

S. Sayres, et al (ed) The SIXTIES without Apologies

Putting feminism back on its feet

SILVIA FEDERICI

(Minnesota
University Press,
Minneapolis, 1984)

Almost fourteen years have passed since I became involved with the women's movement. At first it was with a certain distance. I would go to some meetings but with reservations, since to a "politico" like I was it seemed difficult to reconcile feminism with a "class perspective." Or this at least was the rationale. More likely I was unwilling to accept my identity as a woman after having for years pinned all my hopes on my ability to pass for a man. Two experiences were crucial in my becoming a committed feminist. First my living with Ruth Geller, who has since become a writer and recorded in her *Seed of a Woman* the beginning of the movement, and who in the typical feminist fashion of the time would continually scorn my enslavement to men. And then my reading Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1970), a pamphlet that was to become one of the most controversial feminist documents. At the last page I knew that I had found my home, my tribe and my own self, as a woman and a feminist. From that also stemmed my involvement in the Wages for Housework campaign that women like Dalla Costa and Selma James were organizing in Italy and Britain, and my decision to start, in 1972, Wages for Housework groups also in this country.

Of all the positions that developed in the women's movement, Wages for Housework was likely the most controversial and often the most antagonized. I think that marginalizing the struggle for wages for housework was a serious mistake that weakened the movement. It seems to me now, more than ever, that if the women's movement is to regain its momentum and not be reduced to yet another pillar of the meritocracy system, it must confront the material condition of women's lives.

Today our choices are more defined because we can measure what we have achieved and see more clearly the limits and possibilities of the strategies adopted in the past. For example, can we still campaign for "equal pay for equal work" when wage differentials are being introduced in what have been traditionally the strongholds of male working class power? Or can we afford to be confused as to "who is the enemy," when the attack on male workers, by technological unemployment and wage cuts, is used to contain our demands as well? And can we believe that liberation begins with "getting a job and joining the union," when the jobs we get are at the minimum wage and the unions seem only capable of bargaining over the terms of our defeat?

Conducted in New York City, summer 1983, by S. Sayres. Questions have been deleted.

When the women's movement started in the late 60s we believed it was up to us women to turn the world upside down. Sisterhood was a call to build a society free from power relations where we would learn to cooperate and share on an equal basis the wealth our work and the work of other generations before us have produced. Sisterhood also expressed a massive refusal to be housewives, a position that, we all realized, is the first cause of the discrimination against us. Like other feminists before us we discovered that the kitchen is our slaveship, our plantation, and if we want to liberate ourselves we first have to break with our identification with housework and, in Marge Piercy's words, refuse to be a "grand coolie damn." We wanted to gain control over our bodies and our sexuality, to put an end to the slavery of the nuclear family and of our dependence on men, and explore what kind of human beings we would want to be once we free ourselves from the scars centuries of exploitations have left on us. These, despite emerging political differences, were the goals of the women's movement and to achieve them we gave battle on every front. No movement, however, can sustain itself and grow unless it develops a strategic perspective unifying its struggles and mediating its long term objectives with the possibilities open in the present. This sense of strategy is what has been missing in the women's movement, which has continually shifted between a utopian dimension posing the need for a total change and a day to day practice that assumed the unchangeability of the institutional system.

One of the main shortcomings of the women's movement has been its tendency to overemphasize the role of consciousness in the context of social change, as if enslavement were a mental condition and liberation could be achieved by an act of will. Presumably, if we wanted, we could stop being exploited by men and employers, raise our children according to our standards, come out and, starting from the present, revolutionize our day to day life. Undoubtedly some women already had the power to take these steps, so that changing their lives could actually appear as an act of will. But for millions these recommendations could only turn into an imputation of guilt, short of building the material conditions that would make them possible. And when the question of the material conditions was posed, the choice of the movement was to fight for what seemed compatible with the structure of the economic system, rather than for what would expand our social basis and provide a new level of power for all women.

