading Flexner's description what a goldmine of knowledge and ideas about the struggle these three volumes in particular contain—not only for a historian, but for the reader and particularly for the feminist activist and any U.S. radical. Flexner totally fails to convey the sense of this work, its scope, not to mention the bold craft, compelling style, and provocative content of the first three volumes. Nor does she record that there was a political strategy in the minds of the authors for writing it, a historical strategy. Furthermore, if the readers had not bothered to read the bibliography, they wouldn't have even known of its existence.

Flexner's characterization of the work is illuminating for what it shows about liberal taste. It is indicative of and reflects some of the political issues involved in the on-going battle between liberals and radicals in the by-now reborn woman's movement. The later volumes she ascribes to the "professional" Ida Husted Harper and found well-written, I found boring—virtual catalogues of conventions in state after state, with minutes of meetings and abridged speeches. No longer the fiery debates recorded in earlier volumes. The later volumes contain little or no theory, while the early ones are filled with it. In contrast to Flexner, Harper, the "professional" calls Matilda Gage, one of the authors of the original three volumes, "one of the most logical, scien-





## THE ARCS OF HISTORY

J.R.

tific and fearless writers of her day" and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, too, "the matchless writer." (Vol IV, preface). (Both had died by the time Harper began, and Anthony died before the last two volumes were written.)

Flexner in her description does appear a little torn between her loyalties to professionalism (if not medieval scholasticism) and the evidence of her senses. She decries the histories by the activists themselves for, among other things, lack of objectivity. But then she concludes that the later volumes by the professional are "lacking in objectivity" just because they contain far less original material reprinted in full.

Had these political activists given their histories a more recognizable shape, no doubt they would have been accused of being even less objective, of being "doctrinaire."

The shape that the radicals Stanton, Anthony and Gage gave their volumes is a wide ranging one that includes criticism and debate; the shape the liberals gave theirs is restrictive—all summary. There is no more material in the earlier volumes than the later ones; it is just of a different kind. In fact, the earlier volumes and the later ones are so different that they could be characterized as different works. Objectivity, however, is not what divides them. The difference is between a brilliant style and a lackluster one and the successive volumes of the *History* reflect the shift of the movement toward greater conservatism, narrowing concentration on the single issue of suffrage; and finally, away from efforts at theory or historical evaluation of any

kind. (In fact, in its last three volumes, the *History* had become the official tone of The National-American Suffrage Association and the militants led by Alice Paul, who were picketing the White House, marching, and going on hunger strikes, barely get mentioned in it.)

Perhaps Stanton, Anthony and Gage were kowtowing to liberal opinion by including a more widespread assortment of material than they really wanted to. (The result to a feminist nearly 100 years later, however, is fascinating and provocative because it is really possible to see how the major issues of the movement unfolded. It makes the added expense they had to go to in order to print all this material—many conflicting speeches and documents in full—seem worth it.)

In the end, oddly enough, it was Flexner's put down of the *History* which woke me up to its existence. Although I had read Flexner before, I noticed the reference to the *History of Woman Suffrage* in her bibliography only when I was involved in a movement struggle in the spring of 1972 over the omission of many exciting, groundbreaking radical feminist articles from an anthology on similar grounds that they lacked good form.<sup>10</sup>

I happened to pick up Flexner's book from my shelf and began leafing through the back pages. Riveting on the dis-

<sup>10</sup> "Covering Up Woman's History, An Example—Notes From The First, Second And Third Years," by Kathie Sarachild, *Woman's World*, Number 1, Volume 2, July-Sept. 1972.



paraging depiction of the *History* in the bibliography, it suddenly struck me that Stanton, Anthony and Gage's work was receiving the very same treatment from liberal feminists as was our own. I realized that they, too, had a strategy about history, a consciousness very much like our own. I had seen quotes from the work around in various movement papers, but this was the first time I even realized that it was a history and not just the "immense grab bag of source material," Flexner characterized it as. And for the first time I wanted to go and look at it directly.

