

‘Every generation has to make its own women’s movement’

Sheila Rowbotham talks to Jo Littler

‘Imagining how to get up’: the women’s liberation movement

JL: In your 1969 pamphlet Women’s Liberation and the New Politics, you wrote that ‘women have been lying so low for so long, most of us cannot imagine how to get up’. Your work has always been what would now be called ‘intersectional’, in that it discusses gender in relation to multiple dimensions of class, ‘race’ and sexuality as well as geography and history. But it’s not about individualised identity politics or making capital out of victimhood: it’s about creating solidarities. Can you say something about how you’ve created these kinds of solidarities in your writing, activism and feminism?

SR: In the early days, when we were first beginning to form Women’s Liberation groups, many of the people like myself who organised the first women’s liberation conference in Britain, which was held at the end of February 1970, had already become interested in left politics through movements during the previous decade - first around the issue of nuclear war, and then the Vietnam war, which went on for so many years. So issues of peace and anti-imperialism and national liberation were part of the awareness of a lot of women who got involved. The rise of civil rights and then the militant Black Panther movement in America influenced many of us in Britain as well. Then in the late 1960s in Britain there were also rebellions among working-class women. In 1968, the Ford women were demanding equal pay - I remember wincing when I saw the headline ‘Petticoat Pickets’ on newsstands. The papers also attacked men on strike, but not by referring to their underwear! I had friends in Hull so I responded in a personal way too when the women from the fishing community there protested about the lack of safety in the trawlers, and

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eventually got put down by some of the men for campaigning on their behalf. And the activism of women in national liberation movements was also important to many of us. A delegation of women from Vietnam came to London at the end of 1970 and the Women's Liberation groups went to support them.

Left-wing activism and ideas thus contributed to the WLM, although it spread much further quite quickly. Reports on us in the press were often sneering, and women who had felt some vague dissatisfaction with what was happening picked up on that and identified with 'women's lib'. They tracked us down and started coming along to the groups. They arrived without any preconceptions about politics but with a feeling that 'something's wrong'. Those of us who had become involved in left politics at university also shared a sense of discomfort. We might have read Marx, but the kind of socialism we encountered said little about our problems. For a minority of young women, hopes of wider possibilities in life had been raised through the development of higher education. In the early 1960s when I went to university, we women were a tiny minority. We *knew* that we were a bit odd. Nevertheless we were determined not to do what we thought our mothers had done. Yet when women had children the options began to close up. Expectations had risen and then been thwarted. That uneasy sense of incongruence was there at the beginning of the discontent. Ideas of resistance and rebellion on the left fused with it. But then we were exasperated because many men on the left refused to listen. Some, however, did support us - and of course social attitudes to women in conservative circles were actually far, far worse.

You've said you found yourself 'uncomfortably straddled between the left and the underground, always arguing with both sides'. How did the underground and alternative culture shape your feminism and left politics? (I heard you planned to create a group called 'Magic Marxism'.)

In 1967 I was active in the Young Socialists in the Hackney Labour Party. Suddenly there was all this wonderful music and beautifully vivid coloured clothes. My rebellion had begun with the beats, and I'd read medieval mystics and Blake, so the hippies going on about everybody's consciousness being infinitely expanded attracted me. But while the people I met through the hippy underground were aware of race, they didn't relate to trade unions. Plus some of the hippy types could often be worse than the left on gender, because they didn't go along with even basic

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notions of equal rights or equality. Indeed they could be exceedingly elitist. In 1968 I joined the International Socialists (IS) after Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of blood' speech because I was concerned about racism. At that time there many disputing tendencies in IS. For example, the left psychologist Peter Sedgwick was quite anti-authoritarian and interested in anarcho-syndicalism; but the leading figure in it, Tony Cliff, decided that fascism was imminent because of Enoch Powell's popularity and that a tight, disciplined organisation was needed. So there was this Leninist move within International Socialists. I ended up leaving after about eighteen months. But before then I wrote my Magic Marxist discussion document calling on everyone to open their consciousness or something like that. I recruited only one other person to the Magic Marxist faction, a friend called Roger Huddle who is a graphic designer and still in the Socialist Workers Party, which is the descendant of IS. Not long after I left International Socialists, women started meeting as women. They faced a lot of opposition from some of the men. But they went on to produce a paper called *Women's Voice*, published by IS, which was a really good paper - because like *Spare Rib* it contained a wide range of accounts of women's daily life problems. I thought it was a great pity it was closed down by the centre.

