

by Carol Hanisch

Some Thoughts on What's Wrong with Feminist Theory Today and What It Will Take to Make It Successful Again

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I was speaking right here at Marist a few years ago where one of the panelist, who claimed to be a feminist, defined feminism as "anything a woman says it is" and went on to proclaim how wonderful it is that we have come so far. On the surface that may sound good. It certainly prevents any disagreements among women over what feminism is. But it also actually prevents women from organizing around a program to achieve equality and liberation, because when you put together a program of what you're fighting for, you have to define the "ism" that you support.

My old 1944 Webster's dictionary defines feminism as "The theory, cult or practice of those who advocate such legal and social changes as will establish political, economic and social equality of the sexes." I don't know about the "cult" part, but the rest of the definition is what feminism has meant historically and the definition that I use when I talk about feminism. I want to be clear about what I'm talking about. If we are ever to have a mass women's liberation movement again in this country that can fight successfully for the big changes women' need in our lives, we have to be able to define what we are fighting for.

I want to talk a little first about the theory of the early women's liberation movement, which caught on like wildfire and initially led to enormous success.

Consciousness Raising

First and foremost is consciousness-raising, which has been THE radical organizing tool for women's liberation since it was developed in New York Radical Women in New York City in 1968. It came from women active in the Southern Civil Rights Movement who had witnessed the power of a people seriously struggling for liberation testifying about the oppressive conditions of their own lives. We saw how it made things clearer—how it resulted in the higher levels of determination and courage and willingness to take risks that people have when they are sure they are right and when they know that others feel the same. Learning what we did from going around the room answering questions that had to do with our own lives as women was far more wonderful, eye-opening, exciting than any book or movie—and took us higher than any of those drug for which the '60s is so famous.

Our only rule in these early meetings was to tell the truth. From these passionate, truth-telling sessions came many important and insightful position papers including Pat Mainardi's "Politics of Housework" and Shulie Firestone's "Women Rap about Sex." We used our own lives as textbooks to discover the truth about women's lives in general and to use that information to build our liberation theory. Our minds grew muscles, as we used to say, with each new understanding and discovery. And it wasn't just a few leaders who were learning this. When new women came to the group, they would quickly begin to learn too because we could all contribute from our experiences as women.

The Pro-Woman Line

Through consciousness-raising, we began to develop The Pro-Woman Line, to see that women are messed over, not messed up. We answered questions like "Do you think you are dumb? Have you ever played dumb? Why? What happens when you do? What happens when you don't?" All those psychological explanations that said our problems were all in our head were bunk. We discovered we were not brainwashed or socialized to be complicit in our oppression. Women wear make up, act dumb, and so on, NOT because we are brainwashed or because we really ARE dumb, but because we are treated better when we meet certain beauty standards and when we act in certain ways. Even bitching and nagging, which will no doubt go away when women get their fair place in society, are sometimes necessary to get what we want, or even what we need to survive.

If we weren't brainwashed or dumb, as we discovered by examining our own our experiences, it was very likely those things weren't true of other women either. We needed to unite with other women, not put them down because we didn't understand their necessity.

It was through consciousness-raising—using the wealth of women's collective experiences—that we were able to make these major theoretical leaps that helped us organize ourselves and made us able to organize others effectively. Consciousness-raising helps women to understand our oppression in concrete ways and makes every woman's life experience a part of the analysis.

The Miss America Protest Action Came from a CR Group

Good actions also come from consciousness-raising. For example, the idea for the 1968 Miss America Protest came to me one evening at a New York Radical Women's meeting as we were watching a movie called SCHMERGUNTZ. As flashes of women in bathing suits walking the ramps at the pageant flashed across the screen, it began to flash through my own mind that protesting this might be an action that could bring the WLM to public attention in a way that spoke to the lives of all women.

