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“We Just Have to Push and Push and Push”: Bella Abzug and the Campaign for Women’s Liberation within Electoral Politics”

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After a decade stumping for unelectable male “dove” candidates, Bella Abzug threw her hat in the ring—quite literally—entering the congressional race for Manhattan’s Nineteenth District in 1970. A keen political strategist, Abzug calculated “the renaissance in the born again women’s movement” (as she put it) would provide the necessary boost to her longstanding anti-war base. What assured her congressional win, Abzug reasoned, was her ability to garner women’s “swing vote” fostered, in part, by her natural alliance with feminists. Or so it seemed. Early on, Abzug approached Susan Brownmiller, a freelance writer she knew from reform Democratic politics in Greenwich Village. As a member of the newly formed New York Radical Women, Brownmiller was well positioned to compel this and like consciousness-raising groups to come out for Abzug. “I will take the cause of women—America’s oppressed majority—to the halls of Congress,” Abzug had promised in her March announcement speech, a pledge she believed would directly appeal to all feminists. Accordingly, she was rather taken aback by Brownmiller’s cool reception. “They will not support you,” Abzug recalled Brownmiller curtly dismissing. One reason Brownmiller apparently gave was Abzug’s affinity for lipstick. When recounting this brush-off in a mid 1990s interview, Abzug was not above countering with her own complaint. Radical feminists, she admonished, were reluctant pupils, slow to develop a sophisticated feminist response to the Vietnam War. *What can we make of this exchange today?*

Running for Congress at fifty, Abzug’s age—and her politics of respectability—certainly set her apart from the college-educated youth who dominated CR groups. But the tendency to

draw mother-daughter analogies here skews focus from the underlying ideological gulf that separated Abzug from Brownmiller. And so, rather than trace Abzug's bevy of feminist accomplishments today, I would like to explore this point of disconnect by briefly spotlighting her work before Congress.

Bella Abzug was a radical, just not of the same making as Brownmiller. Her politics were born from three formative experiences. First, Abzug's early religious devotion to Conservative Judaism—and an influential Talmud Torah teacher—led her to join the transnational socialist Zionist group, Hashomer Hatzair. As a shomer (or scout), then Bella Savitzky came to terms with the Great Depression by dreaming of kibbutz living in a future Jewish-Arab workers state. She also formed a lasting identity as a Jewish ethnic nationalist who embraced Marxist thinking, but not the secularist sectarianism of the Communist Party. Second, as student body president of Hunter College in 1940, Abzug saw great promise in the Popular Front Left-liberal alliance she led on campus as a “broad element” in the American Student Union. A product of tuition-fee Hunter, this coalition was inter-racial, working-class, and women-centric in their approach to anti-fascist, anti-racist, and civil liberties organizing. Accordingly, Abzug developed a passionate commitment to multi-issue gender justice work even if she was hesitant, as a leftist, to wear a feminist badge she associated with the National Women's Party. Third, Abzug purposely forged her legal career among political outliers in the National Lawyers Guild, a Left-leaning bar association at the cutting-edge of civil rights and civil liberties law during the Second Red Scare. One case in particular—Abzug's appeal of black Mississippian Willie McGee's rape charges—demonstrated how, as a Left feminist lawyer, Abzug linked sexual freedom to racial civil rights during these years. While Abzug gained a reputation as a go-to political lawyer, her time in the Guild brought forward a healthy dose of

frustration. Key among these was her inability to break through the male-dominated bar's hierarchy beyond the rank of Constitutional Rights Committee chair. After pressing for an end to Jim Crow and McCarthyism in the courts for more than a decade, she also began to doubt that courtroom action would bring forward more than gradualist results. Accordingly, Abzug was primed for a new theater of action when she gained wind of Women Strike for Peace. It is in her work with this group where we can see how prominently Abzug prioritized electoral and policy action over group theorizing and collective, localized engagement.

Reporters often assumed that Bella Abzug was a founder of WSP, which makes sense since this group effectively launched her political career, but was an inaccuracy nonetheless (and one she rarely corrected). The fact is, she arrived a week late and had trouble falling into line. On November 9, 1961, she joined a small circle of women “striking” at the Soviet Mission of the United Nations. As she marched, Abzug grumbled to herself and others. “This is all very good, but this is not the end of everything,” she protested, “there’s much more to be done.” As the mother of two young daughters, Abzug had joined WSP because she was deeply concerned about the escalation of U.S.-Soviet tensions, most acutely displayed during the Cuban missile crisis. Yet, what set Abzug apart from most WSP activists was her immediate sense that they must join direct action with political action. She recognized many seasoned activists in her midst, and believed their image of “concerned housewives” donning hats and gloves, while attention getting, was politically disarming to a fault. Rather, she compelled activists to take on a second identity—that of sophisticated policy experts. “In addition to showing outrage, despair and other important emotions,” Abzug later explained, she wanted WSP “to have a process in which we tried to influence change through existing procedures, and [to] chang[e] procedures” that needed reform. Injecting WSP with a political jolt, Abzug initiated the “lobbying” half of

what Amy Swerdlow described as their signature “demonstration/lobbying format.” Abzug also introduced the idea the WSP should advocate gender parity alongside peace, an element highlighted in the call for a women’s peace vote during their first peace pledge campaign in 1962.

