

What does the word 'feminism' bring to mind? A granite faced spinster obsessed with a vote? Or a George Sand in cigar and bloomers, a woman against nature? Chances are that whatever image you have, it is a negative one. To be called a feminist has become an insult, so much so that a young woman intellectual, often radical in every other area, will deny vehemently that she is a feminist, will be ashamed to identify in any way with the early women's movement, calling it cop-out or reformist or demeaning it politically without knowing even the little that is circulated about it. Indeed, the few historians of the women's rights movement in the U.S. complain that the records have been lost, damaged, or scattered due to the little value placed on them. Anyone who as ever researched the subject knows how little is available, and how superficial, slanted, or downright false is the existing information.

I would like to suggest a reason for this. It is the thesis of this article that women's rights (liberation, if you prefer) has dynamite revolutionary potential; that the Nineteenth Century WRM 1 was indeed a radical movement from the start, that it was tied up with the most radical movements and ideas of its day, and that even to the bitter end, in 1920, there was a strong radical strain which as been purposely ignored and buried. To show this, we will have to dig out and completely review the whole history of the WRM in the U.S., to weigh just what it meant in political terms, and to understand the political and economic interests causing these distortions.

The early women's Movement was radical. Remember that to attack the Family, the Church, and the Law was no small thing in the Victorian Era. Few people realize what a grass roots movement it was, nor know of the tortuous journey's made by dedicated women into the back woods of the frontiers, and door to door in the towns to speak about the issues or to collect signatures for endless petitions which were laughed right out of the assemblies. In those days, the meager funds that kept the WRM going were not from wealthy male donors, you can be sure, but were the nickels and dimes of housewives and laundresses. From the beginning the WRM identified itself with women in the working class. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and several others, the most militant of the movement, appeared as delegates to the National Labor Union Convention as early as 1868, before any attempts to organize female labor had ever succeeded. Other early labor organizers such as Kate Mullaney or Augusta Lewis, were feminists. This is not to mention the better known radical origins of the WRM in the Abolitionist Movement and in the ideas of women radicals such as Fanny Wright or the Grimke sisters. The Movement was built by women who had literally no civil under the law, who were pronounced civilly dead upon marriage, or who remained legal minors if they didn't marry, who could not even sign their own wills or have custody of their own children upon divorce, who were not allowed to go to school at all, let alone college, were, at best, equipped with a little knowledge of

embroidery, French, or harpsichord as their sole political education, who had no political status or weapons whatever. And yet, today, we hardly remember that less than a century ago, even after the Civil War', more than half of this country's population were still slaves under the law, women by law not owning even the bustles on their backs.

Indeed the women's Movement from the first was tied up with anti-slavery forces in this country. It was due to their work in the Abolitionist Movement that many women first became aware of their own slavery. It is an added irony that the first Women's Rights Conventions at Seneca Falls in 1848 came about as a result of the ire felt by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton when they were denied seating at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in England in 1840.

Today again, women are beginning to move largely on the inspiration and impetus from the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties. And indeed the Black Struggle and the Feminine Struggle always seem to run parallel in this country. Both were aborted, their energy drained off, at about the same time, and it is only recently that they have begun to demand to know what happened, to analyze what went wrong and why.

And, just as with black history, there is a suspicious blank in the history books when it comes to the WRM, one of the greatest struggles for freedom this country has known. Little girls are taught to believe that all their rights were won for them a long time ago by a silly bunch of ladies who carried on and made a ridiculous display, all to get that paper in the ballot box.

Why is this? Why are little girls familiar with Louisa May Alcott rather than Margaret Fuller, with Scarlett O'Hara and not Myrtilla Miner, with Florence Nightingale and not Fanny Wright. Why have they never heard of the Grimke Sisters, Sojourner Truth, Inez Milholland, Prudence Crandall, Ernestine Rose, Abigail Scott Duniway, Harriet Tubman, Clara Lemlich, Alice Paul, and many others in a long list of brilliant courageous people? Something smells fishy when scarcely fifty years after the vote was won, the whole WRM is largely forgotten, remembered only by a few eccentric old ladies.

May I suggest the reason for this, why women's history has been hushed up just as Negro history has been hushed up, so that the black child learns, not about Nat Turner but about the triumph of Ralph Bunche, or George Washington Carver and the peanut.

And that is that a real woman's movement is dangerous. From the beginning it exposed the white male power structure in all its hypocrisy. Its very existence and long duration were proof of

massive large-scale inequality in a system that pretended to democracy. Both the Abolitionist Movement and the Women's Rights Movement, working at times together, at times separately, threatened to tear the country apart, and very nearly did during the Civil War. (If the feminists then hadn't been persuaded to abandon their cause for 'more important' issues, i.e. other, men's issues, the history of the Women's Rights Movement might have been different.)