Doing consciousness raising about the pageant and examining our own feelings about it gave us a good grounding in how to approach the action. We were concerned that the Miss America contestants would come off as being the enemy rather than as our sisters, and we tried to plan the action to avoid this. It wasn't always easy. For example, crowning a live sheep Miss America might sound like we were saying that beautiful women WERE sheep, instead of that women were VIEWED as docile.

However, when the word got out about the protest, women who had not been in those initial consciousness-raising meetings began coming to our planning meetings. They didn't understand—or didn't want to understand—that Miss America herself was NOT the object of our protest. We were protesting against beauty contests

because they hurt ALL women, contestants included. For the most part, it was the women who had NOT been in the consciousness-raising sessions who were the ones who ended up making such anti-women signs as “Miss America Sells It” and “Miss America Is A Big Falsie.”

In the beginning we were unmercifully ridiculed for doing consciousness-raising. Some people said it was just “therapy,” that we were naval-gazing, that consciousness-raising was not political. But the use of consciousness-raising as a feminist organizing tool spread like wildfire.

The proof was in the pudding. Consciousness-raising was key in building the Women’s Liberation Movement, which has won us a lot, even though we still have far to go. We HAVE had our share of revisionism in the women’s liberation movement, and in certain circles what some women call consciousness-raising is really psychological support and mutual aid, and in those groups, it has lost its political edge. But I can assure you that political consciousness-raising is still being used today by radical feminists to study our current situation, to plan and critique actions, to train organizers, and to raise consciousness generally. One of the most active groups in the country, Gainesville Women’s Liberation in Florida, still uses it as their organizing cornerstone.

Consciousness-Raising Today

When we started the women’s liberation movement, we had our own personal experience as women to do consciousness-raising about. Now those who participate in the women’s liberation movement also have movement experience to do consciousness raising about. We can critique our actions, our theory and our movement in a consciousness-raising way and know that we are well-grounded in reality and not floating around up there somewhere with somebody else’s false or vague theories to guide us.

Organizing for liberation takes more than consciousness-raising, of course. We have learned the hard way that it is an absolute necessity of having a dedicated leadership that listens to the people and figures out a program that truly speaks to our needs and dreams, and at least begins to lay out how they might be achieved. No individual, no matter how brilliant, can match a dedicated group struggling collectively for liberation. We know from our own experience—and from history—that there ARE solutions to problems of both policy and organizing and you can find them when you have that dedicated group using its brain and heart to lead the struggle. We need that kind of leadership. The anti-leadership line of much of the ‘60s generation—my generation—has left a lot of voids. We must have organizations that are well-led, well-organized, well-disciplined, well-funded and well-focused if we are to organize a winning movement that is even more effective than it was the last time around and can carry us through to an even greater leap forward.

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What I have just talked about fits into the “what we did right” category of women’s liberation theory. I also want to talk about some the theory that I think is wrong and that has led to a profound weakening of the women’s liberation movement.

There is the problem that traditionally feminine behaviors—including those survival techniques all women learn in order to survive in a man’s world—have been dressed up and sold back to us as “feminist values.” They assure that women’s ability to struggle against

our oppression is diminished rather than encouraged. For example:

“Feminism is non-judgmental”

In reality, one makes judgements all the time. About things and about people. Our survival depends on it. When it comes to judging the people and positions taken by our movement, our future depends on it. We need to learn to make sound and thoughtful judgments, not learn how to be non-judgmental. If we don’t, we fail.

“Leadership is a male trait”

Leadership is essential. We all know that, really. Waiting around for a great leader won’t get us liberation. But neither will pretending there is no such thing as leadership. Leadership is a combination of wisdom, experience, knowledge and the courage to take risks at the right moment. We all need to learn to become good leaders AND good followers with the wisdom to know when to do each. When feminism has no leaders, feminism fails.

