

This paper , "Was Decentralization of the Movement on Balance Strength on Balance A Strength or Weakness" was presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014

The women's liberation movement (WLM) was a decentralized movement, unlike NOW which was and is a traditional centralized movement with a voted on leadership, Roberts rules, dues, offices, national conferences, systematic notes, statement of purpose, agreed on policies and allowed men in their groups. The WLM held only one national conference at Lake Villa near Chicago at the beginning of the movement in 1968, and had one national newsletter begun in 1968 and ended in 1969 edited Jo Freeman.

The WLM movements ideas on decentralization, leadership and organization came from the fact that women were dominated by men in many of the group's they joined, and didn't want to copy these oppressive structures. Feminists' wanted to invent a more feminist democratic alternative, but never came up

with the right one, although we experimented with several, like giving everyone at the beginning of a meeting 10 poker chips. Every time a woman spoke they got rid of a chip. So at the end, only the reticent ones with many chips spoke up. At the same time, the anarchist counter culture, SDS' participatory democracy, and the civil rights movement influenced the WLM.

In several cities, there were city wide organizations: Boston formed Bread and Roses; Chicago, The Chicago Women's Liberation Union, and Chapel Hill/ Durham, the Female Liberation, and there were probably others. Citywide groups combined both centralized and decentralized organization. Did the groups with citywide organizations last longer than decentralized groups? I think they did. Groups with more formal structures like NOW certainly did. But at the beginning, NOW wasn't part of the new left social movement and movements usually don't last for more

than a few years. In the mid west NOW had roots in the old left, the CP.

Decentralization, like lack of leadership seemed a real advantage at the beginning of the movement because it let 100 flowers bloom and lead to creativity and variety. The early meetings were like the Hallelujah Chorus; new insights poured out of us. Centralized organizations like NOW are better at organizing huge masses of women like the Aug 26 1970 Strike for Equality, but we joined in many of their action events and NOW adopted many of our practices like CR. The WLM transformed hearts and minds and the way women dream and think about their future. NOW was more directly responsible for changing employment laws, although the WLM helped create, the Supreme Court decision, Roe v Wade legalizing abortion, but neither NOW nor WLM could keep the law intact. NOW in certain places like the Midwest had more women of color and more trade union women.

A good example of the need for more centralization was NYC's beginning group, New York Radical Women, (NYRW) after the second year. Due to the Miss America protest and some TV appearances, NYRW kept growing larger and larger. People dropped in and out. True there was a corps of at least 30 regulars who attended religiously. The drop-ins didn't know what had gone before or what had been decided. Many people also found the size of the group unwieldy. Finally NYRW couldn't decide on what to do, and by a close vote broke up into several groups by lottery. People then didn't like their chance group and migrated to others. Some groups withered away. Others formed like the eventual Red Stockings, the Feminists, a Media project, WITCH, eventually, NY Radical Feminists, Up From Under, High School Women's Liberation, Child Care and probably others. The new groups ended up to be more or less closed, so new women unless they were friends couldn't join, a decided disadvantage. Some groups like Redstockings

for a while recruited new members. There was a problem in recruiting new members because often they had no left or movement experience and no sense of our generally accepted, not specified, anti capitalist goals.

Another huge problem in NYC the media capital was without leadership and centralization the press made stars of women who said outrageous things that the press ate up,(Robin Morgan) or milquetoast liberal homilies, (Gloria Steinem)but were not active participants in any group. With lack of structure it was difficult to grow or even act. I think the lack of structure and decentralization also caused chaos and more splits.

Certainly we couldn't withstand the backlash from the right without structure. We also underestimated the power of the backlash and weren't prepared for the long haul, but centralized NOW didn't do any better. A decentralized movement makes it harder to write about because the files are all over, and many not in libraries.

Also being ultra democratic women didn't sign their names. It's gotten somewhat easier with the internet because many of the publications are being put on line.

The glue that held the WLM together was the shared magazines, leaflets and pamphlets.

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