Did you ever go back to the Labour Party?

I rejoined the Labour Party in the 1980s. I stayed in it until Blair and the war in Iraq, and then I just couldn't bear it any longer so I left. Then I rejoined because of Jeremy Corbyn.

Marxism and mascara

A recurring feature of your work, like a lot of other second-wave feminism, is that you put the personal in there a lot alongside the political - obviously in your 1960s autobiography Promise of a Dream but also in lots of your other books. You write about Marxism and mascara throughout! Can you say more about how you came to combine that felt experience of social structures and your own history?

I think it must have been talking about personal things through women's liberation groups. I was aware how socialist theorists never mentioned these, as if they thought it was a bit silly to say anything about little things. I decided it was better to risk looking silly by exposing your fears, which other women would probably recognise.

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I eventually had to stop wearing mascara [laughs] because I got blepharitis, so I had to face the world without it. But I really seriously used to think that I would look so terrible without mascara that I couldn't go out without it!

I remember there was one line where you talked about how Simone de Beauvoir was against mascara, but she wasn't ginger ...

I know! She had dark hair, but mine was ginger. Like many others I was profoundly influenced by de Beauvoir, but on this I parted company with her. When I was young in the 1960s, I did not think of myself as a 'feminist'. I thought there was a puritanical severity about the older generation of feminists. I think that may be a generational assumption - each new generation thinks it has discovered sexual ecstasy for the first time. When I later got to know some of the women who could remember the suffrage movement or had been active in campaigns for women's sexual freedom during the 1920s, I was amazed at how similar they were to us in many ways. Dora Russell - the second wife of Bertrand Russell - had defined herself as a socialist feminist in the 1920s, and she explained to me how, through the Workers' Birth Control Group, they had campaigned in the Labour Party, opposing the powerful Catholic lobby.

You have said movements develop 'in the process of communicating themselves'. What different forms of communication were important to that moment of second wave feminism?

I wrote my first ever article on women at the end of 1968 and it appeared in the left alternative paper Tariq Ali edited, *Black Dwarf*, in January 1969. I knew I must draw on what I'd observed and not say 'Lenin said such and such a thing on the Woman Question' or something like that. Received authority was not going to affect people. I had to find a way of rooting it in some present awareness. So I did talk personally in that piece - saying 'we', and 'we want this'. The impetus must have come from all of the emphasis on subjectivity in the May 1968 events, which in turn were linked to alternative left politics like the Situationists in France and black writers like James Baldwin, who had been talking about how there should be other dimensions to political expression. I was also aware of discussions about linking politics to sexual psychology. So very early on I remember being certain that I had to risk talking personally, even though it made me vulnerable. And I did get attacked contemptuously by a left trade union man, who said he supposed it was good for me to get my *own* feelings out. Then the most wonderful moment

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came when Anne Scott, who was about seventeen, ten years younger than I was then, said 'It's not just *Sheila* who thinks those things'. And I was rescued. That was so important to me.

Before there was a movement we were made to feel we were hysterical, that there was something the matter with us. But even two women saying the same thing made for strength. We quickly came to realise that by trusting and depending on other women we could do all kinds of things that we couldn't do on our own. I remember reacting very early on against something a man said that was very insulting about women at a socialist student meeting. A little group of about three of us happened to be in the Ladies afterwards. I had no idea whether any of the others shared my response, and then we all started to say 'Wasn't that terrible!'.

