Summer 1979

Visions and Revisions: Women and the Power to Change

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Recommended Citation

Reuben, Elaine; Howe, Florence; Smith, Barbara; Bunch, Charlotte; Hochschild, Arlie; and Swerdlow, Amy, "Visions and Revisions: Women and the Power to Change" (1979). CUNY Academic Works.

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/357
VISIONS AND REVISIONS: WOMEN AND THE POWER TO CHANGE

This final panel, summing up and looking ahead at the end of the First NWSA Convention, borrowed part of its title from the collection of essays on feminism and education, Women and the Power to Change [1975]. Contributors to that volume, and other writer-organizers joining them here, were asked to reflect on their work of the early '70s and to offer their analyses — and their visions — for the '80s.

Elaine Reuben

For many of us, the past decade included a transition from accepting and advocating feminist ideas to working for and with projects, publications, programs, and organizations created to embody those ideas. Our movement has been increasingly institution- and organization-building in the '70s; its growth may be less visible to persons not actively involved — or to those so actively involved in the survival of particular projects that they have little opportunity to look around. . . .

Most of our organizations, our institutions, don't yet have the solid stability to provide adequate shelter for us. The exhaustion many feminists feel can be explained as a function of our marginality within the larger society; a result, as well, of the felt necessity of too much to do with too few resources. We need "places" of our own to live and work in — and to visit; structures we can also leave for a while, knowing their walls won't collapse without our immediate support. And, as our rooms become several-story buildings in the '80s, they will give visibility to our ideas as well as support, protection, and continuity to our work.

I was taught as a Jew that faith is expressed within a congregation and a tradition. As a '60s activist, I experienced the difference between having a political perspective and participating in a community of shared commitment. It was difficult to be a radical without a movement, and it is difficult to be a feminist without other feminists. Like most NWSA Convention participants, I have belonged to many feminist groups and organizations: ongoing and short-lived; local, regional, and national; single-focus and multi-issue. . . .

We are now attempting to build powerful women's organizations, both capable of making an impact on history and responsive to the needs of their members. This dual agenda may be a very special feature of current feminist organizational development; it is surely part of its difficulty.

In the formative stages of many of our organizations we found structure and strength in networks founded on personal relationships, interactions, dialogue, and trust. If we are to grow, we must beware of allowing these bondings to become a private, state-of-grace-and-style politics (in which "I am, and I think you are, but we're not too sure about her. . . "). If women are to make change, we must create organizational structures that allow us to share our work and make it accessible — organizations that are judged by their effectiveness in advancing feminist work and by the satisfaction they provide to those who share in it.

Elaine Reuben is National Coordinator of the NWSA.

Florence Howe

Power is still a confused and confusing concept for feminists. Power to change what? Ourselves? Institutions? Few of us have moved beyond the relatively simple theoretical portrait expressed in Women and the Power to Change, that feminists have in general eschewed the male version of power — power as control, domination, authority, the power of governments and the military, indeed, of traditional forms of hierarchy and leadership; that feminists have, rather, promulgated another vision of power — its roots in such previous political movements as Ghandi's and Martin Luther King's, as well as in earlier feminist thought, of power as the source of individual strength and energy. And of power as contagious: as consciousness and knowledge, power is infinitely expansive, enabling others to see, and, through that vision, to move and act in groups and with concern for others. Cooperation, not competition, was the ideal goal. Leadership has been and continues to be a problem for us. We need leaders. We often are afraid to have them and to be them.

When I wrote about this form of feminist power, I was not only thinking about consciousness-raising groups and in terms of the sisterhood of the movement. Consciousness-raising groups were actually in existence, and I did not imagine that only five years later they would be a bit of history in a women's studies course. My sense now is that this idea of the power that enables individuals cooperatively to shape their futures and change their society has, not surprisingly in a society as competitive and individualistic as ours, been turned away from its association with sisterhood and feminism into the self-aggrandizement associated with ambition or success. It is not only that the

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consciousness-raising groups are gone and that some in our movement have never been fortunate enough to have experienced them; it is also that within feminist groups, as well as on their fringes and beyond, we see what we did not see a decade ago, or even five years ago — such sports as "Shoot the Sister" or "Kill the Mother" and their milder varieties. Secrecy about one's research, selfishness about one's priorities, privatism, "I'll do it if it helps my career" — I'm not simply deploring this development, wringing my hands: I am suggesting that we must also develop new ways to deal with it.