Though the "utopian" moment was never completely lost, increasingly, feminism has operated in a framework in which the system—its goals, its priorities, its productivity deals—is not questioned and sexual discrimination can appear as the malfunctioning of an otherwise perfectible institution. Feminism has become equated with gaining equal opportunity in the labor market, from the factory to the corporate room, gaining equal status with men and transforming our lives and personalities to fit our new productive tasks. That "leaving the home" and "going to work" is a pre-

condition for our liberation is something few feminists, already in the early 70s, ever questioned. For the liberals the job was coated in the glamor of the career, for the socialists it meant that women would "join the class struggle" and benefit from the experience of performing "socially useful, productive labor." In both cases, what for women was an economic necessity was elevated into a strategy whereby work itself seemed to be a moment of liberation. The strategic importance attributed to women's "entering the work-place" can be measured by the widespread opposition to our campaign for wages for housework, which was accused of being economic and institutionalizing women in the home. Yet, the demand for wages for housework was crucial from many viewpoints. First it recognized that *housework is work*—the work of producing and reproducing the work force—and in this way it exposed the enormous amount of unpaid labor that goes on unchallenged and unseen in this society. It also recognized that housework is the one problem all of us have in common, thus providing the possibility of uniting women around a common objective and fighting on the terrain where our forces are strongest. Finally it seemed to us that posing "getting a job" as the main condition to becoming independent of men would alienate those women who do not want to work outside the home because they work hard enough taking care of their families and if they "go to work" do it because they need the money and not because they consider it a liberating experience, particularly since "having a job" never frees you from housework.

We believed that the women's movement should not set models to which women would have to conform, but rather devise strategies to expand our possibilities. For once getting a job is considered necessary to our liberation the woman who refuses to exchange her work in a kitchen for work in a factory is inevitably branded as backward and, beside being ignored, her problems are turned into her own fault. It is likely that many women who were later mobilized by the New Moral Majority could have been won to the movement if it had addressed their needs. Often when an article appeared about our campaign, or we were invited to talk on a radio program, we received dozens of letters by women who would tell us about their lives or at times would simply write: "Dear Sir, tell me what I have to do to get wages for housework." Their stories were always the same. They worked like slaves with no time left and no money of their own. And there were older women starving on Supplementary Security Income (SSI) who would ask us whether they could keep a cat, because they were afraid that if the social worker found out their benefits would be cut. What did the women's movement have to offer to these women? Go out and get a job so that you can join the struggles of the working class? But their problem was that they already worked too much, and eight hours at a cash register or on an assembly line is hardly an enticing proposition when you have to juggle it with a husband and kids at home. As we so often repeated, what we need

is more time, more money, not more work. And we need daycare centers, but not just to be liberated for more work, but to be able to take a walk, talk to our friends or go to a women's meeting.

Wages for housework meant opening a struggle directly on the question of reproduction, and establishing that raising children and taking care of people is a social responsibility. In a future society free from exploitation we will decide how this social responsibility is best absolved and shared among us. In this society where money governs all our relations, to ask for social responsibility is to ask that those who benefit from housework (business and the state as the "collective capitalist") pay for it. Otherwise we subscribe to the myth—so costly for us women—that raising children and servicing those who work is a private, individual matter and that only "male culture" is to blame for the stifling ways in which we live, love and congregate with each other. Unfortunately the women's movement has largely ignored the question of reproduction, or offered only individual solutions, like sharing the housework, which do not provide an alternative to the isolated battles many of us have already been waging. Even during the struggle for abortion most feminists fought just for the *right not to have children*, though this is only one side of control over our bodies and reproductive choice. What if we want to have children but cannot afford to raise them, except at the price of not having any time for ourselves and being continuously plagued by financial worries? For as long as housework goes unpaid, there will be no incentives to provide the social services necessary to reduce our work, as proved by the fact that, despite a strong women's movement, subsidized day care has been steadily reduced through the 70s. I should add that wages for housework never meant simply a paycheck. It also meant more social services and *free social services*.

Was this a utopian dream? Many women seemed to think so. I know, however, that in Italy, as a result of the student movement, in several cities during the hours when students go to school, buses are free; and in Athens, until 9 A.M., during the time when most people go to work, you do not pay on the subway. And these are not rich countries. Why, then, in the United States, where more wealth is accumulated than in the rest of the world, should it be unrealistic to demand that, e.g., women with children be entitled to free transportation, since everybody knows that at \$3 a trip, no matter how high your consciousness is raised, you are inevitably confined to the home. Wages for housework was a reappropriation strategy, expanding the famous "pie" to which workers in this country are considered entitled. It would have meant a major redistribution of wealth from the rich in favor of women and male workers as well, since nothing would so quickly de-sexualize housework as a paycheck for it. But there was a time when money was a dirty word for many feminists.

One of the consequences of the rejection of wages for housework is that almost no attempt was made to mobilize against the attack on welfare

benefits that unfolded since the beginning of the 70s and that the struggles of welfare mothers were undermined. For if it is true that housework should not be paid, then women on ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) are not entitled to the money they receive, and the state is right in trying to "make them work" for their checks. Most feminists had towards women on welfare the same attitude many have towards "the poor": compassion at best, but not identification with their condition, though it was generally agreed that we are all "a husband away from a welfare line."