It was simply by talking to one another like this that we started to form little groups. Women brought friends so these would increase in numbers and then we'd divide and form new ones. I remember a woman I knew in Leeds laughing because a man who was in the International Socialists was saying 'How *did* you recruit these members?'. And of course she hadn't *recruited* anyone - she'd just started talking! That was how it felt - as if it was just developing spontaneously. We talked and then followed our thoughts up collectively in an open manner and that enabled us to grow.

We also became aware something similar was happening in other countries. I learned about Holland, France and Germany by going there and interviewing women and I remember devouring every pamphlet that came from America. We'd circulate them: everything was so precious because we had so little. We really didn't want to have leaders. Some of the young men in small revolutionary groups saw themselves as the vanguard and this encouraged them to be irritatingly bossy, while in America some of the women whose names became known as individuals had suffered by being extracted out by the media. So we consciously avoided hierarchies and media exposure. In Britain we were so wary of communicating with the media - even with women journalists. To our annoyance the media then started to invent people who they called the leaders of 'women's lib'. After the 'Women in Media Group' began it was easier to get a fairer hearing.

Were you part of a consistent group of women? Like a consciousness-raising group that continued, or was it more ad hoc?

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The first group I joined was in 1969 in Islington. The meetings had to move and ended up gathering in my room in Hackney. So many women started turning up we split into three smaller groups and I went to Arsenal Women's Liberation Group, which was at Hermione Harris's house near the football stadium and the tube. We wanted to read Engels and Simone de Beauvoir, and we also supported campaigns as well as talking personally. We'd heard about consciousness-raising from America. Some people in the group used to worry whether we were doing it right, because though we liked to talk about our own experiences, we also did do other things. For instance, in 1970 a cleaner, May Hobbs, asked for help in organising contract cleaners, and so, along with another Arsenal member, Liz Waugh, for three years I used to leaflet them about joining a union. Arsenal was also involved in leafleting and campaigning in defence of family allowances and against attempts to curb abortion. We carried on until 1978, when Hermione left Britain to work in Honduras.

These women's liberation meetings differed very much from going to listen to a speaker who gave you a talk on a topic, which was the only kind of political meeting I'd been to. I think the openness to personal experience was not only more interesting than many formal meetings; it could bring you close to women, even ones that you weren't necessarily personally that friendly with. Because once you've heard people talking about themselves, their childhood and what happened to them when they were young, you feel an understanding of them which is really deep.

More generally though, the emphasis on personal experience and expression *did* contain problems that later became apparent. I think gradually we came to realise that consciousness raising wasn't an alternative politics, it was a different organisational form which contained snags as well as good things. An obvious one was that people could reiterate 'I feel I feel I feel', and then it became impossible to have an argument, because you couldn't really lay ideas out on the table and say 'well what about this or that?'. It would simply be just, well 'I *feel* I don't want to have men on the march'. So you hit an impasse. The other problem with our structure in women's liberation was that people kept coming to the groups and going away; so the ones who'd survived in the groups the longest tended to get seen as somehow 'in the know', and therefore became sort of covert leaders. We became worried quite early on in the 1970s that we were getting some kind of hidden hierarchy without intending to. We really wanted it to be open to everybody, and for

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everybody to be making the ideas together. But then how did you go into something in more depth?

It's interesting about the connections with the States. Doesn't the term consciousness-raising come in part from the US black power movement?

It is fascinating and there are different sources. The oldest forms were religious, the Quakers devised those open kinds of groups. And the Methodists had witnessing in their meetings - I used to go to a Methodist youth group when I was still at school. In America a Catholic backed mothers' group called La Leche encouraged small group personal discussions, and the US Communist Party, in the time of the Cold War, held one-to-one sessions because people were under such psychological stress; not only were they losing their jobs, they lived under surveillance, forced to meet with the curtains drawn and treated as pariahs. In the 1960s the Civil Rights groups in the South started to adopt a form of consciousness raising because they were under such complicated pressures confronting white racism externally, while facing internal conflicts around race and gender internally. So there are several possible influences, but within the American women's liberation movement it seems to have been Kathie Amatniek (later Kathie Sarachild) who devised and pushed for consciousness-raising within the radical feminist groups in New York. Some people say Kathie Amatniek invented it. Others say, no, it developed in the South.

