

The FSM and Beyond (unpublished)

Robby Cohen, editor

Women and the FSM (p63)

Among the Free Speech Movement [1984] commemoration's most memorable speeches were those given by Bettina Aptheker and Jo Freeman, prominent FSM activists who offered a feminist critique of both the Free Speech Movement and the New Left.

Jo Freeman (pp.67-71)

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I want to talk first all about why the women's movement has been one of the most profoundly successful social movements this country has ever seen. And I want to talk secondly about why it is an incomplete revolution and what we need to do next.

I was in the FSM and I began my first political consciousness as a participant in the civil rights movement when it came to the Bay Area in 1963. But this political consciousness did not directly lead to a feminist consciousness.

Indeed, there were two kinds of women in the left movement in Berkeley in the early '60's. These women were the workers and the wives. Those were the only two roles that were available to women in the left wing movement. You could either be a worker who did all the shit work; who ran the mimeograph machine, made the phone calls and got some grudging little respect and maybe a teensy little bit of influence with a couple of people that you could nudge one way or the other. Or you could do what the smart women did and sleep with a heavy. That made you a wife. Not literally—I don't mean in terms of legal marriage, I mean in terms of relationship, and the way you exercised influence was by getting that heavy to do the things that you thought ought to be done. You didn't exercise influence directly; you did not have women leaders; you did not have that kind of option for women.

I wasn't willing to be a worker or a wife. I was one of those people who talked out at meetings, was very puzzled when the men paid absolutely no attention until the man next to me said exactly the same thing. But because I had no feminist consciousness, I didn't say, "Hey-you didn't listen to me because I'm a woman." I thought to myself, "What's going on here?" and I didn't really know.

But Berkeley in the '60's was also the time when I first began to think to myself, "you know I betcha the next big movement in this country is going to be a women's movement." And the reason I thought that was not because I had some great insight into the dynamics of the groups that were going on, but having read a little history, and having studied black movements over the course of the history of this country, I realized that there is a very close historical relationship between the development of black consciousness and the development of feminist consciousness, between the rebellion of blacks and the rebellion of women. And it was a historical connection that I put in the back of my head, and said, "Hey, I bet the next big movement of this country is going to be a women's movement." But I didn't tell anyone because I knew they'd all laugh. That's exactly what would have happened. Instead, when the FSM ended and when I graduated in '65, I went off to join the civil rights movement in the south.

I joined the civil rights movement not because I thought it was an exciting political thing to do. I joined the civil rights movement because I'd been programmed to do that by my mother, although she wasn't really aware of what she was doing. My mother was a southerner. She was born, bred and raised in Alabama. Her family comes from Alabama. My family comes from Alabama for a few generations. My mother left the south after World War II, when I was six months old, because she did not want to raise a daughter in a segregated society. Instead, when the civil rights movement began to develop in the South in Alabama, in Montgomery, in the 1950's, it was dinner table conversation. I listened to my mother say the South was wrong. The South has got to change.

Segregation is evil. I argued with my grandmother back in Hamilton, Alabama when I was twelve years old over the segregated bathrooms in the local courthouse. Thus it was very easy and very natural for me to go back to the South, back to Alabama, back to the civil rights movement after I left Berkeley and the FSM.

My predecessors have talked about how they learned early feminist consciousness from the new left. Well, there's another side to the development of the women's movement – or at least that portion of the women's movement that many of us come from. That other side is the influence of the civil rights movement. That other side is why there is a historic connection between black rebellion and female rebellion. Because what I learned in the South – not just about racism and not just about segregation, was something far more profound.

What I learned from the south was not just the civil rights version of sexism – yes, there was sexism in the civil rights movement; but no more sexism than there was in the rest of society and a good deal less sexism than, as far as I could tell, existed in the New Left.

But what I learned in the South was a sense of possibility. What I learned in the South was the idea that freedom and equality can be achieved. The idea that freedom and equality are for everyone and not just for men, not just for some groups, not just for the privileged. What I learned in the South was the idea that we can change the world around us; that people can listen; people will listen if we stand up and say what we believe.

But the south gave us something else as well. The South gave us not only a sense of possibility, the south gave us, as women, some very important role models, because in the South there were black women leaders. Fannie Lou Hamer was not a wife. Fannie Lou Hamer was Fannie Lou Hamer.

