

FEMINISMS

ROSALYN BAXANDALL AND LINDA GORDON

The Women's Liberation Movement

How did the women's liberation movement transform American society? Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon seek to dispel myths about the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s and to document what they describe as "the largest social movement in the history" of the United States.

As you read the essay, think about the following questions: What motivated women to become part of the women's liberation movement? What did the movement accomplish—and when? Where do you see evidence of backlash? What challenges remain?

The women's liberation movement, as it was called in the 1960s and 1970s, or feminism, as it is known today, reached into every home, school, and business, into every form of entertainment and sport. Like a river overflowing its banks and seeking a new course, it permanently altered the landscape. Some think its impact has been excessive and others—like us—believe that much more progress toward sex equality is needed. But all agree that it has left an indelible mark on women, men, and children everywhere. Women's liberation was the largest social movement in the history of the U.S. . . .

. . . Widespread misconceptions [exist] about the movement. . . . These exist not because the public is foolish or hostile to feminism. In fact, 1998 Roper polls found that 51 percent of Americans believe feminists have been helpful to women, 53 percent that feminists are "in touch with the average American woman," 65 percent that black feminists help the black community. The misimpressions derive in part from widely published misinformation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an historical event as widespread and powerful as the women's liberation movement that has been so poorly documented and reported. . . .

Part of this problem is the movement's success. Its achievements—the broad range of work women now do, the equal treatment they expect, the direct way women express themselves—have become the very air we breathe, so taken for granted as to be invisible. . . . Furthermore, the largest grassroots part of the women's movement is difficult to study precisely because it was so big, so decentralized, so varied, and often left few records. It is hardly surprising that most of what has been written has focused on the main national feminist organization, the National Organization for Women, and its leaders, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, because this aspect of the movement was more centralized, less outrageous, more focused—and kept better records. . . .

There are deeper reasons, too, for the lack of reliable studies and the perpetuation of false stereotypes. Despite the huge changes in our society brought about by the women's movement, feminism's fundamental ideas are still controversial—indeed, they are at the root of the hottest debates of our times: abortion rights, contraception for teenagers, welfare, women in the armed forces, gay marriage,

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affirmative action. The media—and not only conservative sources—often portray the women's movement through unrepresentative anecdotes and outright falsehoods. . . . In turn, such poor journalism arises in part from the lack of scholarly research upon which reporters can draw.

Three biases from three different perspectives infuse the misinformation about women's liberation: an overtly hostile, conservative perspective that demonizes the movement as acting against nature, even doing the work of the devil; the perspective of those feminist activists who, disappointed by the movement's incomplete success, consider it a failure; and a trivializing view of the movement as a lifestyle rather than politics, as personal self-transformation rather than social change, as a digression from traditional politics. These biases give rise to widespread myths about women's liberation. Depending on one's particular bias, women's libbers:

- were privileged, white young women who had neither knowledge about nor concern for working-class women or women of color.
- rejected motherhood and considered children only a burden.
- ignored bread-and-butter economic issues and focused only on sex, violence, and personal issues.
- drew energy away from movements aimed at correcting major social and economic problems, such as militarism, racism, and poverty, and prevented the formation of strong coalitions or united efforts.
- hated being women and rejected everything feminine, from bras and long hair to shaved legs and high heels.
- were man-haters who tried to belittle and compete with men, often rejecting them entirely and becoming lesbians.
- were losers, bitter because men rejected them.
- were humorless and prudish, quick to take offense.
- were spoiled, self-centered, and self-pitying women who whined about life's difficulties and exaggerated the discrimination against women.

Like most myths, some of these contain kernels of truth. Yes, feminists did reject confining clothing such as high heels and girdles. (See p. 477.) Many stopped dieting and curling,

straightening, processing, dyeing, shaving, plucking their hair. Yes, feminists wanted help raising children—from husbands and organized day care—as more and more women joined the workforce. Yes, feminists were angry at men who beat them, harassed them, belittled them, and kept them in inferior and dead-end jobs. Yes, women's liberation was particularly strong among college-educated young women. Yes, in order to be heard, especially because women had a history of being timid, soft-spoken, and ignored, feminists sometimes shouted and oversimplified.

But some of these myths contain not a grain of truth. Feminists never rejected motherhood; rather, they sought to improve its conditions. . . . All [feminists] had sons, brothers, fathers, male friends, or coworkers whom they loved. Far from being losers, feminists were typically the most achieving and self-confident of women. Feminist humor was so popular it became mainstream—think of Lily Tomlin and Nicole Hollander. Anything but prudish, feminists dedicated themselves to liberating women's sexuality. They were doers, not complainers. They identified discrimination for the purpose of trying to change it.

SOCIAL ROOTS OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Women's liberation was a movement long overdue. By the mid-1950s a majority of American women found themselves expected to function as full economic, social, and political participants in the nation while still burdened with handicaps. As wage-earners, as parents, as students, as citizens, women were denied equal opportunity and, often, even minimal rights and respect. Many women experienced sharp conflict among the expectations placed on them—education, employment, wife- and motherhood. Looking back at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can see feminism as a necessary modernizing force and, not surprisingly, one which rapidly became global. Within the U.S., the movement gained widespread support so quickly because it met real needs, because the great majority of women stood to benefit from reducing discrimination, harassment, and prejudice against them. A movement that might at first have seemed to rationalize the current political and economic system by integrating women into it quickly took off—as many

social movements do—into uncharted territory, exposing the degree to which basic social structures had rested on a traditional gender system. . . .