“We are all equal in the skills needed to fight for equality”

Some people seem to think that when it comes to revolution and social change that “no one has the corner on truth.” That may be, but some people have more truth than others do. Some people have more experience than others do. Some people are better writers, others better speakers, others better strategists, better theorists, better historians, better in confrontations, better typists, better organizers, some more trustworthy and more honest, some have more perseverance. Most of these are skills we all can learn, but some people are better at them right now and we need to put forth our best when we are dealing with the powerful. Self-development is important—crucial—to the future of our struggle, but no one would send untrained and untried soldiers into a major battle alone. It would be suicidal for the soldiers and we’d lose. No one would want a first year medical student performing the job of a skilled surgeon. Yet when it comes to the science of revolution, there are those who claim everybody is equal in knowledge and skills.

“We Should Not Be Critical”

And we have the “nice police”—those who get uncomfortable whenever a woman shows any passion about women’s liberation and the direction it is taking. Everything one says must be measured so that it doesn’t offend—or even disagree with another women. I can assure you that the meetings that spawned the early theory of the women’s liberation movement were not like that! Women argued with each other all the time, sometimes quite heatedly. I have to confess that I tended to sympathize with the “nice police” at times in the beginning. It took me a while to understand that thunder and lightning often comes before a refreshing rain of insight. We did try to understand these disagreements as political differences and not let them degenerate into personal attacks or psychological explanations. And we used consciousness raising to understand these political differences, even if we couldn’t resolve them at the moment. Part of our theory was that in order to unite women we needed to really understand the differences among us, to understand the role of power and our various self-interests and stakes in something and not just revert to the standard “I was brought up to blah, blah, blah.” Most of us, for example, had been brought up to think sex outside of marriage was a sin, or at least dreadfully wrong. And yet by then, most of us had had sex outside of marriage and thought that it was fine—in some cases, great!

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Today many feminist historians are accusing the early women’s lib-

eration movement of having been racist and homophobic. That does not at all fit my experience.

Although we were racist in the sense that all Americans are racist because one can't fully escape it in a society where all white individuals benefit from racism and its institutions, which have so much more power than the individual. We are all compliant to some degree, whether we want to be or not, just as all men are compliant in male supremacy whether they want to be or not. But there are degrees of racism just as there are degrees of sexism.

When I read articles by the Jenny-come-latelys to feminism criticizing us for being racist from their own theoretical ivory towers, I want to ask them what THEY have DONE to combat racism. Have they risked their lives and careers, as so many of us we did, and many instances still do, to fight racism? We did something about racism, we didn't just talk about it, though we did plenty of talking, too. Somehow I never hear any convincing examples from our critics of just HOW we were racist, except that the WLM was mostly WHITE.

In the late 1960s almost every woman I knew in the WLM was concerned that our groups were mostly white and we would have greatly preferred to have been in well-integrated groups because we knew the theory we were developing would be more complete. The only exceptions I can think of were women who were afraid that black women weren't feminist, that they would take over our groups and have us all fighting racism instead of male supremacy. This comes from an ignorance of history—and not just on the part of white women. It has only been in the last 10 to 15 years or so that the great historical contributions of black women to feminism have begun to be uncovered or rediscovered and disseminated—and that dissemination remains largely in academia, which is not where most women live.

Our inability to form integrated groups was based in the reality of the time—that there was a great surge of Black Nationalism taking place that prevented it. Black women were under enormous pressure, in many cases, to stay away from those “white women's groups.” They also were understandably quite reluctant to criticize black men in the presence of white women who often did not fully understand their dilemma. We had to accept this as a fact of life, though at the same time we tried to make common cause whenever we could. For example, When I was organizing for women's liberation in Gainesville, Florida in the early 1970s, a judge who had made some very horrendous racist and sexist rulings was up for appointment to a U.S. District Court. Women's liberation joined with the local black liberation organizations and SDS and held marches and rallies and protested his appointment from all angles. I think we helped stop his appointment and the joint action was able to forge bonds between the groups at a period of intense Black nationalism.