You've said that you think that socialist feminism was dominant within second-wave feminism in Britain.

Initially we didn't have any such definitions. When we formed the first British Women's Liberation groups over the course of 1969 we simply agreed that we wanted to assert our oppression as women, because that was what was always ignored on the left. Early in 1969 when we held a large meeting at a Revolutionary Festival at Essex University, some idiot guy disrupted it by arriving carrying a woman in on his back, then another very severe Maoist held forth to us at great length. It was very difficult to talk. So we were adamant when we met afterwards in London that we did want to talk *as women*. We needed to be on our own in order to work out what it was that we were trying to think about. That desire for autonomy was the first break with the normal way of having left meetings. But it was not a separatist politics. Men supported us on demonstrations and we used to go around

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speaking on Women's Liberation to all kinds of meetings of women and men. Quite often we went in twos even threes to help build up the confidence of everyone to become speakers.

There was so much going on in the early 1970s - so many strikes and workers' occupations, and violent conflict in Northern Ireland: a real intensity of struggle. You couldn't really disregard it. It was around you all the time. So many of us would also go on marches against the Industrial Relations Bill, Edward Heath's effort to curb unions, or against the war in Vietnam or apartheid in South Africa, as well as doing things that were explicitly about women. Around 1973 some women started to define themselves as radical feminists. They didn't necessarily think that you had to be absolutely separate from men personally, but they felt that you had to put women's issues first and not go on about the other things. Whereas those of us who then started to call ourselves socialist feminists thought you couldn't really solve all the problems, even the ones that affect women most especially, by simply focusing on the relationship between men and women, and that class and race also interconnected and affected women's lives. The two wings of the movement could still co-exist, nevertheless.

Several years later when separatism emerged as a *politics*, many of us argued there was a difference between wanting organisational *autonomy* and not wanting to separate our politics from men totally. So socialist feminists argued for instance that men should come and support our demonstrations. By the mid-1970s, at meetings in London to prepare the International Women's Day march conflict developed because other feminists said no, we don't want to have anything to do with men. And from the late 1970s the Yorkshire Ripper murders had a profoundly upsetting impact. Women were being attacked and killed in such horrific ways, and the police persisted in making distinctions between 'prostitutes', as they called them, and 'respectable women'. It was not only outrageous - their prejudices impeded them finding the culprit. There were a lot of demonstrations around violence in the late 1970s and these were important. But unfortunately a minority of women began to castigate *all* men as 'potential rapists' and, what many of us found even worse, were hostile to boy babies and small boys. I saw this version of separatist feminism as extremely reactionary in its deterministic implications. It generated a destructive atmosphere of denunciation, guilt and fear. The women who were the bravest in challenging it were lesbian feminists.

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Misogyny and co-operation

Turning to masculinity. You have written about how men need to be pressured to change whilst simultaneously warning of the dangers of them closing up: you argue that 'we must keep this dialectic open' around masculinity. I was thinking about the expansion of new types of misogyny today and wondering to what extent you think that project of reinventing masculinity ever went far enough - if that dialectic is in urgent need of resuscitation?

Men started forming men's groups in the 1970s to think consciously about masculinity. Both women and men also made really determined attempts to get men involved in caring for small children. This meant the generation of boys and girls brought up in this way came to take it for granted as normal. More broadly too, despite the intensification in how work is now organised, there have been marked changes in my lifetime. It is much more common to see men of all classes and ethnicities pushing small children around or carrying them. But on the other hand, as the decades have gone by there's been such a venomous reaction by other sections of men in physical and verbal attacks on women. So there are men who really have shifted quite a lot, and then men who feel that they're not going anywhere - that they're humiliated and treated with contempt. There's a kind of suppressed rage, isn't there, that has turned into hostility towards women, but also towards anybody that can be turned into an outsider group.

And scapegoated.

