

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND HISTORY FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION ORGANIZING AND ACTIVISM

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Presentation for the panel *Tools of Radical Feminist Analyzing, Organizing and Mobilizing: Consciousness-Raising & History for Activist Use* organized by Redstockings and National Women's Liberation, at the conference "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and the Early 1970s" organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.

Redstockings Website: www.redstockings.org

National Women's Liberation Website: www.womensliberation.org

This is supposed to be a panel on what two organizations, with roots in a close collaboration in the 1960s and which, from the beginning, considered themselves radical and committed to root-and-branch change in the United States, are doing today to get full liberation – a revolutionary society that really does aim to achieve liberty and justice for all, including the full liberation of the long-oppressed female half of humanity. You've already heard something today about these organizations and their history and what they are currently doing towards these goals.

LIKE A GOOD UNION FOR WORKERS

For this panel, we broke down what we are doing into some major areas of our work. Two are mainly action and campaign areas in which, like a good union for workers, we try to win some real relief for women in areas of our daily lives in which we are oppressed as women. Notice – I'm using the word "relief," not full liberation, not full equality. THAT, we realize, is a much bigger, longer battle and, in the meantime, we could use a little relief. Also, that relief ought to strengthen us and help us continue in the longer battle.

But we've come to see from movement experience that, even when we do win some relief, the gains are fragile and, like the right to abortion, are at all times in danger of being further limited or even lost. In winning some relief, we hope also to strengthen and build a union of women. This is also a major part of what we argue needs to be done and a major area of our work. The theory is that winning the relief for women will help us build the union because more women see the useful results – the gains – of our collective efforts and will want to join. This union of women for women's liberation, we believe, will be needed as a power base to win women's liberation, a power base that will make the gains less fragile. So it doesn't do that much good to go for concrete gains by themselves, for just their own sake. We feel we've learned, from our own women's liberation experience, and also from reading about other liberation movement

experiences, that we're wasting our time if we only fight for concrete gains. We need, at the same time, to use our struggle for relief in our lives to build the union that was the SOURCE of this relief. and also, as it grows, will become a major force for full liberation.

LEARNING FROM THE FIGHT

And we also try, while we're fighting for the relief in our lives and the lives of other women – the concrete gains – we also try to learn as much as we can from the fight so we can be even more effective in winning relief for women and in building the feminist union. This is another major part of what we see as "what is to be done" and what we do.

Learning as much as we can means taking time for the learning, putting precious resources of time for other things into the learning, and also into the sharing with others – the teaching, if you will – of what we're learning. This learning and teaching is what I guess you could call – we call – our work on theory, strategy, and tactics, or “theory work” or “theory power” – like the idea of history power. The purpose of theory is to sharpen our and the movement's aim – getting us closer and closer to the bull's-eye in every struggle – and also to winning our big overarching struggle for women's liberation and a world of freedom and justice for all.

Improving the theory, we've concluded, doesn't just sharpen our aim, but resolves more and more differences among women – and so helps in building the women's liberation union. So this is the “theory front” part of Redstockings's think tank program for our own work. Strategy is also part of the “think tank for action” program, the learning part of our program, of course – and the teaching part.

And this think tank work on theory and strategy, these two fronts are what Redstockings has long emphasized the need for, and has been focusing on, really, since 1969. The organizing of consciousness-raising groups and using the consciousness-raising method of pooling women's individual, present day experience as a reality check on what is going on in our lives has been central to developing theory and strategy in Redstockings since 1969. As the Redstockings Manifesto then proclaimed: “Consciousness raising... is the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives.”

MINING PERSONAL AND MOVEMENT EXPERIENCE

And we continue to use consciousness-raising for our own learning and for engaging other women and recruiting them for the larger union. But we are now combining what we call “history for activist use” with "consciousness-raising," as you have already heard something about.

History for activist use – what is it really? In a sense it's consciousness-raising about our women's liberation movement experience, ours and other women's, our

experience with trying to change things collectively for women; whereas the consciousness-raising when the movement began, when we first began trying to change things for women, usually only involved pooling and analyzing our experience as women in our individual lives – in struggling as individuals to make our lives as women better.

That big term “history” – like the word “theory” – got demystified for us. History, we came to realize, just meant experience; and “women's history” meant women's experience and how it changed over time, and what made it change. And women's liberation history meant women's liberation movement experience – the experience of trying to change things, the experience of trying to change history and change the world for women. With “history for activist use” we are mining past women's liberation movement experience and the experience of other liberation movements and revolutions to get ideas for understanding, action, strategy, and tactics today.

DEMYSTIFYING “THEORY”

The word “theory” first got similarly demystified when we realized that what we were doing in consciousness-raising was theory – we were helping to develop the much needed theory for women's liberation; it was NOT “therapy” as it was so often called by the opposition. If “theory” is an explanation of the facts, “consciousness-raising” was helping us to come up, not only with more and better facts, but with more plausible and verifiable explanations of the facts of our lives that we were seeing in a new way.

Now, it's very difficult to decide what to talk about next – because that's all we can do here really, touch on things. Should I run down a little more what we've come to realize about what that much-abused-by-the-academy – and also by the left – word “theory” means? And how theory differs from strategy? Or should I go into what our groups feel we've learned about building the feminist union? What we feel we've learned about the organizational structure and leadership questions that will help the women's liberation union LAST this time, keep radical women's liberation organizations from disintegrating and going up in smoke after a few years of impact, an impact that begins to erode when the organizations dissolve? This is what happened at the Women's Liberation Movement's high point of impact.

All we can do today really is sketch out some of the things we've been doing and why. If what you have been hearing has interested you and you want to hear more and talk about it more, I would suggest that you get together some friends or co-conspirators, or your college department, to raise the money to hold an event to have one of us come and talk to you some more about these things. Or arrange to take the women's liberation class when it's given, or possibly fund one of us to come to your community to give the class. Or you can read our material that's available right on the website or order the literature, or buy some that's on the table back there. Or volunteer to help us in research or in the archives. Take some assignments, or help raise some funds for our programs, the think tank and archive for action, or help with analysis work on the birth control project (and birth control includes abortion) or the social wage campaign.

DUES-PAYING FEMINISM

Helping to maintain the staying power of Redstockings's radical feminism, independent from the influence and pressure of the money power, is what we call “dues-paying feminism.” It's another part of our program, part of our answer to the question “What is to be done?” that we're actually doing: financial self-reliance for radical feminism, for the radical feminist union – based on the nickels and dimes of working women as our main economic foundation.

“Who would be free must strike the blow” was a classic radical slogan that the British militant Suffragettes used; and we add: “Who would be free must also finance the blow.” Or as the signers of the "Declaration of Independence" put it: we “pledge our lives, fortunes and sacred honor” to the cause.

We hope you will all work with us. But, if you don't work with us, then join or support another organization. We need to keep the feminist union going and growing, sharpening its aim and gaining in firepower.

Thank you all for coming.