Why did Abzug believe gender parity should be a central concern? Foremost, she and her cohorts discovered that women had been a decisive “swing vote” in some districts during the 1960 elections. “Should the time come when we controlled that 2%,” Abzug reported at the first WSP convention, “our power would be enormous . . . candidates would begin to eye our growing list with something more than mild interest.” (*And by the way—two members of Abzug’s audience on this occasion were quite likely Casey Hayden and Mickey Flacks. They attended the Ann Arbor “Wispeeree” days before SDS’s Port Huron meeting—a link between WSP and SDS historian Andrea Estepa has recently traced.*) Abzug’s view that peace women could and should shift the tenor of electoral politics also stemmed from her great enthusiasm for Eleanor Flexner’s *Century of Struggle*, published in 1959. After reading this long and wide history of the nineteenth century suffrage movement, Abzug came to see WSP as a necessary continuation of earlier abolitionist, labor, peace, and women’s rights activism. By 1963 and continuously thereafter, she advocated within the group, we should “welcome the struggle for women to assert their rights and fight for emancipation and equality.” Yet, it would take three more election seasons for her to convince WSP to forcefully promote “Women Power is Peace Power,” their voting campaign slogan in 1968.

Thus, we can see Abzug worked ahead of the curve in bringing gender politics to the peace movement. Where she hedged, was in her lukewarm embrace of participatory democracy. And it is this point of friction, where Abzug often found herself a lone critic within WSP, that we

can most clearly trace the roots of her occasional discord with later women's liberation groups. With its ad hoc conventions, policymaking by phone tree, and loosely appointed "key women," WSP was at the cusp of New Left thinking on social decision-making. Abzug valued WSP's political inclusiveness, their receptiveness to grassroots organizing, and their elevation of women decision-makers. However, she also equated their purposeful leaderless structure to a leadership gap that she was all too willing to fill. With the Americanization of the Vietnam War, WSP shifted its emphasis from nuclear disarmament to anti-war organizing, and with this shift, a faction within WSP increasingly promoted civil disobedience and criticized Abzug's political action program. Abzug scoffed at this opposition testing her leadership. As she forcefully advised in a 1966 report, "The protest against the war will remain a poll, a statistic, a fly in the ointment to 'consensus,' but nothing more, until there is recognition by peace pressure groups that the public support they build for change must be channelized directly into the American political party structures."

We think of gender parity as a quintessential liberal feminist goal. But Abzug's purpose was entirely radical, even if cautiously pragmatic. After watching Senator Barry Goldwater capture the Republican presidential nomination in 1964, Abzug realized that this burgeoning conservative grassroots force must be matched by an equally engaged Left-liberal coalition. Still committed to the Popular Front politics that inspired her youth, Abzug sought to reconstitute this force by channeling the energy and ideas of a broad "New Left" socio-political milieu into politics. Abzug's end game was far-reaching: unseat Cold War liberals within the Democratic Party and in Congress, thereby paving the way toward a "new Democratic order" and transformative reforms that would make US democracy more open, responsive, and just. That Abzug helped forward a Left-liberal Democratic insurgency that effectively took the reigns of

the Democratic Party between 1968 and 1976 is remarkable. That she envisioned women as the vanguard of this coalition sets her apart from other “new politics” politicians. Uniquely, Abzug believed women were best suited to “push and push and push” not only for their own sexual and political freedom, but also to break through the “male military megalomania.” (This was Abzug’s shorthand for the Cold War military-industrial complex, national security state, and the social failings of a war-mired liberal state.) Thus, for Abzug, legal feminism was one strand of a broader “new politics” vision to fundamentally rework American democracy into a more egalitarian and libertarian form.

Harnessing the momentum of women’s liberation, Abzug also wanted to bring feminists of all persuasions into the political fold. Women have always been “the workhorses of politics,” Abzug wrote in one so-titled “women’s liberation” position paper, and “we’re expected to be super-creatures to get what is our due.” Coming to this self-realization, was an essential aspect of CR. The “personal is political” was a futile concept if the personal never translated into the political. Patriarchy would only end once feminist powerbrokers infiltrated and overtook the male-dominated political theater. These are the points Abzug pressed in conversations with Brownmiller and other proponents of women’s liberation. Moving past critique to action, Abzug’s congressional office in Longfellow served as conduit for feminist activists keen on realizing movement demands in tangible policy outcomes. We need to trace out this path, just as we need to reevaluate Abzug’s radical pragmatic politics. Both efforts disrupt the either/or choice between radicalism and liberalism that has framed the trajectory of feminist history for far too long.