Yes. That's a really distressing thing. But I don't think it's something that you can solve by simply berating people. When you accentuate competition and dominance over cooperation and caring for others, which our kind of capitalism revels in, it is not so surprising. You have to dig down to what is causing it and use several strategies to undermine and oppose what is happening. But as a basic starting point I've noticed that people's attitudes tend to begin to move when they *like* people - even if they disagree with them. And over time when they have fairly regular contact with people they like, despite the arguments, attitudes can change.

Yes, you talk in one of your books about the East End skinhead boys you taught in a Further Education College during the 1960s, and how they changed their mind on issues about class and 'race' eventually through prolonged discussion and exposure to ideas ...

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Yes. I did really like them. And I think they were fond of me too. And because, for the first time in their lives, they were taught in groups of about ten, instead of thirty or forty, even fifty, as they had been at school, they gradually opened up to more radical ways of seeing. Some of them were aware of unions through being skilled apprentices, and so they felt a consciousness of class in a traditional way. Then others were being affected by music and the hippie counterculture. Even the ones who were saying they were *against* the hippies were attuned to some of the things that were going on. So I used to try and encourage them to question and think their attitudes through. I gained some allies who would argue alongside me. I remember one of the students, an engineering apprentice, who was sixteen and had joined the Maoist group led by a trade unionist called Reg Birch. He had started questioning cultural and political attitudes because the only neighbour who would report the cruel treatment of a local child was a prostitute. He was furious when people spoke disrespectfully about her, because she was the moral person to him.

In London, at the re-issue of Promise of a Dream, you said that 'every generation has to make its own women's movement'. What do you find depressing and hopeful about contemporary feminism and politics?

I'm not that well-informed really. So I'm a bit hesitant to make comments. But as an observer reading the news I thought it was great when all the Me Too stuff came up against Trump. I have never myself encountered men like some of those powerful rich men in the American entertainment business behaving in such horrible ways. But the collective courage generated by the women who protested was moving. When I was young I was so desperate to escape from all the restrictions on our freedom I wanted liberty most of all, rather than protection. But the absence of sexual restraints seems to have resulted in some men treating women as prey. So I think it's a good thing that there is this rebellious *awareness* among young women. I just hope it can extend to women who are totally trapped, and stuck in really low paid jobs, and have difficulty combining these with looking after children, and who suffer from the accentuated forms of inequality which this long period of austerity has imposed on people who are really poor. I know there are smaller groups of women who have a renewed interest in socialist feminism and have been campaigning and organising on these issues. So I hope that this resistance will expand.

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Education and municipalism

You've had a really varied set of experiences as an educator. You've been a teacher in schools and adult education, your work is on the A-Level syllabus, and you've worked at universities. How has this breadth of educational experience shaped what you're interested in and write about?

I went to work in a Further Education college by chance. Around 1964 I lived in a flat in Hackney and there was no phone in our flat. We would go outside to the Hackney Downs station where there were public phones, and I was ringing around to try to get part-time teaching from the public call box. And this weird person answered the phone and asked me if I'd heard of a French revolutionary called Blanqui. I said I had! I was really interested in Blanqui because I'd had this tutor, Richard Cobb, at university who'd specialised in French revolutionary history. So I was given my first job because I'd heard of Blanqui. The voice on the phone was Bill Fishman, who had grown up in the East End, had been involved in the Labour League of Youth and later became a historian of Jewish anarchism. When I first met him he was a very eccentric principal of Tower Hamlets Further Education College. That was how I started to teach the day release students 'liberal studies'. Then, from the late 1960s, I taught in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), through a man called Jim Fyrth, who was a very nice man. Jim had stayed in the Communist Party after '56 but was very non-sectarian. He recruited a lot of young people, including my then partner Paul Atkinson, as well as Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor to the WEA. I was employed as a part-timer doing three lectures on separate topics each week all over London. During the 1970s I also taught part-time in comprehensive schools. One was a very gruesome boys' comprehensive, and another, called Starcross, was an enlightened school with a truly liberal head who was very concerned about all of the girls in the school.