How did an apparently arch-conservative decade like the 1950s produce a movement so radical? To answer that we have to look beneath a veneer that concealed discomforts and discontents. The period between the end of World War II and the birth of women's liberation at the end of the 1960s has usually been described as an era of prosperity, stability, and peace, leading to the conclusion that it was also an era of satisfaction and little change. An intensely controlled and controlling official and commercial culture seemed to provide evidence for that conclusion. The domestic correlate of the Cold War and the Korean War was the hysterical anticommunism that stigmatized nonconformity, including that related to family, sex, and gender. Anxiety about the Soviet threat made family stability seem critical and linked women's domestic roles to the nation's security. . . . Historian Elaine Tyler May [has] observed that the concept of containment, first used to characterize the U.S. policy of preventing Soviet expansion, could characterize equally well the stifling of female ambitions, the endorsement of female subordination, and the promotion of domesticity by Cold War gender culture. Resistance to these norms was un-American, and that label became a heavy club with which to beat misfits and dissidents. . . .

Cold War culture demanded sexual as well as political and gender conformity. The witch hunts targeted not only alleged communists but also homosexuals, and drove many people out of their employment. Films and magazines depicted the lesbian as a moral threat, a symbol of decay, chaos, and predatory evil. Vice control units of local police departments, along with private moral crusade organizations like the American Society for Social Hygiene and public health officials, routinely rounded up those engaged in "immoral" sexual activities. Psychiatrists labeled homosexuals and discontented women alike as sick and in need of rehabilitation.

Girls grew up in this Cold War era barred from wearing blue jeans or sneakers to school, required to sit with their knees together and to set their hair in pin curls. Nothing in the culture encouraged them to become strong or competitive. Girls grew to hate athletics and

dread physical education in school, where they were required to wear unfashionable tunics or bloomers. Girls were not encouraged to fantasize about careers, about what they would "become" when they grew up. They were expected to break a date with a girlfriend if a boy asked for a date. They watched movies and TV in which married couples slept in twin beds and mothers were full-time housewives. The people of color on TV were stereotypes, comic or worse: step-and-fetch-it black servants, marauding Apaches, or fat lazy Mexicans. Rape, illegitimacy, abortion—some of women's real problems—were among many tabooed subjects, whispered about but rarely seriously or openly discussed.

But this official feminine-mystique culture obscured an unofficial but probably more widespread reality that was, ironically, designated as deviant. A small band of historians has been uncovering the story of what turns out to be the majority of American women who did not, and often could not, conform. . . . In contrast to official norms, women's labor-force participation climbed rapidly throughout the fifties and by 1954 women's employment had equaled that during World War II. Most women displaced from well-paid, industrial jobs at the war's end did not return to domesticity but found work in traditionally female low-paying jobs in the expanding service and clerical sectors. As has long been true in American history, African American women and poor women of all colors had particularly high rates of employment, so that the domesticity myth was in part a racist assumption that elite white norms were universal. Women in "pink collar" employment swelled the membership of unions, such as the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and the National Federation of Telephone Workers. And these working women were not only young and single: By 1960, 30 percent of married women were employed, and 39 percent of mothers with school-age children were in the labor force. By 1955, 3 million women belonged to unions, constituting 17 percent of union members. In unions in which women made up a significant part of the membership, they wielded considerable power, especially at the local level.

The number of married women seeking employment rose fastest in the middle class. Women benefited from an enormous expansion in higher education after World War II. Government investment in universities after the war

had multiplied educational opportunity, especially in public institutions. In 1940, 26 percent of American women completed college; in 1970, 55 percent. These relatively privileged American women faced a particular dilemma: educated with men and often achieving, despite discrimination, the same levels of knowledge, discipline, and sophistication as the men of their social class, they were still expected to forego professional or intellectual pursuits after college to become full-time housewives and mothers. Those who resisted this directive and sought employment, through choice or economic necessity, usually found themselves limited to clerical or low-level administrative jobs.

In part as a response to this restriction, many women . . . defied the limits of domesticity through community and political activism. Even in the suburbs, where women seemed to be conforming to the “feminine mystique” by staying home with small children, many were active in churches, schools, libraries, and parks. New forms of organizing appeared: In 1956, for example, the first all-female La Leche group met to encourage breast feeding. Other groups, alarmed by Rachel Carson’s studies of the dangers of pesticides like DDT, had the audacity to challenge official science. Women Strike for Peace, composed largely of left-wing women, attacked military spending priorities, raised an alarm about strontium-90 fallout in milk, and directly challenged the Cold War and American military buildup by contesting U.S. government propaganda about the threat of Soviet expansionism. . . . Conservative women, while paying official homage to the ideal of women’s domesticity, were organizing in the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizen’s Councils, John Birch Society, and Republican Party.

Some forms of deviance from the official domestic norms were more private. At the edges of mainstream culture a counterculture began to emerge in the early 1950s, reflecting a mood of depression, alienation, and anger at the shallowness of dominant standards. True, the “beat” poets and artists were mainly male, but they attracted female groupies who preferred this alternative masculinity and identified with the rejection of respectability and conformity. Beatnik women, dressed in black with heavy black eye makeup and uncurled hair, hung around coffeehouses in New York and San Francisco. Rebellious against consumerism and conformity, yearning for something more genuine, some embraced Zen Buddhism

and existentialism. Even popular commercial culture was riddled with contradictions, ambivalence, competing voices, and transgressions. . . .

Only now, as the women’s movement can be seen in historical context, have historians looked back again and noticed the complexity of the cultural messages. In addition to emphasizing femininity and domesticity, many women’s magazines featured and honored women who made a mark beyond their homes. Magazine articles glorified housewives, but they also offered tips to women managing wage work along with housework and openly praised participation in community activism and politics. Readers met, for example, Dorothy McCullough Lee, who cultivated the image of a pale, frail housewife but as mayor of Portland single-handedly defeated the heavyweights of organized crime; Louise Williams, mother of two, a great cook but an even better mechanic at American Airlines; and Babe Didrikson Zaharias, a champion golfer and pole vaulter who continued competing despite cancer. *Reader’s Digest* placed Mary McLeod Bethune among the world’s greatest living women, despite the fact that she was the highest-ranking African American in the New Deal and had been accused of being a communist by McCarthy. Honoring women’s work and public activity was especially pronounced in black journalism: magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* promoted marriage and motherhood but also professional and artistic achievement. . . .