The history of the struggle for suffrage alone is an absolutely incredible account of tooth and nail opposition from the most reactionary forces in America. The work involved to achieve the vote was staggering. Carrie Chapman Catt estimated that: To get the word "male" out of the Constitution cost the women of this country 52 years of pauseless campaign. During that time they were forced to conduct 56 campaigns of referenda to male voters, 480 campaigns to get legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters, 47 campaigns to get state constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions, 277 campaigns to get state party conventions to include woman suffrage planks, 30 campaigns to get presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses. (Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, WOMAN SUFFRAGE AND POLITICS, New York, 1923, Chas. Scribners Sons, pg.107)

Defeat was so frequent and victory so rare, and then achieved only by the skin of the teeth, that even to read about it is grueling, let alone to have lived through it, or to have devoted oneself to the struggle.

We ought to question this. Is it possible that male chauvinism was the sole cause? Certainly it played a large part, perhaps underlying all the other forces obstructing the movement. Remember that in that period, male power was as taken for granted as once was the Divine Right of Kings, that it was so entrenched, unquestioned, and absolute that even demands for the mildest reforms were dangerous and struck those in power as ludicrous.

However, there was even more to it than that. Eleanor Flexner, in *Century of Struggle* (Atheneum, Harvard U. Press) examines the anti-suffrage forces that fought to such great lengths. She finds several institutions involved in denying the vote to women:

- 1) CAPITALISM: The big industrial states of the North were among the last to give in. Oil, manufacturing, and railroad lobbies worked secretly against suffrage, not only because the big liquor interests were threatened by an early alliance of the Women's Christian Temperance Union with the Suffrage cause, but also because the WRM had from the beginning been identified with

the labor reform, and "creeping socialism" in general. Let's not forget that women were and still are a cheap labor supply. The vote could have worked against that. (An interesting fact that Flexner brings out in this connection is that the Women's anti-suffrage committees were a female front for big money interests. Records show that 4/5 of their contributions came from MEN, generally in quite substantial sums. We can credit the women in these groups with being the first organized Aunt Toms.)

2) Racism: The second large bloc to fight woman suffrage to the bitter end was, you guessed it, the Southern States. In those days they openly stated the connection between the black struggle and the feminist struggle that is better disguised today. For, to grant the vote to women would not only ,enfranchise another HALF of the Negro race, but would call attention to the fact that suffrage was NOT universal. With 51% of the population looking out for corruption at the polls, the 14th amendment might get enforced as well as the 19th.

3) GOVERNMENT: "The political machines which were uncertain of their ability to control an addition to the electorate which seemed relatively unsusceptible to bribery, who were militant, and bent on such disturbing reforms as the abolition of child labor, and worst of all, cleaning up politics." FLEXNER, Op. Cit., p. 299

4) THE CHURCH & THE FAMILY: Maybe none of the other causes listed, goes so deeply to the root as this one. Judeo-Christianity has always espoused the inferiority of women, pointing to Genesis for proof of women's temptress nature, her special role, her mission to be fruitful and multiply and after Eden, to multiply in pain and submission to man.

The family unit based on women's responsibility for child rearing, on male supremacy and thus her submission to male authority and the sexual double standard, was severely threatened at its core by any talk of change. After all, who could know at that time that the movement could be stopped with only partial or surrogate freedoms? They saw clearly, that to follow through on Women's rights would mean abolition of the traditional family structure, which certainly gave these men quite a few advantages.

5) THE LAW: The facade which reinforced and guaranteed the status quo. Thus the revolutionary potential of Woman Power was recognized by the men in power as the real threat to their system and, as so often happens, it was recognized more clearly by the enemy than by some of the crusaders themselves. Even with the Suffrage Association later turning conservative in their obsession with getting the vote at all cost, and in their zeal practically assuring the male

power structure that if they were granted the vote they wouldn't USE it, the establishment wasn't convinced. It took 53 years from the first state suffrage referendum in Kansas in 1867 to the final ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920. And even then there was so much stalling that from January 10, 1918, when the amendment was finally passed (by the EXACT 2/3 majority required) it took two years and nine months to get it ratified. And then it passed by only a miraculous two votes. When all else had failed, the losing minority even tried the desperate tactic of crossing the state line into Alabama to prevent a quorum until they could undermine the majority vote.

But though these forces finally appeared to give in, they did so in name only. They never lost. For by that time, the barrage of campaigns, this pooling and concentration of all energy onto the limited goal of suffrage (which in the beginning after all, had been seen only as a preliminary, a weapon with which to wrest real political power) had depleted the Women's Rights Movement. The monster of the vote had swallowed everything else. Three generations had come and gone, the master planners were all dead. The later women who had joined in to work for the clear cut issue of the vote had never had time to develop a broader consciousness, to see where the vote fit in. By that time they could hardly remember that there had been anything else to fight for. By the time the Suffrage Movement disbanded the Women's Rights Movement was dead. The opposition had had its way.