I was interested in your work with the GLC. Because some of the feminist suggestions you make are municipal in character: you write about how you might imagine more nurseries, launderettes, municipal restaurants, imaginative architecture, cheap council flats for teens (when I read that, the latter was the most jarring one now!). As there's a renewed interest in municipalism now, what lessons can we take from what the GLC did between 1981 and its abolition by the Conservative government in 1986?

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After abolition the memory of the extraordinarily far-sighted and creative things that had been done just got completely pushed aside. The GLC's radical scope was so much wider than previous left councils had been in the past. Ken Livingstone had been influenced by Harvey Milk in San Francisco and was aware of gay liberation and feminist politics in a way that was unusual among left Labour Party politicians. I worked in Industry and Employment, the area for which Mike Ward was responsible. Mike had been inspired by the visionary measures adopted by the Communist council in Bologna, but he also knew in detail about the history of local government in London. Robin Murray, the chief economic adviser, had experience as a development economist as well as in community politics in Brighton where he lived. My immediate boss was Hilary Wainwright, then in her early thirties. She never ever stopped you doing things and always defended you to the teeth. Although rather chaotic in her ways of behaving, Hilary was a very good boss. She contrived to link the creation of forms of democratic planning with economic policies that served human needs, transplanting the Lucas Aerospace Workers' Alternative Plan into local government.

What did you do at the GLC?

I initiated the policies on childcare, domestic labour and contract cleaning for the London Industrial Strategy. I also co-edited a newspaper with John Hoyland called *Jobs For Change*, which reported on what Industry and Employment was doing, including creating jobs by funding women's workplace co-ops and nurseries. We also funded a launderette run by older women under the Westway. About 20 per cent of people in London at that time didn't have their own washing machine. Many were pensioners. There had been municipal washing places that were being closed. The women who used one had campaigned for a replacement - a community launderette. Westway was funded by Industry and Employment and the nursery by the Women's Committee, headed by Val Wise. So the women who used the launderette had contact with the little children, and they also used to do the washing of all the nappies for the nursery.

When I went to visit Westway I noticed they still had wooden washboards, and they used to scrub all the stuff with soap, just like women used to do when I was a little girl. We had this technology group in the Greater London Enterprise Board. And I kept saying, 'well there's this nursery, and there's this laundrette, they've all

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got these very backward sort of methods of washing and drying and things'. And these technology guys came in and they developed something called combined heat and power, so that you could use the heat that came from the dryers to go into the washing machines to save energy. So that was a very neat way in which activities and resources could come together.

At the same time as providing practical help to groups of Londoners who had previously lacked access to public resources, there was also an openness to fun and music in the GLC. There were all these festivals that we had, and music and dancing in the parks for pensioners. It was very inspirational and creative. It was a great pity that so much of it got lost and abandoned. It was an act of real Tory desecration. They even captured County Hall. Though Hilary and Maureen Mackintosh edited a book called *A Taste of Power* (Verso 1987) which contains accounts we wrote based on interviews with people who had been affected by the GLC's economic and social innovations, I fear so much of the memory of what was done has been subsequently buried. So I am really heartened there is interest. The more people who start looking at it the better.

Later on you wrote about homeworking, didn't you?

Homeworking was part of the London Industrial Strategy, but I became involved later on through contact with Jane Tate, who set up networks from her base in West Yorkshire, and I also met Renana Jhabvala and Ela Bhatt, who organised the Self Employed Women's Association in India. Along with the economist, Swasti Mitter, I helped to get a group together internationally on women's low paid work, including homework through the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) in the early 1990s. We edited a book called *Dignity and Daily Bread* (1994).

What was your university teaching experience like?

Well it changed over the time. The conditions were much nicer when I first went. There were quite a lot of radical people in the sociology department and a sharing of work and ideas. Gradually it became more and more formal, with all the increased pressures that were put on academics.

And what was happening to socialist feminism when you worked at Manchester University?