Dissidence in the 1950s was, of course, particularly pronounced in youth culture. . . . Nowhere was the youth rebellion as intense or as contagious as in music, and the transcendence of race segregation was the proximate cause. The officially dominant 1950s white sound (Peggy Lee, Jo Stafford, Rosemary Clooney, and Pat Boone) combined inane lyrics, like “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window,” with soothing melodies, bland orchestration, and ballad rhythms. Yet this is the decade that produced rock and roll, a revolution in popular music. The term was first applied to black rhythm and blues by Alan Freed, the white disk jockey who promoted black music to white audiences. The breakthrough singer was Elvis Presley, the “white boy who could sing black.” Not only did whites start to buy records by black artists, but they also attended huge concerts where for the first time white and black youth mingled and danced. In Los Angeles, for example, racially mixed rock concerts were

busted up by the police. Conservatives considered rock and roll the music of the devil, dangerous, degenerate, mongrel, oversexualized, and in a way they were right: it is difficult to overestimate the impact of rock and roll on the men and women who moved from the inchoate, half-conscious alienation of rebels without a cause to the organized radical movements that began with the civil rights movement.

POLITICAL ROOTS OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

From the vantage point of the [twenty-first] century, the women's liberation movement appears extravagant, immoderate, impatient, as well as young and naive. It was all those and more, but how one weighs its radicalism, positively or negatively, and how one measures its naivete depend on understanding its historical context. Fifty years later our culture has been so transformed, the expectations of young women so altered, that it is hard to grasp the unique combination of anger and optimism that made second-wave feminism so determined to change so much so fast.

Women coming into adulthood at the end of the 1960s, both middle- and working-class, faced an economy that was producing an ever larger number of jobs; . . . [also,] women had unprecedented access to education. But many were disappointed in the jobs they could get. They went from being the equals or even the superiors of men in educational achievement to working as secretaries or "administrative assistants" for the same class of men. Although they faced discrimination in their colleges and universities, they also encountered professors who recognized and challenged their intelligence. Yet their studies, no matter how rigorous, offered them no way to escape the cultural imperative that directed them toward marriage and family as their fundamental and often exclusive source of identity and satisfaction.

If economic and educational abundance opened windows for the women who began women's liberation in 1968, the passionate new social activism of the 1950s and 1960s opened doors and invited women in. But these movements, like the economy as a whole, also sent women a double message. Whenever there have been progressive social change movements in modern history, women's movements have arisen within them, and for similar reasons: in the crucible of activism for civil rights,

for peace, for the environment, for free speech, for social welfare, women have been valued participants who gained skills and self-confidence. At the same time they have been thwarted, treated as subordinates, gophers, even servants, by the men in charge—including men who considered themselves partisans of democracy and equality. Within these movements women learned to think critically about social structures and ideologies, to talk the language of freedom and tyranny, democracy and domination, power and oppression. Then they applied these concepts to question their own secondary status. It is precisely this combination of raised aspirations and frustration that gives rise to rebellion.

. . . By the 1960s, there was a sense of unity among progressive campaigns for social justice; in fact, they came to be collectively called "the movement," a singular designation. Reflecting the relative prosperity of the period, its mood was optimistic, even utopian. Its members came largely from the middle class, but working-class people also participated. The movement was as critical of commercialization, conformity, and moral hypocrisy as of poverty. Its guiding principle was to challenge received wisdom and hierarchical authority. Quintessentially a movement of young people, it was correspondingly impatient and preferred direct action to political process. In dress, in sexual behavior, in its favorite intoxicants, and above all in its beloved music, it distinguished itself sharply from grown-ups.

By the mid-1960s, the more ideologically Left currents within the movement were called the New Left, because they differed fundamentally from the older Lefts: communism, socialism, and New Deal progressivism. At least a decade earlier, the civil rights movement had been the first to break with conventional politics, helped by its high proportion of student activists, ability to stimulate mass participation, decentralized and pluralist organization, and commitment to direct but nonviolent action. Like all mass movements, the civil rights movement had no defined beginning, although the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott announced to the country that something big was happening. Thousands of African Americans were challenging three hundred years of apartheid, demonstrating unprecedented discipline, solidarity, and bravery against brutal retaliation. Their courage forced racist viciousness into the open; journalists and their cameras

then brought into living rooms the high-power water hoses turned on peaceful protesters, the grown men who spat on first-graders, the dogs who charged at protesters singing gospel hymns. The news brought a heightened appreciation of the possibility of making change from the bottom up. In contrast to the bitter liberal-versus-conservative national division in the 1980s and 1990s, the civil rights struggles seemed to galvanize, at least among the most articulate citizenry, broad majority approval for social change in the direction of greater democracy and equality. (There may have been a "silent majority" that did not approve.) While any individual battle might be won or lost, it seemed to supporters that their cause was unstoppable, so great was the groundswell of desire for the long-overdue racial equality and respect.

... Civil rights was, at first, preeminently a black movement, but it was also the first of a series of youth movements that would transform American culture. Civil rights generated youth protest throughout the country, producing a political culture marked by anti-authoritarianism, direct action, and anger at the constraints of respectability. Particularly in the South, many whites from religious backgrounds were drawn into the movement through the student division of the YWCA, which was far more committed to interracial activity than the YMCA. The drama of the attack on segregation drew some northern and western young blacks and whites to the South to help, while others were inspired to contest inequality where they lived. Young whites emulated African American activists in many ways: they adopted the blue jeans that Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers wore in identification with poor southern farmers and workers; their artistic sensibility was permanently revolutionized by black music—blues and rock and roll—and their images of heroism and virtue were modeled after the nonviolent resistance of SNCC volunteers who refused to run or defend themselves from beatings.

