



WHAT CAN BE LEARNED A Critique of the Miss America Protest

with Background and Introductory Thoughts

by Carol Hanisch

Background and Introductory Thoughts

Carol Hanisch was interviewed by Fran Luck for the "Joy of Resistance" feminist radio show, broadcast on WBAI in New York City in July 2003.

The interview brings out some of the details of the history of the protest, touches on issues that are still important today such as the question of what oppresses women now, the backlash against feminism, the difference between empowerment and having real power, and how to deal with different views among feminists. What follows are excerpts from the interview.

Fran: September 2003 marks the 35th Anniversary of the legendary 1968 protest of the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City. Flashed on the news across the country and worldwide, the protest denounced the fake ways women were expected to look and act, and announced the arrival of a new movement, Women's Liberation.

What happened at this legendary action in 1968, in the convention hall and on the boardwalk, outside the Miss America Pageant?

Carol: Well, there were more than 100 picketers there, we picketed all afternoon. We did some street theatre which included throwing 'instruments of female torture' as we called them, into a freedom trash can. This is where the bra-burner myth started, by the way, but we weren't allowed to burn anything, including bras. We did throw in some bras, and we also threw in high heels, nylons, girdles, corsets, garter belts, hair-curlers, false eyelashes, makeup and Playboy and Good Housekeeping magazines. And that evening some of us went inside to disrupt the pageant and we hung a large banner over the balcony and we yelled things like "Women's Liberation!" and "No More Miss America!" and that started to bring some change in the uncomfortable dress codes that were in place then, and it also let the world know that a women's liberation movement was underway.

Fran: You got a lot of attention to that protest, plus the appellation "bra-burner."

Carol: I like to say that if they'd called us "girdle-burners" every woman in America would have come and joined us.

Fran: This is the 35th anniversary of that action, and I understand you're going to be doing a "Freedom Trash Can" tour?

Carol: Well, I'm hoping to offer a speech telling about what happened then and ... women can throw articles of female torture of today-whatever they see that to be-into a freedom trash can... to try to get all of us thinking again about how women are oppressed in 2003.

2 • A Critique of the Miss America Protest

Fran: The Freedom Trash Can tour, coming to your city soon...

Carol: And trash what's still trashing women.

Fran: That's very exciting, I wonder what women would throw into a freedom trash can today.

I want to go back to some of the articles that you threw into this freedom trash can. Some young women of today would say that some of these items are part of our expressing our sexuality. Corsets, high-heels, these things seem to be making a comeback, and they seem to be being touted as feminist expression. I would like to know what you think of this turn of events.

Carol: I think this is an example of how the Women's Liberation movement has become depoliticized... Women using the power of their sexuality goes way back to Jezebel and before, and it's not a real challenge to male supremacy because it doesn't demand that men change how they think about us or treat us, and it seems to me it supports the status quo.

Men are all too happy to see us competing with each other over who's the sexiest. It helps keep women in their place. And in my view, women's place is not in front of the mirror.

Sexual competition divides women, just as beauty pageants divide women and there are all kinds of race and class and age divisions going on. I think it's true that all of us have to play the game to some degree to even survive in the world, and we have to be careful about condemning each other for doing that, but to take the trappings of our oppression and try to redefine them as liberating I think is really reactionary.

In the early days of the women's liberation movement we talked about the appearance issue in terms of comfort and fashion and how beauty concepts divide women. I think what we were really challenging was this uniform of women's inferior sex-class status, these high heels and skirts and all these female trappings that were not only physically inhibiting and painful, they were right out there reminding both men and women of women's inferior position. And I think that's why this issue remains so entrenched in our culture and in our sexual politics. It's part of a backlash that's hounded the movement since the early 1970's.

I don't think we need feelings of empowerment, what we need is real power.

Fran: that's an amazing statement because you hear the word "empowerment" all the time and it really has come to replace the power analysis, the analysis of how power works that feminists and many other groups of the 1960s were putting across. ... Could you elaborate?

Carol: Power is having the power to change things and to have power over our lives to make them better. The whole empowerment issue is oriented only towards individuals, an individual person feeling empowered, which isn't totally a bad thing, but when it takes all the focus, it's not a good thing.

Fran: This issue of women's sexual expression being put across as a feminist practice-to be very overtly sexual, often in ways that actually mimic the porn culture-being said to be feminist is really dividing a lot of feminists from each other and I wonder how we can straighten all that out.

Carol: I think one thing we need to do is discuss it. We need some consciousness-raising, and we need to be honest. We need to look at it and see what does it really mean for women, not just the individual woman at the time she's doing it, but for women as a group in the long term. What does this do to how men look at us and how we feel about ourselves in terms of that.

Fran: I mean it certainly does take guts to walk around looking sexual in this society

3 • A Critique of the Miss America Protest

because of all the catcalls and comments you get. So I suppose it's easy to confuse that with bucking the system, because you're taking on this reaction and you have to be very brave to do it. But it also seems to me that you're playing into the system when you do that.

