

FROM WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO WOMEN'S LIBERATION:
Some Observations

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There are people who think, or at least think, that American women won freedom when they got the vote in 1920. On the basis of this oversimplification, they deny the validity of the current women's movement and of the oppression that spawned it. They might do better to follow Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said to Margaret Fuller that he did not see how she was oppressed, but that if she felt she was, she must in fact be oppressed. It is always dangerous to say someone else's feelings of oppression. Beyond that, we can see that the current women's movement has its roots in the movement of Emerson, Day and that both are part of a larger and longer struggle. By looking at some aspects of both movements, I would like to suggest the relationship between them and of both to the general struggle for human liberation.

I. The Background of 1848

Long before American women met Seneca Falls to declare their sentiments and pass resolutions regarding the equality of men and women, women in groups organized actions on the stage of history. Five years before the Boston Tea Party, there was an organization called the Boston League of Women Anti-Tax Drinkers. They held a "female peace day" attempted to force the Commons to negotiate in 1763, and when Northampton was besieged, women in parties of fifty stalked the streets every night. It was the women of Fife who broke the blockade in the early revolutionary struggle when they went to Fort Mifflin to fetch "the Baker, the Baker's wife, the Baker's boy and Maria Mabeau." After 1846 too, they continued to act efficiently in groups: the so-called "women incendiaries" who were accused of attempting to cremate the good body of the sandy Commons - or to search the earth for the core over and betrayers of that revolution. For more examples look in our more recent history: consider the women of Island a few months ago.

The Seneca Falls convention poses the same unlikable examples. Yet it represented something quite new on the stage of history. Women in groups, sometimes ad hoc groups, had always been on hand in any liberationist struggle, to support it, to fear for it, or to wish it towards some resolution. But the banners they struggled under did not, until the mid-nineteenth century, represent particular interests of women. Always some larger cause, some more god-human freedom. At Seneca Falls, women came out for themselves as men. By analogy with the Declaration of Independence, they declared the equality to all forms of their oppression. Adopting the language and sure of that earlier declaration, they declared their grievances, "the greatest injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman," and listed in twelve parts to act for the redress of these grievances.

It is well known that the laws that backed for this earlier action were the experiences of many of the women in abolitionist movements. The analogies between blacks and women, between causes of the women's rights were not in the abolitionist cause: the women's liberation movement in the civil rights cause of the African American people.

It is true that we are in danger of oversimplifying the historical process. The connections seem so logical and obvious to us, we forget that history does not move forward by our hindsight, however obvious and logical our perceptions. Nor does the circumstantial detail that we have about how the Grimké sisters had to establish their right as women to speak publicly on the subject of slavery suffice to explain the growth of the women's movement. We may certainly say that their experience in the abolitionist cause enabled leaders of the new feminist cause to develop, that they learned from it to have self-confidence, to trust themselves to speak in public, to gain certain organizational skills and knowledge of books and towns and trains and people, which otherwise would have been denied them. Before they could speak on slavery, they had to lift themselves out of the position of chattels. Before they could organize a movement for their rights, they had to realize some rights. But leaders do not make a movement alone. Without the enthusiasm and response of thousands of women who never spoke in public, there could have been no leaders. What seems to be obvious is what the time for women had come. Perhaps this is best illuminated by the fact that when the Anti-Slavery Society split over the question of tactics, the side that had opposed female speakers henceforth sent out no speakers.

Originally the 1840s women's rights movement did not focus on the issue of suffrage or regard the vote as the main means or end of their claim to equal rights. (For that matter, neither did the suffragists regard the vote as an end only.) Besides the fact that mid-nineteenth-century women had more elementary rights to battle for--the right to hold their earnings and property after marriage, for instance--they also understood the variety of oppressions that they suffered from. One might say they had an embarrassment of riches in the number of grievances they felt against the man's world. For protest they could choose the right to an education, the right to enter and practice professions, the right to sensible clothing, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to guardianship over their children, the right to divorce--even the right to petition governmental bodies. All of these rights denied represented another front in the battle. And if they were not enough, women could see still more. Like the right to commune with nature in safety. As later put by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the psychological restraints put on women's enjoying "the soft sweet, mysterious voices of the night, the rich soft whisperings of fragrant summer, when the moon talks and the young soul awakens" ranged from a socialization under "espionage and restraint" to the threat of rape by "prowling men." They understood how the culture itself and society in general deprived women of full human status.

