

Reflections on the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement as "racist," post by Carol Hanisch, June 1, 2006

An excerpt from:

Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political”, Attacking Women, Carnival of Feminists 17, and What the Heck

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I came across a really interesting and recent feminist forum on the subject of the political being personal entitled, Hanisch Forum on the Personal is Political held from May 26 through June 11, 2006, and described as follows:

From May 26 through June 11, 2006, "The 'Second Wave' and Beyond" hosted a special forum among scholars and activists led by Carol Hanisch and inspired by her article "The Personal is Political" and the new introduction published below. Please read the discussion in the archives (with comments by Carol Hanisch, Judith Ezekiel, Chude [Pam] Allen, Ariel Dougherty, [Margaret] Rivka Polatnick, Kimberly Springer, Stephanie Gilmore, and Cathy Cade).

Here is an example of one of Hanisch's comments in the forum, dated June 1, 2006 (note: "WL" and "WLM" are acronyms for "Women's Liberation" and "Women's Liberation Movement"):

I have to admit to being a bit flabbergasted by the direction of this discussion of "The Personal Is Political" as racist and/or excluding Black women. I have been aware of many attacks on the what is called "Second Wave Feminism" by the ensuing "Waves" (particularly in Women's Studies) as white and middle class, but I wasn't aware that it was now going after some of the cornerstone ideas of our movement.

I did run into it personally a few years ago when a Women's Studies student writing her thesis on Redstockings asked to interview me. In preparation I asked to see an outline of what she was planning to write about. Her thesis was that Redstockings was a single issue group which, by choosing to focus mainly on abortion, was an example of the racism of the early WLM. It wasn't stated that bluntly, but that was the essence. When I tried to explain to her that she was wrong on both counts, she got very defensive and huffy. When she told me that since I had been a mere biased participant and she was the impartial scholar more qualified to interpret history, I decided not to do the interview. The facts didn't matter to her; she would put her own spin on it.

I think part of the problem, not only with WL but also with Black liberation and the Left, is that they have become too centered in the academy. It's where a good many former activists fled when the '60s movements began to fall apart. (I too considered it, but I never got there.) I've only dipped my toe into the academic waters, but what I see is a great disconnect to the discussions going on there and the on-the-ground ongoing organizing and theory work, limited as it may be in today's anti-radical, anti-activist climate. The old saying about "angels dancing on the head of a pin" comes to mind, but I think it's much more insidious than that.

I can't help but wonder from whom this attack on the WLM from within the academy and other intellectuals comes from and why. I see it as part of the political attack to discredit the radicalism that rendered such change in the 1960s and early 1970s. Some seem to be building their careers on this stuff. In feminism, advocates claim that they "liberated" (or at least advanced) the early WLM from its terrible racism and classism. In some cases this seems to be a substitute for actual involvement themselves in any movement organizing activity. Organizing words on a page is one thing; organizing real people quite another. If they were in the fray instead of critiquing it from above it all, perhaps they would see that such false theory actually feeds the separatism that already exists by spreading untruths and rumors about women's liberation. It also makes it more difficult for us to do real self-criticism on the issue. There is admittedly a lot to work out, but it won't happen in an atmosphere of "Gotcha." Not all mistakes of a racial nature are racism. Some are just mistakes of ignorance, like the white women at the Sandy Springs Convention who thought Black women have no history of feminism and therefore wanted to exclude them because they were afraid their only interest would be in anti-racism. Somebody did a good job of burying Black feminist history, too.

The attack on us has been so successful in large part because the truth is actually the opposite of what they claim. That is, we WERE and STILL ARE so concerned about race and class that we easily fall into a paralyzing state of angst over it that PRECLUDES doing the real work of organizing anything that will actually be effective in pulling down the INSTITUTIONAL lynchpins of male supremacy OR racism and capitalism. The new "multiracial feminists" seem to rarely engage with the various institutional basis for oppression.

When I read the charge that the WLM was only "secondarily concerned with racism" I want to say, "Of course, it's the WOMEN'S liberation movement, stupid." I can't imagine anyone complaining that the Black movement is only "secondarily concerned with feminism." The old bugaboo that women must always put their own needs last is still alive and well in 2006. Oppressed groups need organizations to represent their interests. The struggle to end racism needs its own organizations to do that just as the struggle to end male

supremacy does or the struggle to end capitalism does. At the same time, these organizations have a responsibility to make equality within the organization as complete as possible.

I realize what I've just written does not directly answer some of your specific questions but I must stop for now. Below is an excerpt from a speech I gave at a Women's Studies Conference in 1999 which might be helpful, and we can pick up again any questions you still have (as well as new ones, no doubt).

