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'1968' and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain

The year 1968 is remembered—and celebrated by the left—for the astonishing eruption of political insurgency around the world, in the U.S., France, Mexico, Czechoslovakia and beyond—particularly by young people. '1968', however, refers to more than just a year. Some people have more recently called the period between about 1966 and 1974 'the long '68'' to indicate a historical conjuncture,[1] that is to say a broader spectrum of political events and socio-political context. Stuart Hall, whose writing about conjunctures has influenced several decades of political and cultural analysis,[2] argued in addition that the most revolutionary and enduring legacy of '1968' was feminism, not student activism.

Yet in the actual year of 1968, the women's movement in the United Kingdom (UK) was merely gestating. Those of us who, in the following few years, became passionately committed feminists, were on the whole politically marginal and marginalised during the upheavals of '68', despite being close to the left and the 'alternative' culture—to liberation and student politics. For instance, the important 1967 two-week-long Dialectics of Liberation Congress organised by radical "existential psychiatrists" held at the Roundhouse in London, and considered the founding event of the Anti-University, included not one woman speaker and in its programme and ensuing publications made no references to women as a potential political force at all. Yet the stated aim of the congress was (to quote from the back cover of the collection of speeches given at the time) "to create a genuine revolutionary momentum by fusing ideology and action on the levels of the individual and mass society"[3], and women—including Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham[4]—were among the attendees. Moreover, in contrast, racism and discrimination against blacks *was* taken very seriously. Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidadian-African American, was there to talk about Black Power and the strategic importance of excluding white people, however sympathetic, from the growing social movement.

1 Including Anthony Barnett in this publication.
2 Jeremy Gilbert: This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall, in: New Formations 96/97 (2019), pp. 5–37.
3 David Cooper (ed.): The Dialectics of Liberation, London 2015. First published by the Institute of Phenomenological Studies 1968.
4 Both later to become important contributors to the feminist debate.

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Before 1968, many of us on the new left had been mobilised by issues outside our immediate everyday circumstances: by the civil rights movement in the U.S., apartheid in South Africa and by revolutionary struggles in Cuba and Vietnam; in sum, for justice and against imperialism, capitalism and the state. The concerns of the embryonic women's movement were to be significantly different and were to transform what counted as the political. Our struggle was on behalf of ourselves—against our *own* oppression *as women*—and our aim was to change both our domestic lives and our participation in the public sphere. In order to accomplish this, our strategy was to organise independently of the broader male left, in women-only groups. Our autonomous structure was partially inspired by separatist Black Power struggles, but also generated as a solution to the often jaw-dropping sexism of men in the radical movements. (Juliet Mitchell refers to an incident in the U.S. where a woman is trying to speak at a public meeting and men are yelling "take her off the stage and fuck her".[5]) But what in the end brought us together in '69 was the compelling impulse to participate in the radical oppositional politics of the moment.

Small groups of women-only protesters had begun to form in the U.S. in 1968. In the UK, the first women's groups were organised in 1969. In the summer of 1969, heavily pregnant and with two small children, I met one of the (north American) male organisers of the London School of Economics (LSE) student occupation who told me about a small group of women, many of them from the U.S. and active in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, who were meeting independently on a weekly basis, in Tufnell Park, and that among the issues discussed was childcare. That was one of the last things I wanted more of. What I desired was to participate on equal terms with men in the momentous political events of the period, so my initial reaction was to back off. But over the next weeks, I learned more about the group's aims, and about 'consciousness-raising', and in September 1969, with my new baby in a carry cot, I attended my first meeting. And it did indeed transform my life.[6]

There were about four groups in London at the time; they formed a loose network connected through the Women's Liberation Workshop, which had a tiny office and functioned as a resource and distribution centre. In the language of cultural theory today, the rapid proliferation of women's groups that ensued was rhizomatic. There was no central organisation or hierarchy or constitution — we operated as autonomous but increasingly linked collectives and were determined always to achieve consensus and to give space to all members of the group to speak. By the end of 1969, there

5 Juliet Mitchell: Woman's Estate, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 85.

6 For a recent discussion about consciousness-raising see Novara Media #ACFM: Trip 5: Consciousness Raising (published on 16 August 2019), which includes an interview with me, at: https://novaramedia.com/2019/08/16/acfm-trip-5-consciousness-raising/ (accessed on 26 November 2019).

were dozens of such loosely affiliated groups around the country and in March 1970 a number of women organised the first—now celebrated—Women's Liberation Conference in Oxford attended by 700 women and a few men who ran the crèche.