Since the original writings of Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Flexner's book was the first history of the 19th century Woman's Rights Movement—a shocking fact in itself—and she pioneered in writing it. She also raises the issue of the burial of the movement's history, pointing out in her 1959 preface that little had changed since Arthur M. Schlesinger complained in 1928 in *New York Viewpoints in American History* of the same neglect of "woman's part in American history" and "the protracted struggle of the sex for larger rights and opportunities, a story that is in itself one of the noblest chapters in the history of American democracy." But at the same time she raises the issue of the suppression of history, she buries the work on the history of the movement and the history of women that the feminists themselves did.

*The Emancipation of the American Woman* written by Andrew Sinclair in 1965, seven years after Flexner's book, was the second overview of the 19th century movement. It omits the *History of Woman Suffrage* entirely from the bibliographical notes, as well as the text. (Occasionally it appears as a source in a footnote with no further explanation.) Sinclair even says in one of his chapters, "Unfortunately Stanton's life and nature were too spasmodic to allow her to write anything much longer than a speech." He leaves the impression that the sources of feminist history are completely scattered—in various vaults, manuscript collections, basements, special libraries—"All scholars in this field should begin at the Radcliffe Women's Archives or at Smith College," as he puts it in his bibliographical note, when the easiest, most effective place to begin would be with the *History of Woman Suffrage* he leaves unmentioned. Also buried is the history of the omission of women from history.

With *Up From The Pedestal*, Aileen Kraditor became another in the vanguard of the liberal historians "discovering" feminist history who left the body of the earlier feminist writings in the dark, drawing extensively from them even as she added to the impression that they didn't exist. "Since women wrote as little history as they made," she writes in her introductory essay on Women in History and Historiography, "it is not surprising that historiography faithfully reflected their exclusion from those events historians regarded as important enough to record." Yet her book relies heavily on the *History of Woman Suffrage* which goes unmentioned in her essay, a work by women, pioneering not only feminist history but women's history, and whose invisibility, is after all, not a faithful reflection of reality.

*Voices from Women's Liberation* edited by Leslie Tanner

was the first book really to highlight *The History of Woman Suffrage* and the original source writings from the 19th century women's movement. A third of the book contains "voices" from the 19th century to accompany the writings from the 20th century. It was the first book to draw extensively from *History of Woman Suffrage* and it was thrilling to read the selections back to back with modern material. But somehow I never really understood that it was a history. I think this was because of the influence of the anti-leadership line prevalent in the WLM at the time Tanner's book was compiled. There is very little specific personal and political context for the selections from the *History* and one still never really got an idea of what the work was. For instance, the editor says "there are few biographical notes included, as I feel that 'voices' rather than personalities carry the movement forward."

One achievement of even the partly raised consciousness about feminist history, from the rhetoric alone—even as this result remains unknown and unrecognized by most of the movement—was the republication fifty years later, in 1969, by the Arno Press and the *New York Times*, of a whole new edition of hard-bound volumes of Stanton, Anthony and Gage's *History*. Slowly they made their way into the libraries of this country which didn't already have them and were slowly found, for various reasons and in various ways. (One reason for the slowness may have been the extremely high price for this edition, which could have been made easily and cheaply available in paperback.)

The Women's Liberation Movement talked of resurrecting women's buried history, but many people didn't really believe there was much to resurrect, and, therefore, were afraid to make much efforts at resurrecting.

Fearful though people were about trying to look at and resurrect the past, however—and despite all the emphasis in the movement about doing something about the present—there has been even more fear about recording the present, treating the present movement in a historic way.

The main problem has been that it has been difficult for women in the movement to define the present as history—and to define ourselves and other women of our time as historic. Meanwhile, the failure to defend the history of our movement in the face of the many kinds of attacks on it has led to a considerable weakening of the movement and threatens to lead to its loss and dissolution.

People have not been clear on the necessity of history for the strength and power of the movement and the durability of the movement's gains. It has been complicated by the problem that the value of history never really openly or verbally surfaced as an issue of controversy inside the radical feminist movement. Although it was always a question, it emerged under other rubrics, often in false terms. It was silenced by nearly universal respect and obeisance to its importance. And it usually met resistance under other guises such as the leadership issue, or "relating to the media," or attacks on people who were "taking themselves too seriously."

