1968: Lessons Learned

Christine Stansell

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were blind to class-cultural differences at the outset and were quickly labeled as irrelevant to working-class women and women of color. True, they became the beneficiary of our struggle, but to this day they still abjure the feminist label, even while living its gains. In our anger at the hierarchical nature of the family, we failed to grasp sufficiently the hunger for family and connection that animates most people, and in doing so, gave over the “family values” issues to the radical right. We were so concerned with our own cause that we didn’t fully grasp the pitfalls of the movement toward cultural relativism, multiculturalism, and the identity politics that flowed from that. And we enforced a kind of political correctness on ourselves that blinded us to ways of building a broader, more universal coalition.

Nevertheless, the legacy we have left to our children and grandchildren has been visible in our newspapers and television screens every day for the past year: A woman is a leading contender for the Democratic nomination to be president of the United States. And if nominated, she could win.

LILLIAN B. RUBIN is with the Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California, Berkeley. She is a sociologist, psychologist, and author of numerous books, including, most recently, 60 on Up: The Truth about Aging in America (Beacon Press, 2007).

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In early September 1968, American feminism announced its arrival to the nation, when a hundred women demonstrators from New York traveled down to Atlantic City to disrupt the Miss America pageant. The protest on the boardwalk was more or less antic and funny, skewering the proceedings inside the hall, which even then were starting to seem a bit tawdry. The feminists’ major events included the crowning of a sheep as Miss America. And although the substance of the protests was not so frivolous, the slogans and denunciations seemed to many viewers as absurdities, the latest sign that the country had gone mad. Women?? Them too?? What’s next?????!

Far from an evanescent offshoot of the civil rights and antiwar movements, radical feminism, or women’s liberation as converts called it, flourished on its own. Indeed, its success stemmed from its ability to split off from the left, spreading its ideas and potent sensibility via college students, the press, and the much-maligned liberal National Organization for Women into the conversations, actions, and private reflections of millions. Tuned to the millennial pitch of 1968—the apocalyptic sense of perpetrators’ wrongdoing and the fervor to purge the world of wrongs—women’s liberation generated a description of American women’s reality that had an enormous, enduring impact. Brilliant, melodramatic, and rambunctious, radical feminist proposals to “liberate” women quickly captured a national audience alternately appalled and enthralled, scandalized and persuaded.

Almost instantaneously, ’68 feminists produced two stunning ideas: that women are made, not born; and that culture itself is an instrument through which men ensure that women remain “second.” The propositions could be found in Simone De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, although few knew it at the time: the book, published in the United States to brief acclaim in 1953, was still stowed away on the top shelves of bookcases in 1968. To theoretical determinations about sexual politics, American feminists added a blistering critique of men’s behavior in the here and now: in sex, housework (that is, dodging it), and child-rearing, in how they looked at women and talked about them and saddled them with language that announced their status in relationship to the neutral male subject (“Mrs.” compared to “Mr.,” “poetess” compared to “poet”). Much of this was over the top, but it did the otherwise impossible work of blasting away the hard shell of custom and assumptions about the way things were that protected men’s privileges and power to immobilize women, keeping them always second.

Women’s liberation broke with the New Left
in 1968, but militant feminism retained many of the left’s habits and much of its style well into the 1980s: the heavy-handed theorizing, the scorn for compromise, the insistence that life was lived in blacks and whites and not in grays, the penchant for theatrical display, the faith that sheer will could bring about a perfect—or near-perfect—society purged of wrongs, and the scorn for liberalism and government. In 1968 it was widely assumed that nothing good, absolutely nothing, could come from government, which was a shill for the (male) (white) ruling class. In the women’s movement, liberal democracy seemed, if anything, even more alien and contemptible, since there was hardly a woman in sight in high office.

There were exceptions, but in the wake of 1968 they came from the ranks of NOW and older liberals, not the dazzling young militants. Radical feminism sent the best and the brightest into cultural work, broadly defined. In the visual arts, literature, theater and dance, and film; in journalism, the scholarship of the humanities and social sciences, and the churches; in the professional milieus of medicine, the law, the clergy, and the university, the ideas of 1968 revolutionized constituencies, practitioners, and substance.

But not so electoral politics or foreign affairs. Except for the courts, where feminist lawyers battled fiercely, 1968’s militants kept their distance from the government. In this feminists were like the New Left and unlike the civil rights movement. Feminists won substantial political victories in Congress in the early 1970s, but they were secured by Washington insiders and NOW liberals, whose ladylike cooperation with the status quo was scorned by radicals.

The result is an abiding illiberalism, a profound distrust of the normal politics of compromise and maneuver, even as ’68 feminists have done their own compromising and maneuvering working their ways into positions of great influence in the culture. Feminist politics are still seen, by definition, as pressure politics or protest politics, exerting force from outside rather than working on the inside (those dreaded dull words). Female (and feminist) politicians can be useful allies, but in the terms of ’68, by definition they cannot inspire. Which brings us to the odd story of our first serious woman candidate for president, and the feminists who decided not to support her.

Christine Stansell is professor of history at the University of Chicago. She is finishing a book about the history of feminism, 1792–2002 (forthcoming, 2009).

Michael Walzer

It was opposition to the Vietnam War that filled my time and occupied my mind in 1967 and ’68. I was one of the organizers of Vietnam Summer in ’67 and then of the Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on the War in the fall of that year. The CNC circulated petitions to put a question about the war on the November ballot and, after a number of legal challenges, succeeded in doing that. So the citizens of Cambridge were invited to vote for or against the war, and about 40 percent of them voted against. That was roughly the same percentage that similar campaigns achieved in Flint, Michigan, and San Francisco. Not good enough, obviously, especially since we had chosen the most favorable sites. Look at the results more closely, however, and you will see a far more serious problem with what seemed to us the most obvious kind of left politics.

A Harvard graduate student in sociology, later an editor of Dissent, did a study of the ’67 referendum, and the findings were disturbing to old leftists—and even to new ones. In the old language, we had strong bourgeois support and virtually no working-class support. Or, more scientifically, the higher the rent you paid, the greater the value of your house, the more likely you were to vote against the war. What is wrong with this picture?

What’s wrong became clearer the next year when I was working for Eugene McCarthy. A