The small consciousness-raising groups that made up the women's liberation movement provided a space to explore our own 'oppression' in the domestic as well as the public sphere. This was a very distinctive kind of politics. Unlike that of the first wave of feminists, the suffragettes, our aim was not only to acquire parity in the public domain, but also to change the way we thought and lived. Hence the most compelling and iconic slogan of the early movement, 'the personal is political', became not only its key maxim but also generated a wider radical reframing and expansion of what constituted the political. It was this that was so pivotal and path-breaking at the time. It would also go on to seed today's centre-staging of the politics of identity.[7]

However, during those early days recognising and understanding our personal lives as oppressed, as a product of the sociopolitical and cultural, as *constructed* rather than natural and therefore open to change, was neither obvious nor easy. As Sheila Rowbotham put it:

> Women have been lying low for so long most of us cannot imagine how to get up. We have apparently acquiesced always in the imperial game and are so perfectly colonised that we are unable to consult ourselves. Because the assumption does not occur to us, it does not occur to anyone else either.[8]

So, what were the specific features of oppression and what specifically did we want to change? A useful contemporary text is an article I wrote in 1971 (my first publication), *The Family: A Critique of Certain Features* (1972)[9], at the end of my first year as a mature student of sociology at LSE. The family in this context referred to the form and ideology of the 'nuclear family'—that is to say the closed domestic unit composed of adult heterosexual monogamous couple and dependent children in which women were isolated from each other and responsible for childcare and housework. In the article, I focused on three key areas: childcare and the sexual division of labour; marriage, monogamy and the political consequences of sexual repression; and how to transform our lives.

7 See Selma James: People for Tomorrow: Our Time Is Coming Now, BBC 1971, at: https://selmajames.net/1971/05/18/video-people-for-tomorrow-selma-james-our-time-is-coming/ (accessed on 26 November 2019).

8 Sheila Rowbotham: Women's Liberation and the New Politics, in: Michelene Wandor (ed.): The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain 1969–1972, London 1972, pp. 3–30, p. 5.

9 Mica Nava: The Family: A Critique of Certain Features, in: Michelene Wandor (ed.): The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain 1969–1972, pp. 36–44.

Childcare was probably the main issue for those of us who had children at the time, though other women had other priorities. Bea Campbell and Anna Coote suggested that the two key events responsible for the recruitment of women to the women's liberation movement were the women's equal pay strike at Ford's in 1968 and the Anne Koedt article "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" in 1969.[10] For me, *the* seminal text of the early movement (first given as a paper at the Oxford conference in 1970) was Rochelle Wortis's relatively uncelebrated article "Child-Rearing and Women's Liberation" (1972), in which she critiqued the thesis of influential psychologist John Bowlby about maternal attachment and the harm caused to children separated from their mothers.[11] She argued that multiple attachments—to fathers and other adults as well as mothers—were the norm in some cultures and that the question of who did the childcare was a sociocultural matter, and not a consequence of biology or nature. In my article, I followed Wortis's path-breaking thesis and argued that men should take equal responsibility for childcare and domestic labour, that there was nothing particularly instinctive about child-rearing.

It is hard to convey how controversial these ideas were at the time. Notions of 'natural' mothering, alongside 'natural' femininity, were widespread not only in mainstream culture and on the right but also among left-wing adherents of sexual liberation such as Wilhelm Reich[12] and the organisers of the Dialectics of Liberation event in the UK, for whom freeing up sexuality, therefore implicitly *naturalising* it, occupied a major plank in their philosophical outlook. So, challenging ideas about femininity and masculinity, which inevitably we did, was extraordinarily radical and, moreover, threatening, to both men and women across the political spectrum.