I think it worked because each group was clear and upfront about why it opposed this judge and none tried to jump in front of everybody else and claim the spotlight. We live in a very opportunistic society and there is opportunism and competition in movements as well. Some people are more serious than others; some want liberation while some want to publicize themselves or enjoy the celebrity position of a rebel. That certainly plagued the movement in the 1960s and it still exists today. We have to think through what is best for reaching our big goal. Learn when to step back and know when to step up to the plate. Know when “in your face” works and

when another method might be more effective. Revolution is an art as well as a science. When we are not artful and scientific in our approach, we make enemies of potential allies.

Anyway, because of such attempts to build unity, the leader of a regional Black Power organization invited a group from Gainesville Women's Liberation to meet with its Black women's caucus. It was a very interesting meeting in which we discovered that not only were we dealing with many of the same male supremacist problems, but that our demands for solving them were more similar than different. The meeting confirmed our belief that black women were perfectly capable of taking care of business, whether inside of, or separate from, our so-called white groups.

This accusation that women who get together in a feminist group that is all white, whether the members want it that way or not, are automatically racist is very simplistic and destructive. A few years ago I tried to organize a local women's liberation group. We had about 25 women at the first meeting, none of whom were African-American, though a few had been invited. A white woman got wind of this and came to our meeting demanding that we discuss why there were no black women in the room. After we discussed it extensively and could come up with no way to change the situation—she had no solutions either—she left, self-righteously saying she would not be part of any group that did not have people of color in it. Her disruption left many of the women feeling guilty and unable to deal with the situation and they didn't return. Even for those who remained, the spirit of the group had been broken and it soon fell apart. This needless confrontation contributed to its demise. The fact is that we still live in a racist and highly segregated society and women's liberation cannot solve that problem single-handedly. The same women who accuse us of being racist will heatedly criticize Stokely Carmichael for his semi-public off the cuff comment that “the position of the women in SNCC is prone” while not bothering to mention a white Abby Hoffman's more public and equally sexist remark that “The only alliance I would make with the women's liberation movement is in bed.” I should tell you that not only did Stokely Carmichael do dishes in the homes that hosted civil rights workers in Mississippi, his Black power theory had a profound and positive influence on our own theory. Many men, black and white, have supported women's struggle through the centuries.

We also hear that the early WLM was hopelessly homophobic. Again, that was not my experience. Most early feminists supported lesbians, at least as one of the ways women lived their lives under male supremacy. Any woman who is a feminist is assumed to be a lesbian by many anyway, and it seemed important to most feminists to do away with discrimination against lesbians. In my experience—and I think a close look at the historical record will show—that in the radical WLM there were very few tensions between lesbians and so-called “straight women” UNTIL late 1969 when some lesbians began to create a separatist theory and movement in which lesbianism began to supplant feminism by claiming that women who wanted relationships with men were “sleeping with the enemy” and therefore they couldn't possibly be REAL feminists and therefore had no place in the WLM, especially in its leadership.

On the heels of the rise of the women's liberation movement had come the rising tide of cultural feminism, when the era of the collective fight against male supremacy got supplanted by the era of attempting to escape from it.

One of Gloria Steinem's glib soundbites was "a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." I don't know who coined that slogan, but it soon became a popular bumper sticker and button in some circles. It suggests the extent to which feminism became alien to the masses of women who wanted men to shape up, not be cast out of their beds and their lives.

We hear complaints that the early WLM was anti-children. Where does this stuff come from??? From the beginning there was a vocal tendency that was anti-nuclear family and anti-marriage, but I don't think it is fair to characterize it as anti-children. The very women who raised the cry for abortion on demand also raised the demand for free 24-hour child care centers. Most of us planned to have children AFTER men started to share the housework and AFTER we had won the demand for childcare. How silly to think we could make it happen in our lifetime, right?