Carol, there's so much talk about Third Wave and Second Wave, it seems that the entire movement has been divided up into these two camps, I want to know what you think of these terms as useful or not useful for how we think of feminism and our struggle at this point.

Carol: I think it's a very false division because women are always struggling for their liberation. We get oppressed, we rise up, the backlash pushes us backwards, we build it up again. So there are all these waves constantly... I think "Third Wavers" only tend to think in terms of time, and of generations, and they think their take on this appearance issue, and on many others, is new, when it's not. What we really have here is not a generational division, but a division of competing political lines that have been around for a long time. The individual lifestyle, individual struggle line dominates the political movement line right now...

Fran: Could you define that, the individual struggle line vs. the political movement line?

Carol: The individual struggle line is best summed up in the idea that what a woman really needs to do is stand up for herself, and that will bring her liberation. And the political line is that women need to unite and fight, as a group, to win their liberation, and it has to be for all women.

Fran: So you see the emphasis on how we look, and lifestyle, is taking us away from uniting politically?

Carol: When it's called feminist, yes. There's been this move among some people that anything a woman does is feminist and I think we have to struggle over defining what feminism is and what our movement is and what we want.

Fran: So, not necessarily anything that someone feels is feminist is necessarily feminist.

Carol: That's right. You have to look at it in terms of its results. And there are women of all ages on all sides of these issues and there always have been. There are young feminists out there who understand this and who are trying to rebuild the political movement. If we want more real change in our lives we are going to have to organize across generations of those who want to return to this real political movement, and who are willing to struggle for the liberation of all women. Sometimes that struggle even needs to be against each other.

Fran: In other words, it's OK to debate.

Carol: Absolutely, not only is it OK, it's absolutely necessary.

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Fran Luck is a member of the Joy of Resistance radio collective, which produces a feminist radio show at New York's "Peace and Justice" radio station, WBAI 99.5 (www.wbai.org). She is a member of Redstockings Allies and Veterans and a prime motivator in the New York City-based Street Harassment Project. She can be reached at provoca2000@hotmail.com.

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A Critique of the Miss America Protest

by Carol Hanisch

The protest of the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City in September of 1968 told the nation that a new feminist movement is afoot in the land. Due to the tremendous coverage in the mass media, millions of Americans now know there is a Women's Liberation Movement. Media coverage ranged from the front pages of several newspapers in the United States to many articles in the foreign press.

The action brought many new members into our groups and many requests from women outside the city for literature and information. Many letters said, "I've been waiting so long for something like this." So have we all, and the Miss America protest put us well on our way.

But no action taken in the struggle for our liberation will be all good or all bad. It is necessary that we analyze each step to see what we did that was effective, what was not, and what was downright destructive.

At this point in our struggles our actions should be aimed primarily at doing two inter-related things: 1) awakening the latent consciousness of women about their own oppression, and 2) building sisterhood. With these as our primary immediate goals, let us examine the Miss America protest.

The idea came out of our group method of analyzing women's oppression by recalling our own experiences. We were watching *Schmearguntz*, a feminist movie, one night at our meeting. The movie had flashes of the Miss America contest in it. I found myself sitting there remembering how I had felt at home with my family watching the pageant as a child, an adolescent, and a college student. I knew it had evoked powerful feelings.

When I proposed the idea to our group [New York Radical Women], we decided to go around the room with each woman telling how she felt about the pageant. We discovered that many of us who had always put down the contest still watched it. Others, like myself,

had consciously identified with it, and had cried with the winner.

From our communal thinking came the concrete plans for the action. We all agreed that our main point in the demonstration would be that all women are hurt by beauty competition—Miss America as well as ourselves. We opposed the pageant in our own self-interest, e.g. the self-interest of all women.

Yet one of the biggest mistakes of the whole pageant was our anti-womanism. A spirit of every woman "do her own thing" began to emerge. Sometimes it was because there was a conflict about an issue. Other times, women didn't say anything at all about disagreeing with a group decision; they just went ahead and did what they wanted to do, even though it was something the group had definitely decided against. Because of this egotistic individualism, a definite strain of anti-womanism was presented to the public and harmed the action.

Posters which read "Up Against the Wall, Miss America," "Miss America Sells It," and "Miss America Is a Big Falsie" hardly raised any woman's consciousness and really harmed the cause of sisterhood. Miss America and all beautiful women came off as our enemy instead of as our sisters who suffer with us. A group decision had been made rejecting these anti-woman signs. A few women made them anyway. Some women who had opposed the slogans were in the room when the signs were being made and didn't confront those who were making the anti-woman signs.

A more complex situation developed around the decision of a few women to use an "underground" disruptive tactic. The action was approved by the group only after some women said they would do it anyway as an individual action. As it turned out, we came to the realization that there is no such thing as an "individual action" in a movement. We were linked to and were committed to support our sisters whether they called their action "individual" or not.