There were many other women I could name who were very important to those of us who worked in the South, who gave us our first sense that women, in fact, could be leaders; that women, in fact, could be listened to. Ironically the woman who most permanently affected me was a wife. But she was not just a wife. That woman was Coretta Scott King. I worked for SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) not for SNCC. SCLC was probably the most male-dominated of the civil rights organizations. And as part of my work for SCLC, for about six weeks, I was Coretta Scott King's assistant. Now what impressed me about Coretta Scott King was not the fact that she was the wife of Martin Luther King Jr. What impressed me about Coretta Scott King was that she was also very much her own woman with her own interests – particularly in the peace movement – ideas and her own career. She was struggling not to have these things suppressed by the fact that she was also a wife. And as my admiration and respect for Coretta Scott King grew over the weeks that I worked for her, I came to, what to me, was a very profound realization. It wasn't that I just respected Coretta Scott King; she was the first woman I had ever respected in my life. I was 21 years old, and I had never before met a woman that I had respected.

I thought back upon all the women that I had known in my life and realized that they were never put into positions in which you could respect them. I had spent four years at the University of California in Berkeley, and I had not had or ever even seen a woman professor. And that's the very structure of the situation in which we live that had made it impossible for women ever to achieve positions in which they could exercise authority or influence such that they would act in ways that one would want to admire or respect them.

The other thing we saw in the South was not just women leaders but we also saw strong women. Strong women were not something I had seen before outside my own family. Strong women were something, indeed, that was totally discouraged by the rather narrow, conformist environment of the San Fernando Valley that I had grown up in. Strong women were punished in white society. They were not punished, or at least not in ways that I could then ascertain, in the black communities that I worked. And it was these strong women, and these black women leaders who gave me and the other women like me a sense of possibility; a sense that things could be different. A sense that not merely were there men, women and me, but there were women who did things and women who thought, women who had influence, women who could be respected, women that we could be like.

And that is one of the reasons that there is a profound historical connection between black rebellion and feminist rebellion.

When I came back to the north in Chicago, I was looking for other women to talk to. I was looking for other women to share my ideas. I won't say I was a feminist then; I don't think I even used the term, but the ideas were there, the rudiments of them, the little elements of them. And I wanted other women to talk to. I finally found some other women, in '67, but these women were primarily out of SDS and primarily out of the New Left. So while we had many things in common, we also had profound disagreements. One of the disagreements that I remember most particularly was the endless, endless debate over whether we – whatever "we" were – a little group in Chicago – should organize women as an independent movement or as a constituency of the male left. I look back upon that and laugh – as if we had any choice.

The other debate that I remember was about whether working on women's issues was adequately revolutionary or not. And the denigration that was made of the National Organization for Women (NOW) because it did things like lobbying or working for legislative changes which, of course, were reformist and only led to women being co-opted into the system, and thus were not truly revolutionary activities.

And what was really revolutionary activity? What was really funny about all this, is that while all those groups were sitting around talking about how to use women to bring about the revolution, the revolution was happening in their minds. But the revolution was not only happening in their minds, it began to happen in the minds of millions of American women all over the country.

The movement went public in 1970. That is the point in time in which all the major media decided that they were going to do major stories on the women's movement. And it was as though we had opened a water tap full blast without realizing there was a reservoir of pressure behind that tap. No sooner did the movement become public than there was this massive outpouring of women from all over the country, who flocked to join women's organizations, who wrote letters to Congress, who petitioned their local institutions in one form or another, and said, "Hey, wait a minute. This is for me!" The revolution took place in the early '70's, and the revolution that took place was a revolution in world view; a revolution in mind-set; a revolution in the way of looking at the world and your place within the world. It was a revolution that said, "Women are people; they are not just workers or wives. Women were entitled to exercise equal power with men in all the decisions that are made in this society and in all the institutions, not merely in their own separate sphere." It was a very important revolution.

It was a revolution that manifested itself in Congressional legislation. There was more legislation on women passed by congress in 1972 and '73 than in all the previous Congresses put together. It was a revolution that manifested itself in enormous numbers of women going into the labor force who had not heretofore been in the labor force. And it was a revolution that manifested itself in a vast change of attitude which you can see in some of the polls, although not in all of them. It was a revolution that manifested itself in the way in which women said, "No, I'm not just going to be a wife anymore, I'm going to be me."

But the revolution is incomplete, and it's incomplete in many ways. It's incomplete first of all in that it has not really changed men, and men do occupy a lot of important positions in this society.