The educational world has also shifted in this decade. Unlike the world of the late '60s, today students and new teachers must live with the fear of no employment and the reality of extraordinary competition for few jobs. They live in a world that is not as ours was, or seemed to be — one continual demonstration, one long series of discoveries, a world filled with the excitement of re-vision. Most important, they live in a world that is part feminist, that has centers of feminism visible to them and to the rest of the world. To those of us who want more, these centers and programs and institutes and journals and presses — even this Association — seem small. But ten years ago they did not exist at all. A woman today can choose, as we could not: shall I be a feminist? Shall I join what is a feminist effort? Or shall I be . . . ?

Many college students and faculty I have met this year share two beliefs: either that the feminist revolution has already accomplished its goals — after all, look at all the women who are getting into law schools; or that feminism means man-hating. Both perspectives are not exactly new. . . . But there is another, newer, insidious disease that we are not as well prepared for. . . . It is a late-'70s form of self-hatred . . . varying from homophobia — fear or suspicion of lesbians — to a mild disdain for those students in a class who prefer all-women's groups, or a formal expression of reluctance by a faculty member trained in these centers and programs and institutes and journals and presses — even this Association — seem small. But ten years ago they did not exist at all. A woman today can choose, as we could not: shall I be a feminist? Shall I join what is a feminist effort? Or shall I be . . . ?

The power to change consciousness comes increasingly from knowledge. Our strategies for change now depend on the rapid expansion and diffusion of this new knowledge we have helped to create. Some of it is analytical and rooted in experience. I'm thinking of a book that I've been using as a substitute for the experience of consciousness-raising groups, Jean Baker Miller's Toward a New Psychology of Women. Miller explores aspects of what Alice Walker has described as a woman's ability to learn from illness or disability — indeed, to learn that all her alleged weaknesses may become, with consciousness, strengths. That is, to take one simple example, admitting one's fear or inexperience or incapacity or ignorance was an admission that much of our movement has built on. We knew what to do because we knew what we needed to know. A more complicated example emerges from the observation that women learn to depend on, to value, to need, and sometimes to get, cooperative behavior in the family. This is a strength without which Miller sees the whole society doomed. And only women — in our country, at least — have that power. . . .

The first factor is the power of consciousness to declare the male-centered curriculum a potential or actual distortion of knowledge. . . . This idea has occurred to different people in our movement in many different ways. It was an astonishing awakening when it occurred. The second factor is institutional, and we must never forget that women's studies was able to establish itself because it could build on the disruption in the universities of the '60s. It could build on the challenge to the traditional curriculum of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. . . . Academics had to understand that Black history needed to be taught in general, as well as especially for the benefit of Black students otherwise denied the basis for historic identity. . . .

The tasks for the eighties . . . On more difficult ground . . . we must make new and original efforts to gain the power to change educational institutions — to change (not simply add to) that mainstream curriculum. Two tools for the future are "general education" and "faculty development." For the past 14 months I've been saying in public lectures that women's studies has developed a fine "general education" curriculum and that two years of women's studies courses would be a valuable "core" curriculum for all students. You can imagine the response. You, too, may begin such a debate on your campus. It is, I would suggest, our responsibility to take the offensive on this issue. It is also a way to do what is called "faculty development" without naming it. Most important, it is a strategy for suggesting that faculty and directors of general education projects review curriculum for the presence or absence of women. . . .

Florence Howe is editor of the Women's Studies Newsletter.