For what is the vote worth finally if the voter is manipulated? Every husband knows he's not losing a vote, but gaining one. Today, some 50 years later, women still vote as wives, just as they govern as wives. Lurleen Wallace symbolized the puppet political position women have in this country. Margaret Chase Smith has been the only woman Senator elected independently of any connection with husband or father. And where are the woman mayors? In 1968, Jackie Kennedy correctly told a reporter that "in my family politics are left to the men," while Lady Bird, the highest lady of the land, provides an exemplary model for the young ladies with her concern for Easter outfits and beautiful highways.

Though as often quoted to show progress, one third of all women work, they work in the worst sense of the word; that is, they have merely added a new exploiter to the old one. For they are concentrated in the service occupations, at the bottom rung of the employment ladder, in jobs that no one else will take. As for earnings, latest figures show that even black male workers make more.

The average woman earns approximately \$2,827 annually, a little over half the average man's earnings (\$4,466). Despite the talk about bitchy businesswomen, how many businesswomen do you ever see? How many women in any managerial or decision making position? How many professionals? Ninety five percent of all professionals are still male. Academic opportunities are shrinking, not growing; even the women's colleges and magazines are run by men. Nor does anyone mention the fact that future prospects look even dimmer. The routine jobs that were granted to women, a lollipop to appease their hunger for real and important work, will be the first to go, come automation. Perhaps men will have their way after all, and women will go back to the home they never should have left.

What went wrong? Why did the Women's Rights Movement fail?

1. BY SELLING OUT THE CAUSE FOR "MORE IMPORTANT" ISSUES: Women, more than any other oppressed group, were easy to convince that their struggle should be delayed for "more important issues." This may be due to the special conditioning which women undergo for the beginning to please rather than disturb - to put the interests of the male or the child above their own. Whatever the reason, many of them sold out on their own cause too often.

First, in the Civil War, the back of the tough little W.R.M. was broken when the energy of women was channeled into war work. After the war, the movement had to be built up again from scratch. Only the staunchest feminists insisted that the word SEX as well as Color go into the Fourteenth Amendment. The Abolitionists, who had been glad to accept the alliance with women all along, suddenly decided that now it was "the Negro's hour," - that the cause of women was too unimportant to delay for a minute any advances in the liberation of the blacks. Needless to say they had forgotten that HALF of the black race was female, so they sold out their own cause as well. Once again the principle was proved that unless oppressed groups stick together, and on alliances of self interest rather than do-goodism; nothing can be accomplished in the long run to dismantle the apparatus of oppression. As long as it remains to be used on one group, it can just as easily be employed on another.

Later, in World War I the same thing happened. Most of the Suffragettes bent over backwards to prove their patriotism. They were sensitive to the charge that they cared more about their own interests than the good of the country. Only the militants kept at it, acknowledging the war only by such slogans as "Freedom Begins at Home." Naturally they were baited for this, and vilified. But they were right in knowing that if they gave up now they would never get the vote. For once,

they were needed in the labor force: if only temporarily for the "war effort", and thus they had a certain bargaining position.

They know that then their citizenship could be questioned by no one, whereas after the war there would be the usual conservative backlash, the attempt to put them back in the home. And indeed it is no accident that the Amendment finally passed when it did, right before the end of the War. in 1918

In this regard we should keep in mind that Revolutions anywhere are always glad to use any help they can get, even from women. But unless women also use the Revolution to further their own interests as well as everyone else's, unless they make it consistently clear that all help given now is expected to be returned, both now and after the Revolution, they will be sold out again and again, just as they were in Algeria.

2. BY SINGLE ISSUE ORGANIZING AS OPPOSED TO ORGANIZING To RAISE THE GENERAL CONSCIOUSNESS Many organizers labor under the illusion that they can "use" an existing, already "hot. issue to build up their own cause. I think this is a delusion, that in fact it does not save time or effort, but can really set a movement back or even destroy it. To reach the people "where they are at" when they are in the wrong place, it a false approach. Rather, we should be concerned with educating them at all times to the real issues involved. If there ARE real issues, people will catch on soon enough.

An example of this failing in the Women's Rights Movement was the alliance with the Women's Christian Temperance Union. After the Civil War, when the solid base of the W.R.M. had been broken, it seemed opportune to use whatever women's organizations there were as a platform to promote genuine women's issues. The staunchest feminists were against this alliance. Others, notably Frances Willard, argued that she could "use" the temperance issue to further women's rights, since temperance was "where the women were at." It not only failed, but it set back the vote fifty years. Once the W.R.M. became allied in the public mind with the unpopular temperance issue (justly unpopular, I might add); once it was associated, not with freer women, but with a straight-laced, self-righteous Mother, once the big liquor interests stepped in...well, the rest is history,

Again, Stanton and Anthony made a mistake merging their radical feminist National Suffrage Association with the timid provincial American Suffrage Association. The National was concerned with the vote only as the means to a much broader end. They were against any type of

partial suffrage and favored instead applying pressure on Washington to amend the Constitution. But Stanton and Anthony were getting old, and with many misgivings, they finally merged with the "better organized" American, a single issue organization, devoted strictly to suffrage, and working on the state level. Again, they might have saved fifty years.