In the late 1950s, another kind of rebellion was developing, primarily among the more privileged whites: a cultural rebellion. Discovering and inventing unconventional art, music, and poetry; exploring a variety of intoxicants; and signaling defiance in the way they dressed, adherents of this new cultural revolution soon grew visible enough to draw

mainstream media attention. The press created popular icons—"flower children" and "hippies"—whose values resembled those of the earlier 1950s beatnik rebels. The influence of this lifestyle dissent can be measured by how quickly it was picked up by commercial interests and sold back to a broader public: the new fashion included beards, long straight hair, psychedelic design, granny dresses, and beads. Handmade, patched, and embroidered clothing and jeans once bought at Sears Roebuck or Goodwill were soon being mass-produced in Hong Kong and sold in department stores. For its most zealous participants, counterculture iconoclasm and adventurousness meant such an extreme rejection of the work ethic, temperance, and discipline that it horrified many observers, including some in the movement. Excessive use of drugs, promiscuous sexuality, and irresponsibility were sometimes destructive to participants, some of whom later rebounded into conventionality. Women suffered particular exploitation, as the counterculture's gender ideology reaffirmed that of the conventional culture, but now with a twist, lauding "free" and "natural" heterosexual relations between women who were sexually open and "giving" and men who could not be tied down. Women were to be earth mothers, seeking fulfillment by looking after men and children, while guys needed freedom from marital or paternal responsibilities in order to find and express themselves.

This cultural rebellion had transformative potential and gave rise to some serious political challenges. When civil rights and the counterculture intersected on campuses, the result was a college students' movement for free speech that would ultimately create the New Left and women's liberation. The first major student revolt, at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, arose in reaction to the administration's attempt to prevent students from recruiting civil rights volunteers on campus. This protest movement spread to campuses late in the 1960s throughout the U.S., producing a series of protests against *in loco parentis* rules that treated students like children.

Campus protests soon expanded to include national issues and nonstudents. Sensitized to injustice and convinced of the potential of grassroots activism by what they learned from civil rights, more and more Americans began to see the Vietnam War as immoral and undemocratic. In the name of stopping

communism, the U.S. was defending a flagrantly corrupt regime that had canceled elections when it seemed likely to lose to a popular, nationalist liberation movement that promised land reform in the interests of the poor peasantry. The most powerful nation in the world was attacking a tiny nation that had demonstrated not the slightest aggression toward Americans. The U.S. employed some of the cruelest weapons and tactics yet developed: shooting down unarmed peasants because of fear that they might be supporting the liberation movement; bulldozing villages; spraying herbicides from planes to deprive the guerrilla fighters of their jungle cover; dropping napalm, a jellied gasoline antipersonnel weapon that stuck to the skin and burned people alive. . . . Americans routinely witnessed these atrocities on the evening news. American soldiers of color and of the working class were killed and injured in disproportionate numbers. Hundreds of young men began resisting or dodging the draft while scores of soldiers deserted and defied orders. So widespread, vocal, and convincing were the protests at home, including several massive national demonstrations, that by its end the Vietnam War became the only war in U.S. history to be opposed by a majority of the population.

The Vietnamese revolution was part of a wave of nationalist struggles of Third World countries against Western imperial domination, and these also influenced American domestic politics. Many of these emerging nations and movements took socialist forms, as Third World nationalists observed that the introduction of capitalism increased inequality and impoverishment. But many of these newly independent countries fell under Soviet domination as the price of the aid they so desperately needed, and leading parts of the American New Left, already angry at the stultifying domestic culture of the Cold War, neglected to subject Soviet control to the same critique. U.S. interventions against communism, both military and covert, had the ironic effect of making the New Left less critical of Soviet and Chinese communism than it might have been otherwise.

Before Vietnam, the Cuban revolution of 1959 had seized the developing New Left imagination. Cubans overthrew the Batista dictatorship and brought to power a group of daring reformers committed, at first, not only to economic justice but also to educational,

cultural, and political democracy. Influential New Leftists, including many future feminists, traveled to Cuba in the 1960s, volunteering to work in the sugar harvests, and their enthusiasm for Cuba's valiant struggle led them to overestimate its independence from the U.S.S.R., just as the anti-Vietnam War movement romanticized Vietnam (and overlooked its lack of democracy). The New Left's increasing identification with anti-imperialist and nationalist struggles around the world caused it to subordinate its early emphasis on freedom and democracy.

. . . In this context of international mobilization, American radicals associated civil rights struggles in the U.S. with anti-imperialism. Blacks and other nonwhite groups identified themselves as a Third World within the U.S., victims of internal colonialism. (Some feminist groups would argue that women were another colonized people.)

Activism spread throughout the U.S., creating civil rights movements among other racial/ethnic groups, including Chicanos, Asian Americans, Native Americans; movements to protect the environment; a movement for the rights of the disabled; and renewed labor struggles for a fair share of the prosperity. Among whites there soon arose a national student organization that was to become central to the white New Left, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), established in 1962. With a membership reaching about 100,000 at its peak in the late 1960s, and with many times that number of students—including high school students—who considered themselves a part of the movement, SDS changed the attitudes of a considerable part of a generation. New Leftists and counterculture activists created institutions that spread progressive ideas still further: radical bookstores, a few national magazines, and many local underground newspapers. These were produced by amateurs working in scruffy offices, offering critical perspectives on everything from U.S. foreign policy to the local police to the latest films. Many of these underground newspapers combined words and graphics in innovative ways, inspired in part by the street art of 1968 in France where the *beaux arts* students had considerable influence.

Although the movement (civil rights and the New Left) had no unified ideology—its members included anarchists, social democrats, Marxist-Leninists, black nationalists—it bequeathed identifiable legacies to feminism.

Most important among these were anti-authoritarianism and irreverence. Favorite buttons and T-shirts read "Question Authority" and "Never Trust Anyone Over 30." . . . The movement's message was: look beneath formal legal and political rights to find other kinds of power, the power of wealth, of race, of violence.