My favorite barometer on how to judge where men are at is not just how many jobs that women get. My favorite barometer is an informal social action. And indeed what I particularly like watching as a barometer of social change is volleyball games. Now I don't go to too many volley ball games, but I go to an occasional one, and I'm going to tell you about three volleyball games that I have been in as a participant; that's why I play volleyball.

This first volleyball game was in 1969 and it was at a New Left, back-to-the-drawing-boards conference, held someplace in the midwest. And at this particular conference, the radical women had just started to begin to talk

about women's issues. I shouldn't say, "just started," this is in '69, they'd been talking about them for about two years. But the men were sufficiently sensitive to know that they had to say the right things and they couldn't expect women to do all the cooking. And they didn't – they said the right things – they were very cautious and the women didn't do all the cooking. But while this three-day conference was going on with the men saying the right things and then doing some of the cooking, there was also this continuous three-day volleyball game going on. And my memory of this volleyball game was that every time I had a volleyball coming to me, there'd be these two big brutes who would dive for it. You know, I'm not a small person, but these guys are bigger than I am and they're all rushing for the same space. I want to hit that ball – I can hit that ball – but how stupid am I to hit that ball when I've got these two big guys diving for me? So I didn't get to hit the ball very often.

My other memory was that there were very few women in that ballgame. There were only a few of us who were even bold enough to want to play. The men not only assumed we couldn't hit the ball, and therefore they had to get there first, but they also never did any setups to us. In fact there was exactly one setup in that volleyball game in the entire three days, and that setup was by Staughton Lynd to me. I was so surprised that I missed, and I never got another one.

Now the next to last volleyball game I went to was at a DSA meeting. Now I'm equating the DSA and the New Left; I realize it's not perfectly identical but it's the best equation I can make for the moment.. But at this New Left volleyball game, they made a point of saying that women had to be half the team. Affirmative Action! But the men still dived for the center every time the ball came at you. The only difference was that this time when I had these two guys diving at me, I said "CUT IT OUT! I CAN HIT THE GODDAMN BALL!"

My third volleyball game is to show you that the women's movement has also had an impact on the rest of society. I went to a volleyball game the next spring at the annual picnic at the Brookings Institution. And the Brookings Institution, of course, is – it calls itself-the liberal democratic think-tank; it's really a liberal Republican think-tank, but most of them are Democrats. And I sort of crashed – I had the privileges to use the library and I saw this sign up for the picnic, so I said, "what the hell?"

I crashed the picnic. No one said anything, no one's going to kick me out; they're much too genteel for that. But what was really interesting about this volleyball game was they too had an affirmative action requirement: all their volleyball games now required at least two women on every team. And I talked to one of the secretaries about how this rule came to be instituted over time. It was really a rebellion within the ranks of the women at Brookings, most of whom are secretaries and research assistants. The effect it has had on the Brookings volleyball games is that they used to be really highly competitive affairs in which the men would really go at each other, and of course there were very few women in the games. But now that there was this requirement about two women on each team, they were no longer hotly competitive affairs, and indeed, they were much more a game than they were a contest. And not only that, but the team that I was on, we even had an affirmative action requirement for children. The guys didn't dive for me when the ball came to me, and I did get the ball set up to me and to the other woman in the game, and indeed I think I was the second best player on my team. Just goes to show you what a little practice and opportunity can do!

I tell you that simply to say that "yeah, some progress – a lot of progress – has been made, and yeah, that progress has been a lot further than the confines of the left; it's gone into institutions that we would not originally have thought susceptible to the feminist movement, but yeah, the men really haven't gotten this together yet and they've got a long ways to go."

We've got a long ways to go because we've got a couple of other problems we have to deal with as well. Last summer, I went to both the Democratic and ' the Republican conventions. I've been going to the Democratic conventions since 1960, and the Republican conventions since 1976, plus a little picketing over at '64, and what was profound about the Republican convention is that the right really has taken over. And this right wing takeover is not one that I think we can ignore. The right has been growing for ten years, and the right developed

in part as a reaction to the successes of the left, and in particular the successes of the civil rights and the women's movements.

When the right first emerged as a public phenomenon] in the early 1970's, it had three issues: busing, abortion and ERA: civil rights and women's issues. It has since expanded. It has now added a whole host of other things. But the right has been growing in response to our successes, and yet it is something that we simply cannot ignore.