As a result, there was never any kind of debate over the importance of history, although many did not really understand it or even believe it to be important, even as they



said it was. And those who did take action in the area of history—especially for the present record—did not really understand the nature of the resistance they found themselves meeting nor had they any idea that it was about the issue of history. Many people were only vaguely aware that they were embarrassed by history or threatened by it, particularly by the idea of the present movement being historic and having its own history. So nobody ever really looked into it theoretically until it began to be an undeniable problem—when the shocking and paralyzing assaults on it began to occur.

For instance, we encountered much the same kind of resistance that Stanton, Anthony and Gage did when they wrote their *History of Woman Suffrage*. Many women felt it was too soon to talk about the movement as history. It was too young, “a mere baby.” The movement hadn’t accomplished anything yet. It was arrogant for us to compare ourselves to the glorious sisters of the past, to put *ourselves* into history. How strengthening it would have been to know that Stanton, Anthony and Gage also faced very similar criticism at the time they wrote the *History*, which they describe in the prefaces to the volumes.

“It’s too early. . . wait until our object is attained . . . the actors themselves cannot write an impartial history,” they were told. (In fact it would be 45 more years before suffrage was “accomplished” at the time they began writing the movement’s history.) Judging by the references to possible “egotism” in the prefaces to the volumes, they were under steady attack for it. “To be historians of a reform in which we have been among the chief actors, has its points of embarrassment as well as advantage,” they commented. Because of what they describe as “ill-timed humility” there were some who “refused to contribute any of their early experiences to the volumes because they didn’t consider their contributions important enough. . . . with the actors in any great reform, though they may be of little value in themselves; as a part of a great movement they may be worthy of mention—even to the completion of the historical record.”

The struggle had been going on for thirty years then. It had been the first time in the world—to the knowledge of anyone of that time—that women had organized politically for equal rights with men. They had created a stir and stirring throughout the world. And yet theirs was the first comprehensive history of the movement to be written. They were aware of the need for women to write their own history, not simply to get an accurate history but to get any history. Even in the very last volumes (both published in 1920) after what then editor Harper termed the end of “a movement for political liberty which had continued without cessation for over seventy years,” according to Harper there were no histories but this one. “Doubtless other histories of this world wide movement will be written but at present the student will find himself largely confined to these six volumes.” In the preface to volume IV published in 1902, 54 years after “the inception of the agitation,” she wrote “Had it not been for their patient and unselfish labor the story of the hard conditions under which the pioneers struggled to lift woman out of her subjection, the

bitterness of the prejudice, the cruelty of the persecution, never would have been told. In all the years that have passed no one else has attempted to tell it.”<sup>11</sup>

They were clear that the history of the movement was as important as the history of the victory; they saw the history, in fact, as part of the strategy of the movement, as part of winning the victory. Their “object was to put into permanent shape the few scattered reports of the Woman Suffrage Movement still to be found,” to spur things onward, “to make it an arsenal of facts for those who are beginning to inquire into the demands” when “many of our co-workers have already fallen asleep.” Theirs was no history to look backward but a strategy to stir the movement out of the bitterness and doldrums it had fallen into in the 1870’s after the terrible fight with the other abolitionists over the introduction of the word male into the constitution. They sought to write a history of a movement that apparently nobody else considered worth writing a history about before “all who could tell the story will have passed away.” Theirs, in fact, was the epitome of the radical, the activists, the history-maker rather than the liberal “historian’s” theory of history.

Their view of history was not as the past—as static; but of history as movement, as development, as continuing struggle, a history of the present as well as the past—for the future. It is a history of the arguments and the debates, not just to show progress but how it came about. Theirs was a history that sums up in order to move forward, a history not just to give credit, but to record, record attempts and mistakes, a history to use—an “arsenal” for women, as they put it. It was a history by the activists, those who write history to change history, who must keep trying even if they don’t succeed in the natural striving of human beings to get free, and who make a great leap forward when they begin to record their action. It was a great leap forward when women began to get together in their liberation efforts and another great leap when they began to record their attempts.