Barbara Smith

I am speaking to you as a Black woman, a Third World woman, a lesbian, and a feminist. I wanted to tell you something that you probably don't know. Twelve Black women have been murdered in Boston in the last three months. From January 29 until the day before I left to come here, twelve Black women and one white woman had been found dead in the Third World community. . . . Of course there has been a complete media white-out about it. If you think about other cases of mass murder of women in recent times, for example, the Boston Strangler, I think you can see the difference between how the deaths of Black women and the deaths of white women are viewed. . . .

- Why is racism being taken up as a pressing feminist issue at this time? And why is it being talked about in the context of women's studies? As usual, the impetus comes from the grassroots activist women's movement. In my six years as an avowed Black feminist . . . I have seen much change in how white women take responsibility for their racism, particularly within

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the last year. The formation of consciousness-raising groups, study groups, and workshops to deal solely with this issue, the holding of community meetings, the appearance of essays and letters, are all phenomena that indicate the beginnings of a real coalition between Third World and white women and make me feel confident that there will be no turning back. Another aspect of the growth of this consciousness, of course, has to do with the growth of Third World feminism.

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained. Feminism is a political theory and practice that struggles to free all women — women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, elderly women, as well as white, economically-privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement. . . . White women don't work on racism as a favor for someone else, for the benefit solely of Third World women. You've got to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women; how racism affects your chances for survival, too, and how it is very definitely your issue, . . .

I'm sure many women here are telling themselves they aren't racists because they are capable of being civil to Black women, having been raised by their parents to be anything but. It's not about merely being polite — 'I'm not racist because I do not snarl and snap at Black people.' Racism is much more subtle than that. It's not white women's fault that they have been raised, for the most part, not to know how to talk to Black women, how to look us in the eye and laugh with us. Racism and racist behavior are part of our white patriarchal legacy. What is our fault is making no serious effort to change those old patterns of contempt, to look at how we still believe ourselves to be superior to Third World women, and how we communicate our attitudes in blatant and subtle ways. . . .

There are two roadblocks to our realizing our feminism which I would like to mention briefly. First . . . Third World women's antifeminism often gets mixed up with opposition to white women's racism. To me, racist white women cannot be said to be actually feminists in any case. . . . As Third World women, we must define feminism . . . for ourselves, and not assume that bourgeois female self-aggrandizement is all that feminism is and then attack feminism wholesale.

The other roadblock is still homophobia, that is, anti-lesbianism, an issue that both white and Third World women still have to deal with. Need I explicate in 1979 that enforced heterosexuality is extreme manifestation of male domination and patriarchal rule, and that women must not collude in the oppression of women who have chosen each other, that is, lesbians . . . ?

In conclusion. . . . I can only talk about those qualities and skills that will help you to bring about change: integrity, awareness, courage, and redefining your own success. . . . The women's movement will deal with racism as it has not been dealt with in any other movement — fundamentally, organically, and nonrhetorically. White women have a materially different relationship to the system of racism than white men. They get less out of it, and often function as pawns. Racism is something that living under white male rule has imposed on us; overthrowing it is the inherent work of feminism, and, by extension, feminist studies.

Barbara Smith is a Black feminist writer and activist who lives in Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Charlotte Bunch

. . . Feminism is about a politics, though not a politics that every woman shares, and not a politics encompassed by the vague phrase "women's movement." And furthermore it is not a laundry list of issues. You know the laundry list — ERA; abortion; gay rights is now on the list in most places — not everywhere; child care; etc. All of those issues are, of course, critical to feminism, but feminism is not about listing a series of issues that somehow have been isolated out as what affects women, while the rest of the world, and the rest of the basic things, like the international economic system, allegedly don't. . . .

Feminism is an approach to every possible issue. It is, in fact, a new world view . . . that is probably ten times more powerful than any of us imagined when we first embarked on becoming or being feminists. It is a new world view that I learn every single day has another implication that I never imagined. And even though that discovery is not the same as it was in the beginning, when we had those initial "highs," one of the things that I find keeps me going is to realize that if we don't sell it short, feminism has the potential to be the most profound changing force in the next century. . . .