What I think is going to happen in the next few years in this country is a profound polarization between the values of the left, and the values of the right as represented, believe it or not, by the Democratic and Republican parties. I know that's hard for some of you to believe, but it's true. And this profound polarization is going to compel us to engage in a very important and very necessary debate about the future of this country: about what is important to us as individuals in a society. This debate will be over foreign policy, over social issues such as blacks, the status of women, and in particular, the nature of the family. This debate will also be over economic issues. It's going to be a very profound debate. But it's a debate in which we have to make some very crucial decisions about how we want to act.

I'll just talk briefly on women's issues, because that happens to be what I know a lot about. At the Democratic convention I saw for the first time feminists exercise real influence; so much influence that there wasn't really much for them to do at the Democratic convention because they'd accomplished all their goals before the convention. I found myself going to the women's caucuses and saying, "Hey, you know, I think it's really great." But now feminists are well ensconced into the Democratic party and capable of getting this very powerful institution to appoint people and to make program changes and proposals that we want. But there's something missing, and the something that's missing is a radical flank. The something that's missing is a group of people on the outside saying, "This is O.K., but you gotta do more." A group of people, however, that is not so alienated from the political system that they condemn anyone who works within it.

This is something that the women's movement had in the early years. When the women's movement developed in the late '60 's it had two branches. I like to call them the younger branch and the older branch. They like to call themselves the radical branch and the liberals. I think those terms are misnomers but the younger branch was the branch that raised the new ideas. NOW and the NWPC was the branch that took those ideas and translated them into programs. And NOW and the NWPC and the older branch mainstream organizations – whatever you want to call them – are the people that are still around. Some of the younger branch organizations are still around but they don't talk to anyone but themselves. And when you stop doing outreach, when you stop doing missionary work, you stop being a social movement and you become something else. You become a community, you become a social group, you become a club, but you stop being a social movement. And it is the absence of that radical flank, constantly reaching out, constantly saying, "you have to do more." Constantly raising new ideas, and in particular, questioning the nature of the family in this society, and questioning the fact that our society does not adequately make it possible for individuals to live their own lives and to raise children in this society. It is the absence of that branch which makes it possible, which creates the possibility that the mainstream feminist organizations will pull their teeth in order to attain power within the democratic party.

But there's another side to this. And the other side is that after I looked at this and said, "Hey, what we need is some more people willing to be a radical flank," I went to the Republican convention, and at the Republican convention I said, "The Democratic party is the radical flank." Those of you who sit and say, "Hey, the parties are just alike," which I did 20 years ago, and maybe 20 years ago they were, ought to go to a Republican convention. You'll change your mind.

Women are very active in the Republican party, and at the Republican convention, but they're women for whom every feminist idea that we hold dear, is anathema. And these are women who don't have false consciousness. I won't put them down by saying that. These are women who have a different reality. There's an old saying in sociology that how you stand depends on where you sit. And these women sit in different places.

They sit where we sat 20 years ago. They sit in a world that says, men and women are essentially different; that society consists of two spheres: a male sphere and a female sphere; that women are not inferior to men; that women are separate but equal. Indeed, that women are superior within their own sphere but that these spheres are interdependent – that they cannot be separated from each other. What's more important, that separate but equal means keeping to your own sphere and doing your thing as ordained by God.

These are women who come from a very different place than those of us who want it all, who think we're entitled to all, who believe that men and women can and should have the same options in this life, and that society should make it possible for us to exercise those options to the extent of our individual desires and talents. These women come from very different places.

There's a great relationship, as I said earlier, between black rebellion and female rebellion. But where that relationship breaks down is when it hits the hard wall of social reality. And the hard wall of social reality is that all blacks have an interest in breaking down the barriers of segregation, but not all women have an interest in breaking down the barriers of segregation.

So the other thing that we need to do is not just have a radical flank and keep organizations like NOW honest; not just have new institutions, publications, and ideas constantly being raised about what we need to do next. We also need to understand the traditional woman and where she is coming from, so that we can go back and do missionary work once again; so that we can go back to Dallas – not Berkeley – but Dallas, and begin to do for those women there what the New Left did for many of us and what the civil rights movement did for me: and that is to raise a vision of what things can be, to raise a sense of possibility, and to make all women realize that things can be different in their lives, and that this difference will make their lives better, not worse.