. . . Some women began in the mid-1960s to examine power relations in areas that the movement's male leaders had not considered relevant to radical politics. The women's preliminary digging uncovered a buried deposit of grievances about men's power over women within the movement. Women in civil rights and the New Left were on the whole less victimized, more respected, and less romanticized than they were in the mainstream culture or the counterculture. Despite women's passionate and disciplined work for social change, however, they remained far less visible and less powerful than the men who dominated the meetings and the press conferences. Women came into greater prominence wherever there was grassroots organizing, as in voter registration in the South and the SDS community projects in northern cities. Throughout the civil rights and the student movements, women proved themselves typically the better organizers, better able than men to listen, to connect, to reach across class and even race lines, to empower the previously diffident, to persevere despite failure and lack of encouragement. Still, the frustrations and humiliations were galling. In every organization women were responsible for keeping records, producing leaflets, telephoning, cleaning offices, cooking, organizing social events, and catering to the egos of male leaders, while the men wrote manifestos, talked to the press, negotiated with officials, and made speeches. This division of labor did not arise from misogyny or acrimony. It was "natural" and had always been so, until it began to seem not natural at all.

THE RISE OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

Although women's liberation had foremothers, the young feminists of the late 1960s did not usually know about this heritage because so little women's history had been written. Feminist historians have now made us aware that a continuing tradition of activism stretched from "first-wave" feminism, which culminated in winning the right to vote in 1920, to the birth of

the "second wave" in 1968. Some women of unusual longevity bridged the two waves. Florence Luscomb, who had traveled the state of Massachusetts speaking for woman suffrage during World War I, also spoke for women's liberation in Boston in the early 1970s. Within many progressive social movements, even at the nadir of the conservative 1950s, there were discontented women agitating against sex discrimination and promoting female leadership. Within the Communist and Socialist Parties there had been women's caucuses and demands to revise classic socialist theory to include sex inequality. . . . Some women spanned the older progressive causes and the new feminism—Ella Baker, Judy Collins, Ruby Dee, Eleanor Flexner, Fanny Lou Hamer, Flo Kennedy, Coretta Scott King, Gerda Lerner, Amy Swerdlow.

Liberal women had continued to be politically active between feminism's two waves. They were mainly Democrats but there were some Republicans, such as Oveta Culp Hobby, who became the first secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, established in 1953. In 1961 this women's political network persuaded President Kennedy, as payback for their support in the close election of 1960, to establish a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. It was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, embodying continuity with first-wave feminism and the New Deal, and Women's Bureau head Esther Peterson served as vice-chair. Kennedy may have expected this commission to keep the women diverted and out of his hair. But the commission produced substantive recommendations for a legislative agenda and set in motion a continuing process. Its report, issued in 1963, called for equal pay for *comparable* work (understanding that equal pay for *equal* work would not be adequate because women so rarely did the same work as men), as well as child care services, paid maternity leave, and many other measures still not achieved. Determined not to let its momentum stall or its message reach only elite circles, the commission built a network among women's organizations, made special efforts to include black women, and got Kennedy to establish two ongoing federal committees. Most consequentially, it stimulated the creation of state women's commissions, created in every state by 1967. The network that formed through these commissions enabled the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966.

NOW's history has been often misinterpreted, especially by the radical women's liberationists, who denounced it, as the radicals of SNCC criticized their elders and the New Left criticized the Old Left, as stodgy and "bourgeois." At first NOW included more working-class and minority leadership than women's liberation did. Many of its leaders identified strongly with civil rights and defined NOW as pursuing civil rights for women. Former Old Leftist Betty Friedan and black lawyer and poet Pauli Murray were centrally involved in the East, while in the Midwest, labor union women . . . were prime movers. NOW's first headquarters was provided by the UAW. NOW concentrated heavily on employment issues, . . . and NOW's membership was composed largely of employed women. NOW refused to endorse reproductive rights, which the majority considered too controversial, but it rejected the idea that gender was immutable and called for "equitable sharing of responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their support." This position marked a decisive break with earlier women's rights agitation, which had primarily accepted the traditional division of labor—breadwinner husbands and housewives—as inevitable and desirable. And this position was to give rise to tremendous advances in feminist theory in the next decades.

NOW represented primarily adult professional women and a few male feminists, and at first it did not attempt to build a mass movement open to all women. Although only thirty women had attended its founding conference, and 300 its second conference, NOW demonstrated political savvy in creating the impression that it spoke for a mass power base. It had no central office of its own for three years—networking among a relatively small group did not require one. Its members used their professional and political skills to exert pressure on elected officials.

NOW concentrated on lobbying, using its ties to the few women in influential positions in government; its program focused on governmental action against sex discrimination. Its members met with the attorney general, the secretary of labor, the head of the Civil Service Commission. Its board of directors read like entries from a "Who's Who" of professional women and their male supporters. Its initial impetus was anger that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was not enforcing the sex-discrimination provisions of

the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and it got immediate results: in 1967 President Johnson issued Executive Order 11375, prohibiting sex discrimination by federal contractors. In the same year NOW forced the EEOC to rule that sex-segregated want ads were discriminatory (although newspapers ignored this ruling with impunity for years). NOW's legal committee, composed of four high-powered Washington lawyers, three of them federal employees, brought suits against protective legislation that in the name of protecting women's fragility in fact kept them out of better jobs. . . .

Women's liberation derided NOW's perspective and tactics as "liberal"—not in the 1990s pejorative sense, coined by the Right, of permissive, but in the 1960s sense, used by the Left, as legalistic and compromising. When a mass women's movement arose, it was not liberal but radical in the sense of seeking out the roots of problems and working for structural change at a level more fundamental than law. It wanted not just to redistribute wealth and power in the existing society, but to challenge the sources of male dominance: the private as well as the public, the psychological as well as the economic, the cultural as well as the legal. Given this radical agenda it was hard for women's liberation to become a player in the political process, and it tended to make purist and moralistic judgments of those who chose to work within the system.