Another example of the divisions fostered by the politics of the movement is the history of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Feminists mobilized when CLUW was formed in 1974, and by the hundreds participated in the founding conference held in Chicago in March of that year. But when a group of welfare mothers led by Beulah Sanders and the wives of the miners on strike at Harlan County asked to participate, claiming they too were workers, they were turned down (with the promise, however, of a "solidarity dinner" on that Saturday) because, they were told, the conference was reserved to card carrying union members.

The history of the last five years has shown the limits of these politics. As everybody admits, "women" has become synonymous with "poverty," as women's wages have been continuously falling both in absolute terms and relative to male wages (72% of full-time working women make less than \$14,000, the majority averaging \$9,000-\$10,000, while women with two children on welfare make \$5,000 at best). Moreover, we have lost most subsidized forms of child care and many women work on a cottage-industry basis, at piece work rates, often below the minimum wage, because it is the only possibility they have to earn some money and take care of their children at the same time.

Feminists charged that wages for housework would isolate women in the home. But are you less isolated when you are forced to moonlight and have no money to go any place, not to mention the time to do political work? Isolation is also being forced to compete with other women for the same jobs, so that we see each other as competitors on the labor market rather than as sisters in a struggle. And isolation is competing with a black or a white man over who should be fired first. This is not to suggest that we should not fight to keep our jobs. But a movement that purports to struggle for liberation should have a broader perspective, particularly in a country like the United States, where the level of accumulated wealth and technological development make utopia a concrete possibility.

The women's movement must realize that work is no liberation; work in the present system is exploitation and there is no pleasure, pride or creativity in being exploited. Even the career is an illusion as far as self-fulfillment is concerned. What is rarely acknowledged is that most career-type jobs require that you exert power over other people, often other women and this deepens the divisions between us. We try to escape blue collar or

clerical ghettos in order to have more time and hopefully more satisfaction only to discover that the price we pay for advancing is the distance that intervenes between us and other women. Moreover, there is no discipline we impose on others that we do not at the same time impose on ourselves, which means that in performing these jobs we actually undermine our own struggles.

Even holding a position in the academic world is not a road to becoming more fulfilled or more creative. In the absence of a strong women's movement working in academia can be stifling, because you have to meet standards you do not have the power to determine and soon begin to speak a language that is not your own. And from this point of view it does not make a difference whether you teach Euclidean geometry or women's history; though women's studies still provide an enclave that, relatively speaking, allows us to be "more free." But little islands are not enough. It is our relation to intellectual work and academic institutions that needs to be changed. Women's Studies are reserved to those who can pay or are willing to make a sacrifice, adding a school day to the workday in continuing education courses. But all women should have free access to school, for as long as studying is a commodity we have to pay for, or a step in the famous "job hunt" our relation to intellectual work is nearly impossible.

In Italy in 1973 the metalmechanic workers won as part of their contract 150 hours of school on paid work-time and shortly after many other workers began to appropriate this possibility, even if it was not in their contract. More recently in France a school reform proposed by the Mitterand government opened access to the university to women, independently of any qualifications. Why hasn't the women's movement posed the question of liberalizing the university, not simply in terms of what subjects should be studied, but in terms of eliminating the financial cost of studying?

I am interested in building a society where *creativity is a mass condition* and not a gift reserved to the happy few, even if half of them are women. Our story at present is that of thousands of women who are agonizing over the book, the painting or the music they can never finish, or cannot even begin, because they have neither the time nor money. We must also broaden our conception of what it means to be creative. At its best, one of the most creative activities is being involved in a struggle with other people, breaking out of our isolation, seeing our relations with others change, discovering new dimensions in our lives. I will never forget the first time I found myself in a room with 500 other women, on New Year's Eve 1970, watching a feminist theatre group: it was a leap in consciousness few books had ever produced. In the women's movement this was a mass experience. Women who had been unable to say a word in public would learn to give speeches, others who were convinced they had no artistic skills would make songs, design banners and posters. It was a powerful collective experience. Overcoming our sense of powerlessness is indispensable for

creative work. It is truism that you cannot produce anything worthwhile unless you speak to what matters in your life and are excited about what you write or draw. Brecht used to say that whatever is produced in boredom can only generate boredom and he was right. But in order to translate our pains and pleasures into a page or a song we must have a sense of power, enough to believe that our words will be heard. This is why the women's movement saw a true explosion of creativity. Think of journals from the early 70s like *Notes from the First Year*, (1970), *No More Fun and Games*, (1970), or the *Furies*, (1971), such powerful language, almost all of a sudden, after we had been mute for so long.