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I was there from the mid-1990s to 2010, and initially the kind of feminism the students encountered came mainly through women's studies rather than through political activism. Then I observed from the late 1990s and into the early 2000s another generation coming along who didn't really see feminism as an issue, but were extremely active on the environment and world trade and those kinds of global politics. Some were also interested in the global oppression of women and in poor countries. And while I was working at Manchester, with the help of the socialist feminist economist Diane Elson, we held several international meetings on home work.

Historical archives and aesthetic yearning

Reading Women, Resistance and Revolution now, one of the things that's so striking is how it ranges over such vast historical as well as geographical periods - over so much time and space. And you were 29 when it came out, is that right?

Yeah, I was very ignorant really. But that first book really got me reading a lot. I started to write *Women, Resistance and Revolution* in 1969. I was trying to look at different ways in which women had resisted and been part of revolutionary movements more or less everywhere - and then I wanted to talk about the modern women's movement as well. So in the end it got divided into two, and the stuff relating to Women's Liberation became *Women's Consciousness, Man's World*.

I had originally thought, in a very arrogant way - like quite a lot of us in 1969 - that we'd more or less invented all this from our own heads. But then we discovered that actually the women's movements in the past - both the suffrage movement and women's movements around livelihood and economic survival - had characteristics which we could recognise. And women in revolutionary movements in France, and then later in the Soviet Union and China, had also expressed the need to connect the personal and the political, which we had regarded as our discovery!

I was very enthusiastic too, and excited, and that probably comes over in *Women, Resistance and Revolution*. Although I mainly brought a lot of secondary sources together, I was able to read French women's revolutionary newspapers in the library at Colindale. I was amazed by how they voiced personal feelings along with political demands for the rights of women and of workers. I later learned how a key figure, the seamstress who'd been part of the 1848 uprising, Jeanne Deroin, had come to Britain in exile after being released from prison. She was later in contact with

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William Morris's Socialist League, and knew the socialist feminist, Isabella Ford, who was active in suffrage and the Independent Labour Party. These personal connections in how ideas get passed on intrigue me.

The crucial historical influences upon me had been my tutor Richard Cobb, who was part of a movement of 'history from below' in France; and also Dorothy and Edward Thompson, who wrote on the early working-class radical movement and Chartism. They made me aware of the need to look at history in *depth*, but also to ask questions from your own knowledge or particular understanding. I have kept on trying to put both aspects together, though the questions that have preoccupied me have varied. My earlier books focused on interconnections between personal experience and public politics. However, throughout the 1970s both the left and women's liberation were debating how to relate to the state. We needed it, but in its present form it could be coercive and convey oppressive values. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher, privatisation and municipal socialism at the GLC, combined to make me look more closely at the state. I had done a play about a socialist feminist in Derby called Alice Wheeldon, who was wrongly accused of plotting to assassinate the prime minister, Lloyd George, during the First World War, and when it was published I did an exceedingly long introduction to it, documenting her supporters in the suffrage and shop stewards movements as well as her prosecutors in the police and the embryonic secret services.

The gay socialist Edward Carpenter has fascinated me since I first went to read his papers in Sheffield when I was doing my PhD thesis on the nineteenth-century adult education movement. In 1977 I wrote about him in a book I did with Jeff Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life*. I was interested because he wrote on same sex desire so early on, and also on green politics, art and culture, the transformation of daily life and living, as well as on socialism in its more conventional forms. Eventually I did a big fat biography of Carpenter called *A Life of Liberty and Love*. It was originally fatter even than the one that was published - the very fat version lives in manuscript form in the Sheffield archives.

But A Century of Women is bigger!

Yes, *A Century of Women* came about at a time when I was very broke in the early 1990s and I was encouraged by my agent Faith Evans to put this proposal forward. No sooner had the proposal been accepted by Penguin than I developed a bad

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repetitive strain injury and couldn't write anything for about two years. So it had a bit of a chequered career. When it was published I don't think it really had the impact that we'd hoped, because by the time a new century arrived people were interested in the new century and not really in the one that had just gone! But it was an education for me. I learnt a lot of stuff about all kinds of things, including women and sport, which had never been my strong point. And it was nice to be able to write about women who were artists and musicians. It was fun doing that.