Over and over again in the women's movement, we act surprised at the resistance that we're getting. We shouldn't be surprised. If we believe in what we are doing, we should realize that the current resistance is only the tip of the iceberg of what we face if we continue to pursue what we are about. . . .

That does not mean that I'm pessimistic. In fact, I think we've learned a lot from the resistance. As a lesbian, one of the things that always amazed me is that the forces against us, the patriarchal society, understood, hundreds of years before we as feminists understood, the power of lesbianism . . . as woman-identification for feminists. . . .

But we have established our own selves. We have begun to take the power to name ourselves. We've begun to take the power to name our existence, to name the reality of our own lives. . . . It's time for those of us in the subculture — whether in lesbian feminist projects, whether in women's studies programs — to become deghettoized, not only in relation to each other, but also in terms of daily interaction with the rest of society. And deghettoization does not mean giving up our politics. We are now strong enough and understand what we are
about well enough that we don’t have to engage in interaction with the mainstream on their terms in order to take feminism back out into the public arena. . . .

I understand very well how we become isolated and privatized in our projects. . . . but I think our long-term survival depends on not allowing that kind of separated private existence to become our only existence in the world. . . . We have to reassert the public face of feminism, and reassert that we are not willing to live our lives in an isolated subculture that may be a tiny bit more comfortable than our lives were before, but is in fact only going to be successful if it is interacting, challenging, and struggling with the institutional structures of patriarchy on a daily basis. . . .

Charlotte Bunch is editor of Quest.

Arlie Hochschild

. . . The problem, as I see it, is that women are becoming more like men, assimilating to the male culture, despite all our talk, but men aren’t becoming more like women. And that’s bad. And I blame the structure of work.

Why, in academic life, does the proportion of women decline as the pay and the status go up? The common reason we give is discrimination. . . . Another common explanation we give is that women are socialized to be "wilted violets,” not ambitious enough. I’d give that 5 percent. But even if you scraped that off, and even if you got rid of the last shred of discrimination, still there is in the heart of the structure of work something profoundly sexist. It’s the clockwork of the male career system, and unless we change that, I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere. . . .

There are various nonsexist ways of balancing work and family life. You can have what I would call the male assimilationist model, where both men and women go out and work in jobs designed for men. Or you can have the female assimilationist model, where men can back their work and have more to do with domestic life. In fact, I think we have to go for a pluralist model, where there are lots of different kinds of patterns, including traditional housewives/breadwinners and the reverse, women breadwinners/men househusbands.

The main principle behind all these models is that unless men in the aggregate move into the private family realm, and women in the aggregate move into the public realm, we won’t have achieved our goal. And as long as in the aggregate women are doing more child care, they will in the aggregate be less in the public world, and lower in it. . . . If women are primary child-tenders, then there’s an excuse to think of them as secondary in the labor force. . . . And I hope you’ll appreciate the sarcasm when I note that the best way to upgrade housework and child-rearing is to get men into the business. . . .

What about the reality? Well, here we come to the discouraging part. In fact, women have joined the labor force in ever greater numbers. . . . In 15 or 20 years we’ll hit the Soviet level of women’s labor force participation. But the other side of the equation is missing: the amount of time a man spends with children at home on a weekday can be measured in minutes. And I think this is due to the demands of work, to the structural organization of work. Actually, although working-class men talk a tougher line about not wanting to do the dishes, and not wanting to baby-sit, in fact it is the middle-class men who get off the hook. . . .

Arlie Hochschild teaches sociology and women’s studies at the University of California/Berkeley.