It is power—not power over others but against those who oppress us — that expands our consciousness, not vice versa as it is mistakenly assumed. I have often said that our consciousness is very different depending on whether we are with 10,000 women in the streets, or in small groups or alone in our bedrooms. This was the strength the women's movement gave to us. Women who ten years earlier may perhaps have been subdued suburban housewives called themselves Witches and sabotaged bridal fairs, dared to be blasphemous, proposing, as in the *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), suicidal centers for men, and from the vantage point of our position at the bottom declared that we had to shake the entire social system off its foundations. But it is the moderate soul of the movement that has prevailed. Feminism now is winning the ERA, as if the objective of women's struggles were the universalization of the male condition. Let me emphasize, since criticism of the ERA is usually taken as a betrayal of the movement, that I am not against a legislative act stating we are equal to men. I am against concentrating our energies around a law that at best can have a limited effect on our lives. We should also decide *in what respect we want to be equal to men*, unless we assume that men are already liberated. One type of equality we should refuse is equality in the military, i.e. women's right to have a combat role. This is a goal organizations like NOW have campaigned for for years, so much so that the defeat of Carter's proposal to draft women could be represented as a feminist defeat. But if this is feminism I am not a feminist, because I don't want to assist the U.S. imperialistic politics and perhaps die in the process. To fight for equal rights in this case undermines the struggle men are waging to refuse the draft. For how can you legitimize your struggle when what you refuse is presumably considered a privilege by the other half of the population? Another example is protective legislation. There is no doubt that protective legislations were always instituted with the sole purpose of excluding women from certain jobs and certain unions, and not out of concern for our well-being. But we cannot simply demand that protective legislation be struck down in a country where every year 14,000 people on an average die in work-related accidents, not to mention those who remain maimed or die slowly of cancer or chemical intoxication. Otherwise the equality we gain is the equality of black lungs, the equal right

to die in a mine, as women miners have already done. We need to change working conditions *for both women and men*, so that everybody is protected. The ERA, moreover, does not even begin to address the question of housework and childraising, though as long as they are our responsibility, any notion of equality is doomed to remain an illusion.

I am convinced these are the issues the women's movement must confront if it wants to be an autonomous political force. Certainly there is now a widespread awareness of feminist issues. But feminism risks becoming an institution. There is hardly a politician who dares not to profess eternal devotion to women's rights, and wisely so, since what they have in mind is our "right to work," for our cheap labor is a true cornucopia for the system. Meanwhile feminist heroines are no longer Emma Goldman or Mother Jones, but Sally Ride, the first woman in space, the ideal symbol of the self-reliant, highly skilled woman capable of conquering the most secluded male territories, and Mrs. Wilson, the head of the National Caucus who, despite her pregnancy, decided to run for a second term.

It is also a sign of the crisis in the women's movement that at the time when this country is witnessing the most intense attack on working people since the Depression and a militarization foreboding another world war, the main debate among feminists is about the vices and virtues of sado-masochism.

Glorifying sado-masochism seems to me a step back with respect to the "woman-loving-woman" relations we wanted to build in the movement. I also think that sado-masochistic desires are the product of a society where sexuality is so emmeshed with power relations that sexual pleasure and violence, either suffered or inflicted, are difficult to separate. It is good that we stop feeling guilty for our "perversions," and what perversion, by the way, compared with what is daily carried on by this government as the highest example of morality. Sticking pins in each other's breasts is an act of great civilization compared with what takes place daily at the White House. It is also good that we play out our fantasies at a time when we are continuously asked to center our lives around church, work, and the heterosexual couple. But is practising sado-masochism liberating our sexuality? It may have a therapeutic effect to admit to our secret desires and cease to be ashamed of what we are. But liberation is being able to fully determine when, under what conditions, with whom we make love, outside of any exploitative relation.

The truth of the matter is our sexual lives have become quite boring because the possibility of experimenting with new social relations has been drastically reduced. In fact we have become quite boring to each other, for when we are not on the move we have little to offer our friends except mutual complaints, hardly a recipe for sexual excitement. So we prick our sensibility, find new ways of stimulating ourselves. Actually they are old ways, what is new is that now women are openly practising them. This is a new

area of equality we are opening up, it is like getting a job as a construction worker. But liberation is being able to go beyond both.