I think you've easily written more than anyone else I've interviewed. The sheer volume of volumes!

Oh dear, it's a bit alarming.

It's great.

It's also alarming in terms of archives. When I moved from Hackney to Manchester in 1995 I gave away many papers, mainly on women's liberation in the 1970s as well as my ephemeral writings. These eventually got catalogued and now live in the LSE in the Women's Library. Then I gave away a whole lot more in 2010 when I moved from Manchester to Bristol. I think there were about thirty boxes! And they're still uncatalogued. I am currently working on a memoir remembering the 1970s. It follows on from *Promise of a Dream*, which ended in 1969. Before the Covid lockdown I visited the Women's Library many times to go through the boxes and took notes, and fortunately I also still have some stuff here [gestures around her home]; it's been a very weird experience, researching this stuff from my own life, not only books but pamphlets, letters and diaries. It's partly because, being an historian, I always wanted to make sure records survived, so whenever I went to Women's Liberation conferences I used to buy every local newsletter because I knew those are the things that disappear. Everything that might disappear I kept buying, and adding to this archive ...

It could be some archivist's dream.

Or horror!

Can you say something about your attitude to writing and how it's evolved? Your writing has got a levity and comedy to it as well as breadth and is very quotable.

I wanted to write from being quite young and started a journal when I was in my early teens. I always loved trying to craft words. I was seen as a peculiar swot. I

Every generation has to make its own women's movement

didn't come from a family that used a vast amount of unusual words, but I was always trying to discover words. I literally used to sit and read a dictionary when I was about 14! It was a feeling of great power to get your hands on some new word that would be *just right*. I thought probably I would do English at university. But I had a wonderful history teacher who told me 'you should be a historian', which I think was right, and I'm glad.

I still love words and ways of saying things that might jog people's attention without showing off. I try to write as clearly as I can and have often worried when I found socialist and feminist writing was not that clear. I know that it's not always possible to be clear and it could be rather repressive to insist that people must be clear. But on the other hand, I do think you can be *more* clear than often people are. And I don't see why people aren't. I have always wanted people to be able to easily read things that I write. On the other hand, I have to admit that I did hear once someone saying that they'd read *Hidden From History* with a dictionary [laughs]. So it shows that you're not always necessarily that clear. And I think if you're referring to a body of ideas, it's very difficult to be completely accessible. A friend said to me that her daughter had read *Promise of a Dream*, and not understood some things in it. I had thought that was pretty straightforward, but of course there was a lot of references to the politics of that time, which to a younger person wouldn't be obvious.

You can never be completely transparent.

No. Sometimes there are words that give me a sort of physically ecstatic feeling. I read something that someone's written and I think 'ah!'. So it's also an aesthetic yearning as well as a practical one. I have a bit of a secret life writing poems, and I do quite like reading them, but nobody ever asks me to do that [laughter].

Are they out there in the world?

Not too much out in the world. Some of them went into *Dreams and Dilemmas*. And I do enjoy reading them. Occasionally I've been asked.

Do you have a plan for a volume of poetry?

No, no! [laughs]. But I still keep them.

I think you should publish them! And thank you.

Soundings

Sheila Rowbotham is a historian and writer. She wrote the influential pamphlet *Women's Liberation and the New Politics* in 1969 and was involved in organising the first national UK Women's Liberation Movement conference held at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970. Her many books include *Women, Resistance, and Revolution* (Pantheon, 1972); *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Penguin, 1973); *Hidden from History: 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Fight against it* (Pluto, 1973); *Beyond the Fragments: feminism and the making of socialism* (Merlin Press, 1979); *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (Verso, 2000) and *Rebel Crossings: New Women, Free Lovers, and Radicals in Britain and America* (Verso, 2016). Her memoir of the 1970s, *Daring to Hope*, is forthcoming.

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