In its basic insistence that women are "equal" to men, the early movement reflected its historical period. Equality, equal rights, were what all language at large was demanding against the "parties of privilege"--the landowners, the churchmen, the extreme abolitionists, trade unions, and all other that people of the state itself. "The Democracy," as Jefferson's old play was often called. The cry was for equality between

rich and poor, between patriots and peasants, the owners of joint-stock corporations and workmen, between black and white. It followed that women should demand equality with men. What we must recognize is that the word in that different historical context meant something other than it means today.

It certainly did not mean, as perverse critics have always insisted on taking it to mean, that women thought they were the same as men. *Vive La Difference* did not answer the question any better than it does now. In their actions, the women instinctively and proudly manifested their difference from men. I do not mean here those sentiments about the superior morality or purity of women that came eventually to crowdfund the movement. I mean in their creation of organizational forms that best suited the kind of struggle in which they were engaged. This point makes an important link between the women's rights movement, as we shall see, and the women's liberation movement. As Eleanor Flexner says, in explaining the lack of a permanent organization before 1850, "The women feared an organization would be cumbersome, and would restrict individual effort, while little would be gained by it." She quotes Ernestine Rose's comparison of organizations to "Chinese handsges" and further illuminates the comparison with Lucy Stone's remark that she "had had enough of thumb-cerous ever to wish to be placed under them again." It was only after more men-women organized to fight in a male cause, the Civil War, that women adopted conventional male organizational forms. After the war they used a similar form for their own movement.

It is no accident that the adoption of these centralized hierarchical forms accompanied the focussing of demands on the vote. If the women's movement suffered by becoming a one-issue organization, its chances for success on the one front chosen were greater. And perhaps a selfishness was influential here too. In the days of robber barons and the industrial revolution, a truly feminine organizational form might not have survived. We may even compare the disciplined and militant army of the suffrage cause with the kind of political party that Lenin thought necessary to match the repressive structure of czarist Russia. In both cases, the form was influenced by the power it set itself against and under which it had to work.

Now you must permit me one digression--one that is relevant to this question of forms but which attempts to get beneath it. In his essay on humor, Meredith wrote that although there has been fun in Bagdad, there would never be true humor or wit, marks of high civilization, so long as women were enslaved. He had in mind those periods of high culture in the west when the arts of conversation and wit flourished and when women were the leading spirits, organizers, salonnieres. I think we can see something besides preciousness or delicacy is involved here: the interchange of idea and spirit, the group dynamic, the whole dialectical process which produces the finest specimens of human thinking as opposed to human thought. And it is no accident that women come to the fore in societies where such an art or process is valued. Even in the literature of our early republic we have an expression of the relationship between women and wit: Charles Brockden Brown's *Alfred*. He has the narrator of the dialogue say:

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Books are too often insipid. In reading, the senses are inert and sluggish, or they are solicited by foreign objects. To spur up the flagging attention, or check the rapidity of its flights and wildness of its excursions, are often found to be impracticable. . . . I hate a lecturer. I find little or no benefit in listening to a man who does not occasionally call upon me for my opinion, and allow me to canvass every step in his argument. I cannot, with any satisfaction, survey a column, how costly soever its materials, and classical its ornaments, when I am convinced that its foundation is sand which the next tide will wash away. I equally dislike formal debate, where each man, however few his ideas, is subjected to the necessity of drawing them out to the length of a speech. A single proof, or question, or hint, may be all that the state of the controversy, or the reflections of the speaker, suggest: but this must be amplified and iterated, till the sense, perhaps, is lost or obscured, that he may not fall below the dignity of an orator. Conversation, careless, and well uttered, that is sometimes abrupt and sententious, sometimes fugitive and brilliant, and sometimes capacious and declamatory, is a scene for which, without being much accustomed to it, I entertain great affection. It blends, more happily than any other method of instruction, utility and pleasure. No wonder I was desirous of hearing, long before the opportunity was afforded me, how far these valuable purposes were accomplished by the instructors of Mrs. Barker's Lyceum.