The mass women's movement arose independently of NOW and the government commissions, and its members had a different style: they were younger, typically in their twenties, and less professional. Most importantly, it generated groups consisting of women only. The new women's liberation movement insisted that women needed a woman-only space in which they could explore their grievances and define their own agenda. They observed that women frequently censored not only what they said but even what they thought when men were around. Arriving directly from male-dominated, grassroots social-justice movements, these women longed for a space where they could talk freely with other women. First in Chicago, then in several other cities such as Gainesville, Florida; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Washington, D.C.; and New York City, women's liberation groups formed in 1967 and 1968. At a 1968 antiwar demonstration in Washington organized by the Jeannette Rankin Brigade, 500 women gathered as a

women's liberation counter-conference and then spread the movement to other towns and cities. In August 1968 twenty of them met in Sandy Springs, Maryland, to plan a larger conference. Everyone present was disturbed by the fact that they were all white. But identifying this problem did not mean they could solve it: when over 200 women from thirty-seven states and Canada met in Chicago at Thanksgiving, black women's groups were not represented, because they had not been invited or because they were not interested.

The first women's liberation groups were founded by veteran activists, but soon women with no previous movement experience joined. The decentralization of the movement was so great . . . that different geographic locations developed different agendas and organizational structures. In Iowa City, a university town, the movement began with college students and concentrated much of its energies on publishing a newspaper, *Ain't I a Woman?* In Gainesville, Florida, another university town, the movement originated in civil rights networks. In several large cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles—single citywide organizations brought different groups together; in New York City an original group, New York Radical Women, gave birth to several smaller groups with divergent ideologies. Small-town feminists had to hang together despite their differences, while in big cities there was room to elaborate various political positions. Different cities had different ideological personalities: Washington, D.C., was best known for The Furies, a lesbian separatist group, while Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was noted for its socialist-feminist orientation.

The movement developed so widely and quickly that it is impossible to trace a chronology, impossible to say who led, what came first, who influenced whom. This lack of a clear narrative, and the sense that participants across great distances were making some of the same breakthroughs simultaneously, are characteristic of all mass social movements. . . .

WOMEN'S LIBERATION DEVELOPS

The movement's characteristic form of development was consciousness-raising (CR), a form of structured discussion in which women connected their personal experiences to larger structures of gender. . . . These discussion

groups, usually small, sprung up starting in 1968–70 throughout the country among women of all ages and social positions. They were simultaneously supportive and transformative. Women formed these groups by the hundreds, then by the thousands. In Cambridge/Boston where a core group offered to help other women form CR groups, a hundred *new* women attended weekly for several months. The mood was exhilarating. Women came to understand that many of their "personal" problems—insecurity about appearance and intelligence, exhaustion, conflicts with husbands and male employers—were not individual failings but a result of discrimination. The mood became even more electric as women began to create collective ways of challenging that discrimination. At first there was agitprop: spreading the word through leaflets, pamphlets, letters to newspapers; pasting stickers onto sexist advertisements; verbally protesting being called "girl" or "baby" or "chick"; hollering at guys who made vulgar proposals on the streets. Soon action groups supplemented and, in some cases, replaced CR groups. Women pressured employers to provide day care centers; publicized job and school discrimination; organized rape crisis hot lines; opened women's centers, schools, and credit unions; built unions for stewardesses and secretaries; agitated for women's studies courses at colleges; published journals and magazines.

Soon different groups formulated different theoretical/political stands. But the clarity and discreteness of these positions should not be exaggerated; there was cross-fertilization, none was sealed off from others, the borderlines and definitions shifted, and there were heated debates *within* tendencies. Liberal feminists were at first associated with NOW and similar groups, although these tended to merge with women's liberation by the end of the 1970s. Those who remained committed to a broad New Left agenda typically called themselves socialist feminists (to be distinguished from Marxist feminists, who remained convinced that Marxist theory could explain women's oppression and were not committed to an autonomous women's movement). Socialist feminists weighed issues of race and class equally with those of gender and tried to develop an integrated, holistic theory of society. Radical feminists, in contrast, prioritized sexual oppression, but by no means ignored other forms of domination.

Our research suggests that the radical/socialist opposition was overstated, but small theoretical differences seemed very important at the time because the early feminists were in the process of developing new political theory, not yet making political alliances to achieve concrete objectives. A few separatists, often but not exclusively lesbians, attempted to create self-sustaining female communities and to withdraw as much as possible from contact with men. By the late 1970s, some women had become cultural feminists, celebrating women's specialness and difference from men and retreating from direct challenges to sexist institutions; they believed that change could come about through building new exemplary female communities. But despite this proliferation of ideological groupings, most members of women's liberation did not identify with any of these tendencies and considered themselves simply feminists, unmodified.

Racial/ethnic differences were more significant. Feminists of different racial/ethnic groups established independent organizations from the beginning and within those organizations created different feminisms: black, Chicana, Asian American, Native American. Feminists of color emphasized the problems with universalizing assumptions about women and with identifying gender as a category autonomous from race and class. . . . [F]eminists of color were not more unanimous than white feminists—there were, for example, black liberal feminists, black socialist feminists, black radical feminists, black cultural feminists. These complexities do not negate the fact that feminists of color experienced racism within the women's movement. The majority of feminists, white women from middle-class backgrounds, were often oblivious to the lives of women from minority and working-class families. Feminists of color faced the additional problems that certain women's issues, such as reproductive rights, had been historically tainted by racism; and that feminist criticisms of men were experienced differently, often as betraying racial solidarity when the men were themselves victims of racism.

Lesbians sometimes created separate feminist groups. . . . As lesbians became more open and vocal, they protested the heterosexual assumptions of straight feminists, but they also experienced discrimination from the male-dominated gay movement. For the most

part lesbians continued to be active in women's liberation and made important contributions to feminist theory. Lesbians even led campaigns of primary concern to heterosexual women, such as campaigns for reproductive rights.