"Today many feminist historians are accusing the early women's liberation movement of having been racist. ...

"Although we were racist in the sense that all Americans are racist because one can't fully escape it in a society where all white individuals benefit from racism and its institutions, which have so much more power than the individual. We are all compliant to some degree, whether we want to be or not, just as all men are compliant in male supremacy whether they want to be or not. But there are degrees of racism just as there are degrees of sexism.

"When I read articles by the Jenny-come-latelys to feminism criticizing us for being racist from their own theoretical ivory towers, I want to ask them what THEY have DONE to combat racism. Have they risked their lives and careers, as so many of us did, and many instances still do, to fight racism? We did something about racism, we didn't just talk about it, though we did plenty of talking, too. Somehow I never hear any convincing examples from our critics of just HOW we were racist, except that the WLM was mostly WHITE.

"In the late 1960s almost every woman I knew in the WLM was concerned that our groups were mostly white and we would have greatly preferred to have been in well-integrated groups because we knew the theory we were developing would be more complete. The only exceptions I can think of were women who were afraid that Black women weren't feminist, that they would take over our groups and have us all fighting racism instead of male supremacy. This comes from an ignorance of history and not just on the part of white women. It has only been in the last 10 to 15 years or so that the great historical contributions of black women to feminism have begun to be uncovered or rediscovered and disseminated, and that dissemination remains largely in academia, which is not where most women live.

"Our inability to form integrated groups was based in the reality of the times that there was a great surge of Black Nationalism taking place that prevented it. Black women were under enormous pressure, in many cases, to stay away from those "white women's groups." They also were understandably quite reluctant to criticize black men in the presence of white women who often did

not fully understand their dilemma. We had to accept this as a fact of life, though at the same time we tried to make common cause whenever we could. For example, When I was organizing for women's liberation in Gainesville, Florida in the early 1970s, a judge who had made some very horrendous racist and sexist rulings was up for appointment to a U.S. District Court. Women's liberation joined with the local black liberation organizations and SDS and held marches and rallies and protested his appointment from all angles. I think we helped stop his appointment and the joint action was able to forge bonds between the groups at a period of intense Black nationalism.

"I think it worked because each group was clear and upfront about why it opposed this judge and none tried to jump in front of everybody else and claim the spotlight. We live in a very opportunistic society and there is opportunism and competition in movements as well. Some people are more serious than others; some want liberation while some want to publicize themselves or enjoy the celebrity position of a rebel. That certainly plagued the movement in the 1960s and it still exists today. We have to think through what is best for reaching our big goal. Learn when to step back and know when to step up to the plate. Know when "in your face" works and when another method might be more effective. Revolution is an art as well as a science. When we are not artful and scientific in our approach, we make enemies of potential allies.

"Anyway, because of such attempts to build unity, the leader of a regional Black Power organization invited a group from Gainesville Women's Liberation to meet with its Black women's caucus. It was a very interesting meeting in which we discovered that not only were we dealing with many of the same male supremacist problems, but that our demands for solving them were more similar than different. The meeting confirmed our belief that black women were perfectly capable of taking care of business, whether inside of, or separate from, our so-called white groups.

"This accusation that women who get together in a feminist group that is all white, whether the members want it that way or not, are automatically racist is very simplistic and destructive. A few years ago I tried to organize a local women's liberation group. We had about 25 women at the first meeting, none of whom were African-American, though a few had been invited. A white woman got wind of this and came to our meeting demanding that we discuss why there were no black women in the room. After we discussed it extensively and could come up with no way to change the situation — she had no solutions either — she left, self-righteously saying she would not be part of any group that did not have people of color in it. Her disruption left many of the women feeling guilty and unable to deal with the situation and they didn't return. Even for those who remained, the spirit of the group had been broken and it soon fell apart. This needless confrontation contributed to its demise.

"The fact is that we still live in a racist and highly segregated society and women's liberation cannot solve that problem single-handedly. The same women who accuse us of being racist will heatedly criticize Stokely Carmichael for his semi-public off the cuff comment that "the position of the women in SNCC is prone" while not bothering to mention a white Abby Hoffman's more public and equally sexist remark that "The only alliance I would make with the women's liberation movement is in bed." I should tell you that not only did Stokely Carmichael do dishes in the homes that hosted civil rights workers in Mississippi, his Black power theory had a profound and positive influence on our own theory. Many men, black and white, have supported women's struggle through the centuries." Posted by Carol Hanisch at Jun 01, 2006 13:49