Now I propose that there is a connection between feminine institutions of high culture and the forms of organization that are congenial to the women's movement. Whether because of some female principle or simply because of the experience of women (the "thumb-screws" that Lucy Stone talked about), women have always favored the open and informal, the unstructured and un-hierarchical forms. Among themselves, rather than taking votes in a mechanical manner, they prefer to work by consensus. But when women went after the voting privilege, a male institution, they used male forms of organization. One might say it was appropriate.

II. The Interval between 1920 and 1965

Women's suffrage was won and little came of it. Was the women's movement exhausted by its century of struggle? Was the vote a meaningless privilege? Had the focusing on one issue sold out the women's cause? The answer may be "yes, in part" to all of these questions, and yet none of them nor all together suffice to explain the death of the movement or the death of women's interest in it as expressive of their concerns. Most of the grievances, most of the disabilities that women had suffered continued unabated; women were still oppressed and knew it. But their attention turned in hopes of redress of their grievances, from the finished business of securing the vote to two other historical developments: the "sexual revolution" and the Russian Revolution.

Of the two revolutions the first named was by far of greater interest to most women. Those who have been objectified and dehumanized by sex mores and institutions are greatly concerned about any proposed change in sexual relations. As Kate Millet says in Sexual Politics, the first step necessary against the repressiveness of Victorian sexuality was relief. The sexual revolution promised that. At last people could talk about sex without shame. They were permitted to know their bodily functions and to think of sex as natural and even good. Up to this point, the sexual revolution was a boon to women and far more important in their lives than the vote could ever be. Beyond that point, it was a sore disappointment, because it led to greater and more pervasive sexual exploitation. What custom had once required that women deny, the new "freedom" pushed them to give--but without any change in the social relations between the sexes. Neither male attitudes nor social institutions had any regard for the special pleasures or dangers of female sexuality. For women the sexual revolution was in word only.

As for the other revolution, it caused a worldwide ferment in the institutions nearest to women's roles, marriage and the family. Women in general as well as workers everywhere watched avidly the outcome of the social experiments begun in the first period of revolution in a notoriously backward country. The granting of full political rights to women, the easing of divorce laws, the establishment of child care centers, communal living--all these were written about from every possible point of view, and they had their small influence on American practice (Judge Lindsey's notion of "trial marriage" is one example). Women as well as workers were turned off by the failure of the experiments in Russia, especially when they saw the reversion to old repressive forms under Stalin. A failed revolution disenchantments people, but much more so when the counter-revolution calls itself by revolution's name.

Meantime the ramifications of that failure gave women many problems to deal with on a crass survival level. After the decade of "flaming youth" (the sexual revolution) came depression, which was only to be cured by war on a global scale. In the first women were considered a drag on the labor market and were taught once more that their "proper sphere" was the home. Jobs were scarce and what there were belonged by rights to men--that was the understanding that informed all the legislation of the period, particularly the welfare acts. In the second period, women were brought out of the home and into defense plants to take the place of men who had gone to war. Suddenly the skills which they had learned in their "proper sphere" were extremely useful on the production line. They were told this thousands of times, and child care centers were set up in the factories to help them solve a major obstacle

to their employment. Needless to say, when their services were no longer needed, women were sent back to the home, child care centers were closed, and they were bombarded with propaganda about their "true" roles and the joys of motherhood and housewifery, the post-war kitchen and the dangers of child neglect.