In fact it was the rising lesbian separatist movement that caused the WLM to be branded as anti-children. Their advice to women having problems with men in their love life was simple: leave him. Some women's music festivals—"women" here being a pseudonym for lesbian, especially when spelled "w-o-m-y-n" even banned boys, including infant boys from the premises. I remember having organized a self-help abortion lecture and demonstration by the Feminist Women's Health Center in California in the mid 70s. This was in Gainesville, Florida. The women who came to lead it were lesbians and the last frame of their slide show was of two women hugging. Their closing comment was a self-righteous "Of course, lesbians don't have the problem of unwanted pregnancy" — a slap in the face to most of the women who had come to the event because they DID face that problem and they did not see lesbianism as a solution.

The double whammy is that this kind of behavior has been off limits to critique. Anyone who complains about it is called homophobic. I don't understand quite why, but lesbians seem to have acquired a "special" status in the movement, a special position where what they do is off-limits to critique even while they have not hesitated to call women's sexual desire for men or the desire for a family "anti-feminist" and worse. Is it any wonder that fewer and fewer women want to call themselves feminists?!

Were there, and are there, real homophobes in the movement? Women who think that lesbianism is sick and unacceptable? I'm sure there are. But it is not a one way street and those lesbians who have acted in heterophobic ways have to accept their share of the blame for the current situation. As we talk about the further development of feminist theory, this must be taken into consideration.

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I want to finish with a few words about the role of Women's Studies in the women's liberation movement.

I understand there is a battle going on in academia, not only in women's studies, about who gets to be considered the authority on historical experience—those who lived and made the history or those who come along later and are supposedly "more objective." I can tell you that having been interviewed by women writers of everything from academic dissertations to feminist history books that it is very disconcerting to have one's observations and quotes twisted to fit some historian's pre-conceived notion of what really took place. Many don't even bother to consult those who made the history.

You see this in the media a lot where reporters interview each other instead of going to the source. When I was a journalism student and later a reporter for UPI in the 1960s, it was prohibited to even quote another reporter, much less interview him—most of them were him's back then. A good historian, like a good journalist, reveals and reports accurately what the source has to say, and goes from there. He or she does not construe the words of the source to support his or her own theory. I always find the most useful and interesting books to be those of original writings or direct interviews where you can have some higher degree of trust that what you are reading is unfiltered through somebody else's agenda.

A professional language has grown up around academic feminist theory which make it utterly inaccessible to most women. I have a quote here from someone named Wendy Brown who in a book review for THE NATION wrote,

"Gender is constituted by sexuality, the organization of desire; sexuality, gendered, is domination and submission; domination and submission are the specific hierarchy of gender, are "what gender means." Thus in male-dominated societies, domination and submission, no matter what their field of operation, are always sexualized; and sexuality, not matter who is doing it, is always hierarchically gendered."

HUH?!? I couldn't even join in the debate, and I think that is the point. This happens with all professionals, and Women's Studies language is not unlike that of lawyers or doctors. It self-servingly creates a mystic that only academically-trained professionals can write theory. I would contend that the best theory, that is the theory that led to the wonderful mushrooming of the WLM in the 1960s, came not from professional, academically-trained feminist theorists, but from those women who were in the trenches, organizing a MOVEMENT. The false division between theory and practice that has overtaken the WLM is in no small way responsible for the "I'm not a feminist, but..." that comes out of so many women's mouths today—and not just the mouths of young women, either.

I had this Wendy Brown quote handy because I had written a letter to THE NATION in response. In her review she had also made reference "to Redstockings, Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet and other relics of feminism's early years" and I felt it my duty to remind her that if we "old" pioneers had not broken the ground of women's liberation theory and built a mass movement, that she would have nothing feminist to "build on, tear down or babble about."

Academic feminism has the resources and therefore the potential to teach students the real history of the WLM, but it can't do so if it replaces that history with its own self-serving ivory tower theories that (1) have no relationship to the lives of most women and (2) give a distorted reinterpretation of the real and exciting history of women's struggle for freedom and equality. If academic feminism doesn't become an ally of the women's liberation movement instead of trying to replace it, the day will come soon when women's studies is so irrelevant that it will disappear. That doesn't have to happen, and hopefully those who see the problem will begin to find ways to solve it. That, too, should be on the agenda of future theory.