Amy Swerdlow

. . . Studying our past, which has been hidden from us and from history, has released our fury, our energy, and our creativity. We are prepared to do battle, but we seem to be coming up against walls of power far greater than our own. To keep our programs alive, to go on with our research and scholarship, to redefine the entire curriculum, we have to deal with opposition that comes not only from conservative male college administrators, but from the larger power structures . . . a President and a Congress that cut funds for education in favor of nuclear weapons. . . . To go forward in our program for the advancement of women’s studies, we have to understand how national and international policies affect our lives as women, as workers, and as scholars. But understanding alone will not give us, a few thousand feminists, the power to recreate the society in our feminist/humanist vision. Those in power do not vanish just because we understand their game.

Nineteenth-century abolitionist women believed that “the truth shall make you free,” but, as they learned, the truth was not enough. Those who hold power never give it away, and we are beginning to feel their resistance directly. We feel it in denials of tenure to scholars whose work is allegedly “only about women.” We feel it in budget cuts and the retraction of faculty lines. . . . We are witnessing triumphs accompanied by backlash, sometimes both at the same time and in the same institution. . . .

In finding our allies, we must reach out first to those who share our views but not our struggle; then to those who we believe should share our views — the majority of women in the United States. The first line of our outreach is the organized women’s movement, the hundreds of thousands of women who have joined the fight for ERA, for reproductive freedom, and for the right to sexual choice. Most of these women have never thought about women’s studies; they see it as something for elite academics who seem to be feathering their nests with thousands of pages of new publications and grant proposals. They see women’s studies as a special pursuit far removed from the lives of most women.
To reach out to the women’s movement, we must examine what brings us and all the feminist women in the United States together. At the risk of sounding crassly economist, I believe it is our connection as working women. It is no coincidence that women’s studies and the women’s movement came into prominence just at the moment when the female work force was expanding.

The women’s movement, which is fighting hard against the attack of the so-called pro-life, pro-family forces, needs our help. Women’s studies can do much to demystify the past and the present functions of women and the family. But so far women’s studies and the women’s movement have not been working hand-in-hand. Neither we in NWSA nor the organized women’s movement have made efforts to form a conscious coalition. Women’s studies should be a priority of the women’s movement, just as the women’s movement is our priority. . . . It is significant, for example, that until the last minute at Houston when an amendment was offered, a call for women’s studies was not part of the original education plank of that Convention.

Feminist mothers who are fighting for abortion rights, against sexism on the job and in the media, seem to be ignoring the sexist curriculum to which their daughters and sons are subjected. Perhaps they are unaware of its dangers; perhaps they feel powerless to change it. But if all our sisters in the organized women’s movement made it a point to investigate what their children are learning about women and sex roles in schools all across the country, the reverberations would hit those schools, as well as the colleges and universities, like an earthquake. We must convince them that women’s studies is not our concern alone; it is the concern of all women who want change. To ensure that our programs grow, and to develop the irresistible coalition that can achieve nonsexist education in the eighties, academic women will have to extend their activities. Organizing on the campus is not enough; we need to find our allies in the community and tackle the educational system together.

After a quiet period in which we were the only voice for change — the seventies up to this moment — new problems and discontents are pressing again. The nuclear issue, inflation, the restoration of the draft — all call for action from women and men. We are heading into the major struggles of the eighties, and it is in time of struggle that major victories are won. Let us find our allies, work together, and expand our power to change. Sexist education affects all women; only all women working together can end it.

Amy Swerdlow teaches history and women’s studies at Livingston College, Rutgers University.

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Reading from their works . . .

as part of an evening of readings called “Birthing the New Voice,” moderated by Moira Ferguson, were (above, left to right) Esther Broner, Kate Stimpson, Judy Grahn, and Alice Walker. Others who read from their works during the Convention included writer-activist Meridel Le Sueur (left); midwestern poets Jeanine Hathaway, Nance Van Winckel, Kay Closson, Anita Skeen, and Dorothy Walters; Judith McCombs, Betsy Alexander, Luvenia Pinson, Jane Marie Lueche, Lourdes Pammit, Noriko Lippit, Linnea Johnson, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Esi Sutherland (reading from the work of Ama Ata Aidoo), Suzanne Fox, and Arny Christine Straayer.