There are signs today that the paralysis the women's movement has suffered from may be coming to an end. A turning point has been the organization of the Seneca Women's Encampment, which has meant the beginning of a *feminist-lesbian antiwar movement*. With this our experiences are coming full circle. The first feminist groups were formed by women who had been active in antiwar organizations but had discovered that their "revolutionary brothers" so sensitive to the needs of the exploited of the world would blatantly ignore theirs, unless they took their struggle into their own hands. Now, fourteen years later, women are building *their* antiwar movement and starting directly from *their* needs.

Today the revolt of women against all types of wars is visible all over the world: from Greenham Common to Seneca Falls, from Argentina, where the mothers of the *desparecidos* have been in the forefront of the resistance to military repression to Ethiopia, where this summer women have taken to the streets to reclaim their children the government has drafted. A women's antiwar movement is particularly crucial in a country which seems bent on asserting, by the power of its bombers, its domination over the planet.

In the 60s we were inspired by the struggles of the Vietnamese women, who showed to us we too can fight and change the course of the world. Today we should be warned by the despair we see on women's faces cast every night on our screens as they crowd into refugee camps, or wander with their children among the wrecks of their homes destroyed by the bombs our wage cuts have paid for. For unless we regain our impulse to change this society from the bottom up, the agony they presently suffer may soon be our own.

"It's damn slick out there"

FLO KENNEDY

I'm old and forgetful. I don't remember the 60s, though I guess I wrote my book *Abortion Rap* in the 60s and I guess every concern we had in the 60s, we still have. But we've also got payoffs. When I see black people working in banks, in TV and Madison Avenue, I see a payoff. § Things take a long

*Conducted in New York City, summer 1983, by S. Sayres. Finvola Drury deserves special thanks for her help in preparing this manuscript. Questions have been deleted.

time to change. In a society that has 34 million to waste on a motion picture, a penniless, virtually unfunded struggle shouldn't have been surprised at how little has changed. We on the left, though I don't know anybody who's on the left and I'd hesitate to use the word *progressive*, but none of the people on what's called the left, seem to take socialism seriously. And most of my socialist friends don't seem to realize that the media is important. Any so-called socialist who doesn't use cable TV is retrograde and reactionary. No poverty-stricken, grass-roots constituency buys books. Teaching reaches only those in the classrooms. We call ourselves *progressive*, but we've never mounted a decent consumer fight against the pizza rats who control this society. And it would be very easy. § Whether we're joking or serious, I think the 60s woke a lot of us up. We may be lying in bed, but we're lying in bed awake, and planning and talking occasionally to one another. I'm proud to be a part of that dialogue. § Maybe it ought to be off the record, but I don't like increasing the horizontal hostility already obtaining between antiestablishment people, social advocates, whomever. I'm delighted to work with anybody on this side, even if I'm sure they are CIA. I can't check people's political credentials and naturally, if they are CIA, their political credentials are impeccable. I try to work with who comes along and hope that if they are CIA they get my message straight when they report back to the establishment. § Most of my ideas now, although I still work on them, I had at the outset. I said back in 1931 that marriage was for the birds and that if you didn't have webbed feet and feathers, you shouldn't get into it. For me the 60s was a continuation of what I did in my twenties in Kansas City, Missouri, like boycotting Coca-Cola for refusing to hire black drivers. In 1967 I was after Proctor & Gamble complaining about the lily-white soap operas and game shows they sponsored. In those days Proctor & Gamble used up 245 million dollars in their annual advertising budget; last time I checked, it was 775 million. So I still advocate that we follow our dollars and see what business, government and the media are doing with them. § I'm no original thinker, but I'm very smart about picking up ideas from people who have an original thought of a political nature. In some cases, I'm slightly ahead of progressive people; in other cases, I'm ready for them. I'm proud to say that there haven't been any progressive ideas that the establishment has ignored that I didn't love. § So, as a black woman, I never bought the idea that blacks and women, both and each, should be twice as good as men. Looking at the people at the top, I should be able to get twice as far on half my energy, and I'm always working at half-speed. I'm lazy and I have poor health and my eating habits are irregular. When I don't eat so well, I say to myself, if I ever have to go to jail, at least I won't have to complain about the food. I consider myself first concerned with finances and fun. I expect politics to be fun. If it gets difficult, I don't bother to do it. I'm not much of a leader; on the other hand, I'm not much of a follower, either. I'm too impatient. When they want to go in one