At the beginning of the movement, feminists tended to create multi-issue organizations, which in turn created committees to focus on single issues, such as day care, rape, or running a women's center. One of the fundamental tenets of early feminist theory was the interconnectedness of all aspects of women's oppression. As political sophistication grew and activists grasped the difficulties of making sweeping changes, feminists settled for piecemeal, fragmented activism. By the mid-1970s feminist politics often occurred in single-issue organizations focused on, for example, reproductive rights, employment discrimination, health, domestic violence, female unions, women's studies. Single-issue politics de-emphasized theory, which reduced divisions; it had the advantage of making coalitions easier but . . . made the movement less radical and more practical. Single-issue politics also lessened the movement's coherence as its activists became specialized and professionalized.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

In sharp opposition to its liberal feminist sisters in NOW, women's liberation preferred radical decentralization. . . . Women, whose voices had been silenced and whose actions had been directed by others, were loath to have anyone telling them what to think or do. They understood that central organization would produce principles, programs, and priorities they would be required to follow. They also sensed that a movement growing at such velocity could not be contained by central organizations, which would only inhibit creative growth. Without formal rules of membership, any group of women could declare themselves a women's liberation organization, start a newspaper or a women's center, issue a manifesto. The resulting diversity then made it all the harder to keep track of, let alone unify, the many groups.

Not only was there no formal structure bringing groups together, there was very little structure within groups, and this was, again, by choice. Feminists . . . were often hostile in principle to formal procedures, which they

saw as arbitrary and not organic. This attitude was part of the feminist critique of the public/private distinction, and it was a way of making the public sphere accessible to women who were traditionally more experienced with a personal, familial form of conversing. In small meetings, especially in the consciousness-raising groups that were the essence of women's liberation, the informal "rapping" style was nurturant, allowing women to speak intimately and risk self-exposure, and therefore to come up with rich new insights into the workings of male dominance. When there were large meetings and/or sharp disagreements, the sessions often became tediously long, unable to reach decisions, and even chaotic. As a result, small groups of women or strong-minded and charismatic individuals sometimes took charge, and others, exhausted by the long aimless discussions, grudgingly relinquished power to these unelected leaders.

Women's liberation faced a major dilemma with respect to leadership. Its search for direct democracy led the movement to revere the principle of "every woman a leader" and to imagine that collectives could speak with one voice. Consequently the movement empowered thousands of women who had never dreamt they could write a leaflet, speak in public, talk to the press, chair a meeting, assert unpopular points of view, or make risky suggestions. The emphasis on group leadership meant that many important statements were unsigned, written anonymously or collectively, or signed with first names only, indicating the degree to which theory and strategy were being developed democratically. But the bias against leadership hindered action, decision-making, and coherent communication beyond small groups. More problematically, the movement did create leaders, but they were frequently unacknowledged and almost always unaccountable because they were essentially self-appointed rather than chosen by the members. This led to widespread, sometimes intense resentment of leaders. The hostility, usually covert, sometimes escalated to stimulate open attacks, as women publicly criticized or "trashed" leaders in meetings. One result was that individuals who had worked hard and made personal sacrifices felt betrayed and embittered. Another was that women's liberation groups became vulnerable to takeovers by highly organized sectarian groups (mainly the Marxist-Leninist sects) or obstruction by

disturbed individuals who could not be silenced. Perhaps the most deleterious result was that many women became reluctant to assert leadership and thus deprived the movement of needed talent. The leadership problem involved the movement's denial of internal inequalities, its refusal to recognize that some women were more articulate and self-confident; had more leisure time, connections, and access to power; or were simply more forceful personalities. These inequalities mainly derived, as the feminists' own analysis showed, from the class and race hierarchy of the larger society. This is an example of utopian hopes becoming wishful thinking: feminists so badly wanted equality that they pretended it was already here.

Despite decentralization and structurelessness, women's liberation created a shared culture, theory, and practice. In an era before e-mail, even before xeroxing, printed publications were vital and feminists spent a significant proportion of their energy, resources, and ingenuity producing them. Mimeographed pages stapled together into pamphlets were the common currency of the early years of the movement, and soon a few feminist publishing houses, such as KNOW in Pittsburgh, Lollipop Inc. in Durham, and the Feminist Press in New York, were printing and selling feminist writings for prices ranging from a nickel to a quarter. These were widely discussed, debated, and answered in further publications. . . . By the mid-1970s over 500 feminist magazines and newspapers appeared throughout the country, such as *Women: A Journal of Liberation* from Baltimore, *It Ain't Me Babe* from the San Francisco Bay Area, *Off Our Backs* from Washington, D.C., *Everywoman* from Los Angeles. . . .

Unlike *Ms.*, a mass-circulation advertisement-supported liberal feminist magazine established in 1972, women's liberation publications struggled along without funds or paid staff. . . . Many articles were signed simply "Susan" or "Randy," or not signed at all, because the movement was hostile to the idea of intellectual private property. The papers sometimes forgot to print dates of publication, addresses, and subscription information. Women worked hard at producing these publications but, unfortunately, less hard at financing and distributing them, so many were irregularly published and short-lived. Nevertheless, it was in these homespun rags that you could find the most creative and cutting-edge theory and commentary.

WHAT WOMEN'S LIBERATION ACCOMPLISHED

... [Specific] achievements arose from [women's liberation] campaigns, [but] most transformations only revealed themselves later. Social change, after all, happens slowly. Judicial and legislative victories include the legalization of abortion in 1973, federal guidelines against coercive sterilization, rape shield laws that encourage more women to prosecute their attackers, affirmative action programs that aim to correct past discrimination—but not, however, the Equal Rights Amendment, which failed in 1982, just three states short of the required two-thirds. There are many equally important but less obvious accomplishments: not only legal, economic, and political gains, but also changes in the way people live, dress, dream of their future, and make a living. In fact, there are few areas of contemporary life untouched by feminism. As regards health care, for example, many physicians and hospitals have made major improvements in the treatment of women; about 50 percent of medical students are women; women successfully fought their exclusion from medical research; diseases affecting women, such as breast and ovarian cancer, now receive more funding thanks to women's efforts. Feminists insisted that violence against women, previously a well-kept secret, become a public political issue; made rape, incest, battering, and sexual harassment understood as crimes; and got public funding for shelters for battered women. These gains, realized in the 1980s and 1990s, are the fruits of struggles fought in the 1970s.