That the history of the 19th century feminist movement disappeared was not due to the failure of the movement to write its own. The 19th century women’s liberation movement faced the problem of no history unless they wrote their own. And the present movement faces the problems of false history unless it writes its own. It is a somewhat different problem because already with the movement less than a decade old there has been no dearth of books about it. The problem has been that the actors themselves have not been writing it—and have not been using history, of either the past or the present.

<sup>11</sup>Actually in the first 110 years—between the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and Flexner’s book in 1958—it appears there was one other history of the movement, and this one also by another activist. In 1870, to celebrate the second decade since the first national woman’s rights convention (held in Worcester, Mass. in 1850), Paulina Wright Davis who presided at that convention was asked by the National Woman Suffrage Association of which Stanton was president to pull together a history of the movement up to that point. Originally given as a speech, it was expanded and published in 1871 by the Journeymen Printer’s Cooperative Association of New York.



## POSTSCRIPT

The history question had a lot to do with the leadership question. History, after all, is all about what was done and who did it and what was important and how it was accomplished. And who does things and how it is accomplished is all about leadership. There was a conflict between promoting history—recording women's history, past and present—and the movement's ideology of "leaderlessness".

People were impaled on a contradiction, even Firestone who was so far ahead in understanding the importance of history. How could people be for recording history and against acknowledging leadership.

At the same time people weren't taking history seriously enough, we were also taking history too seriously. History was mystical for us. We weren't seeing history simply in terms of experience—recording human achievements, how they were made, mistakes and successes. At the same time we said history was important, we also weren't realizing how important it really was. We were seeing it personally—in very grand personal terms—and not seeing that it had very practical political uses. We saw it in terms of personal acknowledgement rather than recognition, *political* recognition—recognizing political ground won for women at great cost and securing it so it would not have to be fought for and won again—recognizing truths, getting them on to the public record so they wouldn't have to be discovered again.

Just as history was mystified, so was leadership. We didn't think of history as keeping track—and with respect to leadership, simply keeping track of where and whom ideas are coming from, to link up with and keep track of the work that's important to us, to link up with the people we needed to, to support them and receive support.