Once the pressure was taken off Washington, the Suffrage issue sank into the "doldrums" until years later, when Harriet Stanton Thatch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter returned from England with a set of new tactics, and a renewed pressure for the National Amendment, an approach that had lain dormant since her mother's time. It must also be stressed that the later militants were not single issue oriented like the others. Their strategy was better because they approached the problem fearlessly from a broader perspective.

Again, we can see how this principle operates on the international level as well. Women in socialist countries or situations, such as Russia or the Kibbutz, have been used in the economy, but because a tremendous raising of consciousness did not occur during the revolutionary period, because they were too concerned with THE Revolution and not THEIR Revolution, because their definition of themselves did not change radically but was only reformed on certain ISSUES such as Labor, they found themselves later not only not free, but perhaps in an even worse position. They simply had added certain new jobs to their old ones. Now they work harder.

I would like to conclude from all this, that contrary to what most historians would have us believe, women's rights were never won. The Women's Rights Movement did not fold because it accomplished its objectives, but because it was essentially defeated and mischannelled. SEEMING freedoms appear to have been won. Let's investigate these briefly:

1. SEXUAL Though its true that women wear shorter skirts than they used to, I would suggest that this happened not so much in their interest as because MEN preferred it that way. After all, girls are still sent home from high school in winter for wearing pants to keep their legs warm. Miniskirts are impractical, requiring constant attention to ones sitting posture, constant emphasis on ones sexual nature. High heels, girdles, garter belts, nylons and all the other trappings of the chic modern woman may appear more natural, but in fact are almost as uncomfortable as the corsets and bustles were. For though women may strive for a 'natural' look, they do indeed strive. Girls today are as concerned about 'image' as ever. And they are still sexual objects. Only the styles have changed.

As for sex itself, I would argue that any changes were as a result of male interests and not female. Any benefits for women were accidental. A relaxing of the mores concerning female sexual behavior was to HIS advantage; there was a greater sexual supply at a lower or nonexistent cost. But his attitudes haven't changed much since the good old Professional Whore days.

2. LABOR As stated above, though one third of the women are employed, they have merely taken over the shit jobs. Even when they earn as much as their husbands do, the equal work does not grant them a new equal status in the family; rather, they are considered to be "helping out." And when they come home, there's still that housework to do, the child care, the cooking of supper. ("The woman's work is never done.") So that here again, the change resulted in male advantage; that is, the woman took over the menial jobs he didn't like, jobs that she had no commitment to, and would give up any time in favor of marriage or babies, if he so desired. (Then he could argue as an employer that he couldn't hire her for the good jobs or give her equal wages for equal work when she'd just turn over and get married.)

3. WOMEN & MONEY This is the one you never hear the end of: How the women control all the bread and spend it on whatever they please. But, the advertisers and manufacturers want it that way, though in their personal lives they will be the first to berate the little woman for spending all that money. It doesn't take much to figure this one out. This is a consumer economy, one that needs full time consumers of useless products for its very existence. What better target than a class of semi-educated semi-conscious unhappy people, who also have some access to the budget money? It is no accident that the domestic pages are full of cartoons depicting irate husbands chewing out Big Mama for always going shopping when ever she's unhappy. So let's start putting the blame where it belongs: on that same husband when he's in his office doing market research.

4. LEGAL RIGHTS - A Canadian documentary on the Women's Rights Movement, WOMEN one THE MARCH, showed that the Canadian Supreme Court had once handed down a decision declaring that, no, women were NOT people. Later, there was a lot of fanfare when the decision was reversed. A plaque was even presented to someone, I forget who. And that's about where it's at. Now we are declared human in certain books, but though some legal rights have been won, as with the Negro, its guise another thing to have them actually enforced. More often they are distorted or even used as grounds for more severe exploitation, i.e., "See what you've done now that we've given you your freedom?"

But such advances so hard won, and yielded with such ill grace, turned out to be a big hoax, and we're finally catching on. There are several important lessons to be learned this time around if we don't want to be subtly subverted yet again.

To capitulate briefly, these are:

1. Never compromise basic principles for political expediency.
 2. Agitation for specific freedoms is worthless without the preliminary raising of consciousness necessary to utilize these freedoms fully.
 3. Put your own interests first, then proceed to make alliances with other oppressed groups.
- Demand a piece of that revolutionary pie before you put your life on the line.