Feminist pressure generated substantial changes in education: curricula and textbooks have been rewritten to promote equal opportunity for girls, more women are admitted and funded in universities and professional schools, and a new and rich feminist scholarship in many disciplines has won recognition. Title IX, passed in 1972 to mandate equal access to college programs, has worked a revolution in sports. Consider the many women's records broken in track and field, the expanding number of athletic scholarships for women, professional women's basketball, and the massive popularity of girls' and women's soccer.

Campaigning to support families, feminists organized day care centers, developed standards and curricula for early childhood education, demanded day care funding from government and private employers, fought for parental leave from employers and a decent

welfare system. They also struggled for new options for women in employment. They won greater access to traditionally male occupations, from construction to professions and business. They joined unions and fought to democratize them, and they succeeded in organizing previously nonunion workers such as secretaries, waitresses, hospital workers, and flight attendants. As the majority of American women increasingly need to work for wages throughout their lives, the feminist movement tried to educate men to share in housework and child raising. Although women still do the bulk of the housework and child rearing, it is common today to see men in the playgrounds, the supermarkets, and at the PTA meetings.

Feminism changed how women look and what is considered attractive, although the original feminist impulse toward simpler, more comfortable, and less overtly sexual clothing is being challenged by another generation of women at the turn of the century. As women's-liberation influence spread in the 1970s, more and more women refused to wear the constricting, uncomfortable clothes that were required in the 1950s—girdles, garter belts, and stockings; tight, flimsy, pointed, and high-heeled shoes; crinolines and cinch belts; tight short skirts. Women wearing pants, loose jackets, walking shoes, and no makeup began to feel attractive and to be recognized by others as attractive. By the 1980s, however, younger women began to feel that feminist beauty standards were repressive, even prudish, and developed a new, more playful, ornate, and multicultural fashion sensibility that may signal a "third wave" of feminism. Women's newfound passion for athletics has made a look of health and strength fashionable, sometimes to an oppressive degree as women feel coerced to reach a firm muscular, spandex thinness. At the same time, a conservative antifeminist backlash is also influencing fashion, trying to reestablish an allegedly lost femininity. The politics of feminism is being fought out on the fashion front.

Other aspects of the culture also reveal feminism's impact. Finally some older movie actresses, such as Susan Sarandon, Olympia Dukakis, and Meryl Streep, are recognized as desirable, and women entertainers in many media and art forms are rejecting simplistic, demeaning, and passive roles, despite the reemergence of misogynist and hypersexualized entertainments. Soap operas, sitcoms, even cop shows now feature plots in which

lesbianism, abortion, rape, incest, and battering are portrayed from women's perspectives. . . . The way we speak has been altered: new words have been coined—"sexist" and "Ms." and "gender"; many Americans are now self-conscious about using "he" to mean a human, and text-books and even sacred texts are being rewritten in inclusive language. Women now expect to be called "women" instead of "ladies" or "girls."

Some of the biggest transformations are personal and familial, and they have been hotly contested. Indeed, even from a feminist perspective not all of them are positive. Women's relationships with other women are more publicly valued and celebrated and lesbianism is more accepted. . . . Most women today enter marriage or other romantic relationships with the expectation of equal partnership; since they don't always get this, they seem more willing to live as single people than to put up with domineering or abusive men. Conservatives argue that the growth of divorce, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and single motherhood is a sign of social deterioration, and certainly the growing economic inequality in the U.S. has rendered many women and especially single mothers and their children impoverished, depressed, and angry. But, feminists retort, is being poor in a destructive marriage really better than being poor on one's own? Even the growth of single motherhood reflects an element of women's choice: in different circumstances both poor and prosperous women are refusing to consider a bad marriage the price of motherhood, and are giving birth to or adopting children without husbands. . . . There is a growing sentiment that families come in a variety of forms.

By the mid-1970s an antifeminist backlash was able to command huge funding from right-wing corporate fortunes, fervent support from religious fundamentalists, and considerable media attention. The intensity of the reaction is a measure of how threatened conservatives were by popular backing for women's liberation and the rapid changes it brought about. Even with their billions of dollars, their hundreds of lobbyists and PR men, their foundations and magazines dishing out antifeminist misinformation, as compared to the puny amounts of

money and volunteer labor available to women's liberation, the striking fact is that public opinion has not shifted much. Polls show overwhelming support for what feminism stands for: equal rights, respect, opportunity, and access for women.

That there is still a long way to go to reach sexual equality should not prevent us from recognizing what has been achieved. If there is disappointment, it is because women's liberation was so utopian, even apocalyptic, emerging as it did in an era of radical social movements and grand optimism. Unrealistic? Perhaps. But without utopian dreams, without anger, without reaching for the moon and expecting to get there by express, the movement would have achieved far less. In fact, without taking risks, feminists would never have been able to imagine lives of freedom and justice for women.

Feminism is by no means dead. Feminist groups continue to work on specific issues such as reproductive rights, rape, violence against women, sweatshops, sexism in the media, union organizing, and welfare rights. Nevertheless, the mass social movement called women's liberation did dissolve by the end of the 1970s. This is not a sign of failure. All social movements are short-lived because of the intense personal demands they make; few can sustain the level of energy that they require at their peak of activity. Moreover, as people age, most put more energy into family, employment, and personal life. Equally important, women's liberation could not survive outside the context of the other progressive social movements that nurtured hope and optimism about social change. As the Left declined, the right-wing backlash grew stronger. It did not convert many feminists to conservatism but it moved the mainstream far to the right. Given this change in mainstream politics, it is all the more striking that so few feminist gains have been rolled back and many have continued and even increased their momentum. Although the word "feminist" has become a pejorative term to some American women, most women (and most men as well) support a feminist program: equal education, equal pay, child care, freedom from harassment and violence, shared housework and child rearing, women's right to self-determination. . . .