5 • A Critique of the Miss America Protest

It also came to us that there is at this time no real need to do “underground” actions. We need to reach as many women as possible as quickly as possible with a clear message that has the power of our person behind it. At this point women draping a Women’s Liberation banner over the balcony that night and yelling our message was much clearer. We should have known, however, that the television network, because it was not competing with other networks for coverage, would not put the action on camera. It did get on the radio and in newspapers, though.

The problem of how to enforce group decisions is one we haven’t solved. It came up in a lot of ways throughout the whole action. The group rule of not talking to male reporters was another example.

One of the reasons we came off anti-woman, besides the posters, was our lack of clarity. We didn’t say clearly enough that we women are FORCED to play the Miss America roll—not by beautiful women, but by men we have to act that way for and by a system that has so well institutionalized male supremacy for its own ends.

This was not too clear in our guerilla theater either. Women chained

to a replica red, white and blue bathing-suited Miss America could have been misinterpreted as against beautiful women. Also, crowning a live sheep Miss America sort of said that beautiful women are sheep. However, the action did say to some women that we are viewed as auction-block, docile animals. The grandmother of one of the participants really began to understand the action when she was told of the sheep, and she ended up joining the protest.

There is as great a need for clarity in our language as there is in our actions. The leaflet that was distributed as a press release and as a flyer at the action was too long, too wordy, too complex, too hippy-yippee-campy. Instead of an “in” phrase like “Racism with Roses” (I still don’t know exactly what that means), we could have just called the pageant RACIST and everybody would have understood our opposition on that point. If we are going to reach masses of women, we must give up all the “in-talk” of the New Left/Hippie movements—at least when we’re talking in public. (Yes, even the word FUCK!) We can use simple language (*real* language)

that everyone from Queens to Iowa will understand and not misunderstand. Most swear words are anti-woman, and that’s probably one reason why our mothers objected to them so much.

We should try to avoid the temptation to say everything there is to say about what is wrong with the world and thereby say nothing that a new woman can really dig into and understand. Women’s Liberation itself is revolutionary dynamite. When other issues are interjected, we should clearly relate them to our oppression AS WOMEN.

We tried to carry the democratic means we used in planning the action into the actual DOING of it. We didn’t want leaders or spokesmen. It makes the movement not only SEEM stronger and larger if everyone is a leader, but it actually IS stronger if not dependent on a few. It also guards against the time when such leaders could be isolated and picked off one way or another. And of course many voices are more powerful than one.

Our first attempt at this was not entirely successful. We must learn how to fight against the media’s desire to make leaders and some women’s desire to be spokesmen. Everybody talks to the press or nobody talks to the press. The same problem came up in regard to appearances on radio and television shows after the action. We theoretically decided no one should appear more than once, but it didn’t work out that way.

The Miss America protest was a zap action, as opposed to person to person group action. Zap actions are using our presence as a group and/or media to make women’s oppression into a conscious social issue. In such actions we speak to men as a group as well as to women. It is a rare opportunity to talk to men in a situation where they can’t talk back. (Men must begin to learn to listen.) Our power of solidarity, not our individual intellectual exchanges will change men.

We tried to speak to individual women in the crowd and now some of us feel that it may not have been a good thing to do. It put women on the spot in front of their men. We were putting them in a position which we choose to avoid ourselves when we don’t allow men in our discussion groups.

It is interesting that many of the non-movement women

6 • A Critique of the Miss America Protest

we talked to about the protest had the same reaction as many radical women. “But I’m not oppressed” was a shared response. “I don’t care about Miss America” was another. If more than half the television viewers in the country watch the pageant, somebody cares! And many of us admitted watching it too, even while putting it down.

It’s interesting, too, that while much of the Left was putting us down for attacking something so “silly and unimportant” or “reformist,” the Right saw us as a threat and yelled such things as “Go back to Russia” and “Mothers of Mao” at the picket line. Ironically enough, what the Left/underground press seemed to like best about our action was what was really our worst mistake—our anti-woman signs.

Surprisingly and fortunately some of the mass media ignored our mistakes and concentrated on our best points. To quote from the *Daily News*, “Some women who think the whole idea of such contests is degrading to femininity took their case to the people. ... During boardwalk protest, gals say they’re not anti-beauty, just anti-beauty contest.” Shana Alexander wrote

in a *Life* magazine editorial that she “wished they’d gone farther.” Together, *Life* and the *Daily News* reach millions of Americans.

We need to take ourselves seriously. The powers that be do. Carol Giardina of Gainesville, Florida was fired from her job because of her activities in women’s liberation and her participation in the protest. Police cars were parked outside the planning meeting one night. The next day we got a call from the mayor of Atlantic City questioning us about just what we planned to do. Pepsi Cola is withdrawing as a sponsor of the pageant. They produce a diet cola and maybe see themselves as next years special target.

Unfortunately the best slogan for the action came up about a month after the contest when Ros Baxandall came out on the David Susskind show with “Every day in a woman’s life is a walking Miss America contest.” We shouldn’t wait for the best slogan; we should go ahead to the best of our understanding. We hope all our sisters can learn something from our first foray. We did.