III. The New Women's Movement

The same "credibility gap" that blocks almost every pronouncement of government today from the consciousness of citizens has had a special effect on women and on the women's movement. It has restored to them the deep-seated belief that if anything is to be done, they must do it themselves. It has restored to women their old and particular forms of organization. Once again they are building an organization from the grass-roots up, not from some formal structure down. Support groups (sometimes called "small groups" or "rap groups" or "consciousness-raising groups"), whose functioning lies outside the scope of this paper, are the heart of the movement in more than one sense. They are radically democratic, fiercely autonomous, and ever-changing. Their form is so difficult to get a handle on that they are safe from outside manipulation, capturing, or control--whether by men, men's organizations, or women acting under the direction of mixed organizations. And to a large extent, likewise safe is the movement based on these nuclei.

Without this form as its foundation, the Women's Liberation Movement would already have been swallowed up by politically expert organizations or else coopted by the state. Attempts have been made and are still being made on the movement, but it preserves its independence. It holds to its values of spontaneity, dialogue, anti-hierarchy and anti-lay-on. To group cooperation, support, and development even more stringently than the Women's Rights Movement did. It has been said that Women's Liberation kills its "stars" because stars begin to sound like men (remember Lucy Stone's "chumb-scr.ews"). Where every woman is a spokeswoman, there is no need of stars. Leaders may be another thing. The movement is threshing out its ideas on this subject. Perhaps it will come up with a new definition of leadership.

Organizational matters aside, we can say that the movement has already contributed a new definition of human freedom, new ideas on sex roles, on the family and on work. It has brought new issues to the political scene: child care, abortion law repeal, sex education, women's studies, etc. It has evolved new methods of struggle against the whole society and culture from the support group to massive demonstrations, from the occupation of media offices to the creation of a new press. Sometimes the novelty lies only in a new object of

of attack--like the Miss America contest; sometimes it involves a new kind of activity--like anti-rape squads.

In all of its aspects the Women's Liberation Movement is creative because it taps the spontaneity of hundreds of thousands of women--and their pent-up rage as well. But its first-mentioned contribution to politics today (substantive rather than of form) deserves serious consideration here. I said the movement has already contributed a new definition of human freedom. This alone should command an attention, a political and philosophical respect. So far the definition is more implicit than explicit, though it is reflected in slogans and catch-phrases. In concluding I want to examine one of them: "women's liberation means men's liberation too."

This is an oft-repeated phrase. The women know it and say it in aggressive or defensive tones. Sometimes you hear a man saying it--though with a peculiar intonation or even as an attack on the women's movement. The obsession, men's liberation means women's liberation too, has not been historically true. The reason is that women are talking about liberation on far deeper levels of human experience, levels that involve our basic socialization as human beings. Because they know, and only they know, what oppression consists of on these levels, only they can envisage a freedom from these forms of oppression. Only they can explore new concepts of socialization and enculturation; indeed they must do this as they attempt to recreate their identities on a level more fully human than present structures have permitted them. It is necessary for them in their work, as they set up child care centers, for example, which will not cripple children psychologically in the assignment of sex roles. In order to do the work that frees them, in other words, they must create a new concept of what is truly human; they must explore the capacity and potentiality of human kind.

Hardly anyone else is engaged in this sort of activity. Where is the radical party which accepts human spontaneity as a good, which does not have a PLAN into which human beings must accommodate themselves, which does not function on an understanding, implicit or explicit, only too common today that "people are no damned good." We live in a time of stalemate between the forces of repression and the forces of rebellion. The greatest weapon of repression is that many of the rebellious lack a positive sense of human possibilities. They know they hate oppression, but they have no concept of a human grandeur that could transcend it.

It was not for nothing that the present women's movement endured a long gestation, during which women had to experience the so-called sexual revolution, had to watch the failure of state reforms in Russia (and elsewhere), had to live through the deprivations of the depression and the catastrophe of World War II. This is the experience that lies behind the new positive, the new definition of freedom, of being human. The women's movement has been called the longest revolution. Perhaps their successful struggle will also make it the last.