My article, like most in Michelene Wandor's edited collection, was polemical and prescriptive as well as analytical. Along with others at the time, I advocated collective living and the abolition of marriage as well as the sexual division of domestic labour. But even then, in the heat of those early euphoric days of utopian discovery and activism, I was aware that our aspirations about different ways of living would not be easy to achieve. Hence, I concluded cautiously:

> What chance is there of any real change? […] [T]he way we live lags far behind our theories. We may have new ideas, but the old responses and resistances persist

10 Anna Coote/Beatrix Campbell: Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation, London 1982.

11 Rochelle P. Wortis: Child-Rearing and Women's Liberation, in: Michelene Wandor (ed.): The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain 1969–1972, pp. 124–130.

12 Controversial Austrian psychoanalyst and author of *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), *The Sexual Revolution* (1928) and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) whose admirers included Norman Mailer, Paul Goodman and the British anti-psychiatrists and who was a foundational figure of the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

> […]. Are we capable of changing not only our ideas and environment, but also our feelings?[13]

My scepticism was perhaps overstated. We did in fact manage to change a great deal. Ideas and practices about sexuality, marriage and domestic responsibility have indeed shifted seismically since that stuttering libertarian moment. Collective living has had less success, maybe in part because of the miserable constraints of the housing market. But work opportunities and what counts as knowledge in higher education have been utterly recast.

Feminism in general has shifted since those early days from a minority movement rooted in liberation culture to the mainstream. It has gained more strength than we could ever have imagined. Five million women around the world demonstrated against Trump at his inauguration. ‘Patriarchy’ and ‘misogyny’ are now widely used terms. Identity politics, the legacy of the early women’s movement’s insistence on the personal as political, is now pervasive. But what is the nature of this new feminism? A number of people have written about how it has been co-opted by the right.[14] The #MeToo movement of today, with its focus on the predatory nature of men and sexual harassment in the workplace, is not the same as the left-wing counterculture feminism of the late 1960s and early ’70s, in which the focus was on the liberating potential of sex rather than its danger.[15] Broad-spectrum feminism of today includes neoliberal and individual-advancement strands that would not have been acceptable to feminists in the 1970s. Even conservative women call themselves feminist, and women’s rights have been used to justify the Iraq war and the Islamophobia of far-right populists.

But, despite the popularisation and dilution of ‘feminism’, feminist activism, particularly in academia[16], is flourishing, energised not only by sexual harassment, equal pay and non-binary gender questions, but also by the wider febrile climate associated with environment and austerity politics, and, as well, as ever, by differences between feminists themselves.

However, the theoretical and political impact of the ‘the long ’68’ women’s liberation movement has been surprisingly overlooked. In 2018, the centenary of ‘votes for

13 Mica Nava: The Family, p. 43; for further discussion of the family and feminism see also idem: From Utopian to Scientific Feminism? Early Feminist Critiques of the Family, in: Lynne Segal (ed.): What Is to Be Done about the Family?, Harmondsworth 1983, pp. 65–105, and Lynne Segal: “Smash the Family?” Recalling the 1960s, in: ibid., pp. 25–64.

14 Sara Farris/Catherine Rottenberg: Righting Feminism, in: New Formations 91 (2017), pp. 5–15.

15 Mica Nava: Sexual Harassment, #MeToo and Feminism, in: Chartist for democratic socialism 290 (January/February 2018), at: https://www.chartist.org.uk/sexual-harassment-metoo-and-feminism/ (accessed on 26 November 2019).

16 See, for instance, http://fwsablog.org.uk/about/ for current academic initiatives.

women' was more celebrated than the 50th anniversary of second-wave feminism by the mainstream media. The 1970s women's liberation movement has also often been ignored by organisers and participants of academic and political meetings commemorating the radical events of '68. This is a political and analytical error. Feminist ideas and activism in the years immediately following '68 must be acknowledged for their scope and transformative legacy. The influence of women's liberation on the ensuing development over the last 50 years on the politics of identity has been incomparable and endures—albeit sometimes inevitably in contradictory ways.

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