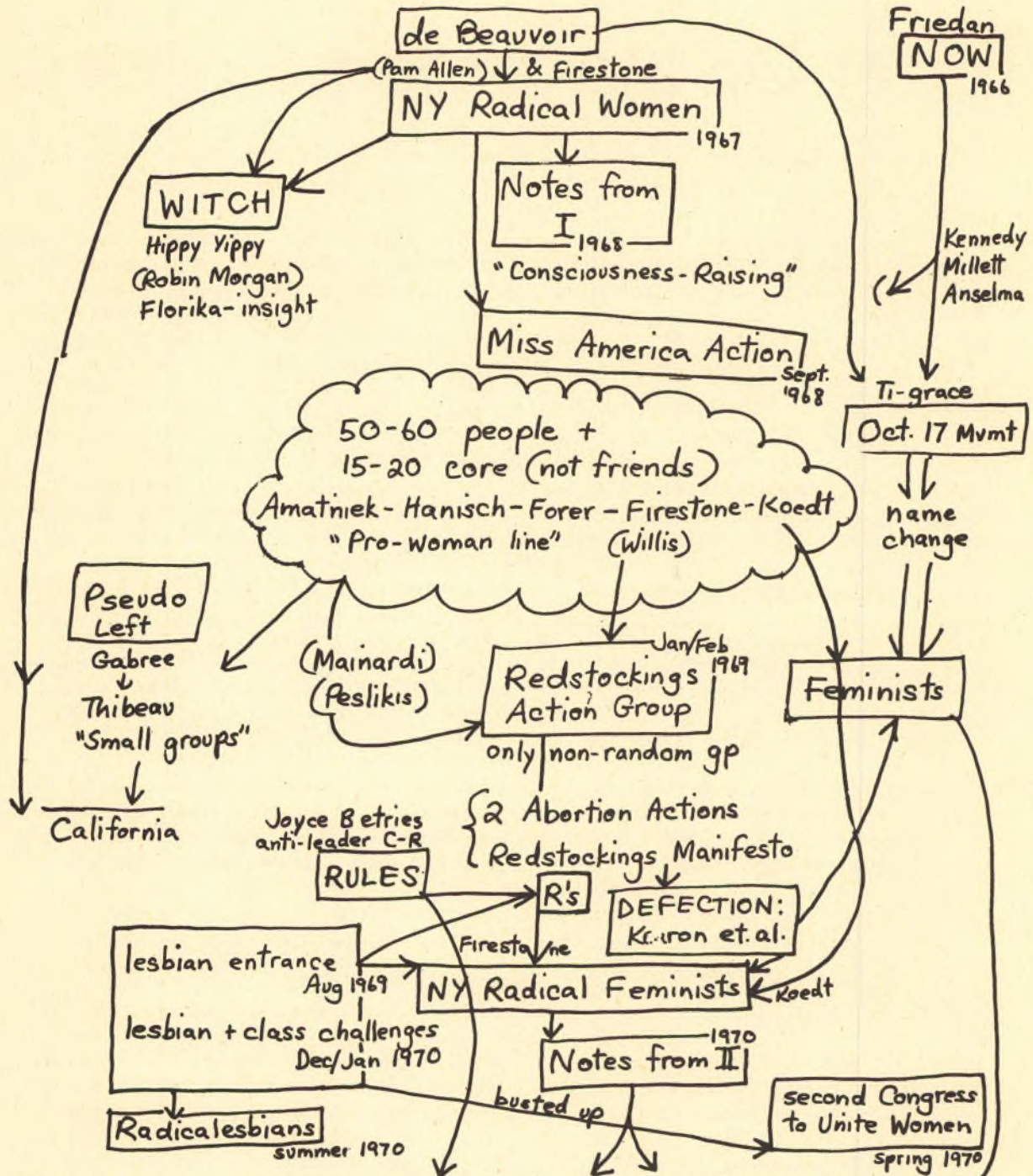
The loss of the movement's history, both recent and past, is now a key problem which is stopping its momentum and the revision of its original ideas is one of the prime reasons for its dilution and weakness. Therefore raising the political issue of revisionism is necessary for the agenda of action. What this essentially means is raising the issue and defining it—defining what it is, when it occurs and alerting people to the toll it takes on women's history and the movement—and then defeating it. Part of defeating the problem will be raising consciousness of the need for going to the original sources for really knowing anything, understanding and clarification. Along with doing this would be a return to many of the old issues for re-examination, discussion and checking out what was really said.

In this paper, I have tried both to highlight the general problem of historical revisionism and return to some of the old issues in order to clarify the basis on which to move forward. In some ways, it is necessary virtually to start over, stronger now by avoiding some of the old mistakes.

Both the issues of history and leadership are the bases for gaining strength and ground on where we were originally and avoiding many of the pitfalls of the first round. The issue of history is essential but not sufficient in the battle against revisionism because, as has already been discussed, simply having access to and reading the original sources does not always lead to understanding them or preventing the misuse of them. The fight against revisionism is really an extension of the ideas of consciousness-raising which, after all, was all about going to the original sources—women themselves—for knowledge, rather than what is said about them by others. History adds movement experience to the material available for consciousness-raising and extends it back into time.

But there are many other issues that need re-examination. Because we have advanced, the old issues have taken on new twists that make them as exciting as when they were first discussed. The necessary critiques of the old issues promise to be a return also to the old, interesting, exciting quality of the movement with hope for new unity and another step forward. Because that is what going back to the roots, going back into history, is all about. It's really about moving forward. It's about creating the new, not opposing it. It's about building the new on the shoulders of the old.





OUSTER OF LEADERS: Amatniek, Firestone, Koedt, Atkinson

NEW ALLIANCES: COOPTATION (Phase 2)

