

# **Feminism As Anarchism**

Lynne Farrow

1974

# Contents

Where Do We Move From Here? . . . . .	8
---------------------------------------	---

Feminism practices what Anarchism preaches. One might go as far as to claim feminists are the only existing protest groups that can honestly be called practising Anarchists; first because women apply themselves to specific projects like abortion clinics and day-care centres; second, because as essentially apolitical women for the most part refuse to engage in the political combat terms of the right or the left, reformism or revolution, respectively.

But women's concern for specific projects and their a-political activities constitute too great a threat to both the right and the left, and feminist history demonstrates how women have been lured away from their interests, co-opted on a legislative level by the established parties and co-opted on a theoretical level by the Left. This co-option has often kept us from asking exactly what is the Feminist situation? What's the best strategy for change?

The first impulse toward female liberation came in the 1840's when liberals were in the midst of a stormy abolition campaign. A number of eloquent Quaker women actively made speeches to liberate the slaveholding system of the South and soon realised that the basic rights they argued for Blacks were also denied women. Lucy Stone and Lucretia Mott, two of the braver women abolitionists, would occasionally tack some feminism ideas on the end of the abolition speeches, annoying to an unusual degree their fellow liberals. But the women were no threat so long as they knew their place and remembered which cause was the more serious.

Then in 1842 the World anti-slave convention was held in London and some American women crossed the Atlantic along with other Abolition delegates to find that not only were women denied a part in the proceedings, but worse, they were forced to sit behind a curtain. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cade Stanton, enraged at the hypocrisy of the liberal's anti-slavery gathering denying women participation, then and there determined to return to America and organise on behalf of liberating women.

The first Women's Rights Convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, attracting with only three days' notice in a local newspaper a huge number of women filling the church in which they met. At the end of the very moving convention the gathering drew up a Declaration of Rights and Sentiments based on the Declaration of Independence only directed at men rather than England's King George. After this convention which is identified as the formal beginning of the Women's Rights Movement in America, feminism picked up quickly aiming at women's property laws and other grievances.

As American Feminism gathered a small measure of support, liberals became nervous that these women were spending energy on the woman issue rather than the real issue of the time: abolition. After all, they insisted, this is "the negroes' hour" and women shouldn't be so petty as to think of themselves at a time like this. When the Civil War became imminent this rhetoric grew from subtlety to righteous indignation. How could women be so unpatriotic as to devote themselves to feminism during a *national* crisis. Virtually every feminist in America suspended her feminist consciousness and gave support to the liberal interests at this point, assured that when the war was over and Blacks were given equal rights under the Constitution women would be included.

Susan B. Anthony, an ardent Abolitionist, was the only known feminist at the time that refused to buy the liberal's proposal. She continued appealing for the rights of women despite the gradual disintegration of her following who had been co-opted by the Abolitionists into joining their ranks. She insisted that both struggles could be run simultaneously and if they didn't women would be forgotten after the war. She was right. When the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment was introduced in Congress after the war, not only were women omitted, they were specifically excluded. For the

first time the word “male” was written into the Constitution making it clear that when it referred to a person that was the equivalent to male person.

This substantial blow to organised feminism hindered further legal advance for women. Then around 1913 when British women launched their militant tactics bombing buildings and starting fires, Alice Paul, an enthusiastic young American woman of Quaker stock, travelled to England to study and ended up working with the notorious Pankhursts. She returned to the States determined to rejuvenate the cause of suffrage and soon had persuaded the practically non-functioning National Woman’s Suffrage Association to re-open the federal campaign for suffrage in Washington.

In a very short time and due to nothing but her sheer genius for organising and strategy Alice Paul created a multifactional movement to be reckoned with. Her most effective tactic was picketing the White House with embarrassing placards denouncing President Wilson’s authoritarian stand on Woman Suffrage while he preached democracy abroad. World War I approached steadily and the stage was again set for the feminists’ co-option.

The pacifists appealed to the women to suspend their cause temporarily and join the peace effort while at the same time the majority, the war hawks, were scandalised that the women abandoned their country at a time like this. Again the women were co-opted as thousands left the feminist cause to go to the aid of their parties, but nevertheless a small efficient group, the National Woman’s Party, stayed intact to fight suffrage through.

It is difficult to ascertain which side, the right or the left, has been more responsible for co-opting the feminist efforts at change. History assures us their methods have been identical and their unquestioning confidence in the priority of “the larger struggle” inevitably leads to a dismissal of feminist issues as tangential. The analysis of the current Black Movement and the Marxist dominated left squeezes women into their plans symptomatically, i.e. when the essential struggle is fought and won women then will come into their own. Women must wait. Women must help the *larger* cause.

The poetry of Black women identifies intensely with building the egos of the Black male in the conventional way egos are built, by self-depreciation. The theme heard over and over again tells of the Black woman’s proud suffering at the hands of the Black man who has been emasculated by his white boss and so needs his woman to at least feel superior to. She does her part. Her suffering is a direct contribution to the Black (Male) struggle which she considers a noble sacrifice. (As Germaine Greer has suggested, since women have no power to threaten, they cannot be castrated and therefore no one sees their powerlessness as anything but natural and no one’s going to lie down for women to kick.) Whereas the Black male’s powerlessness is only temporary, since he is male and has the potential power of the white male. All he needs is a woman to dominate the way the white man has dominated him and his stature will be restored. Blacks have challenged white supremacy by realising Black is beautiful. They have yet to challenge the white family model, the patriarchal family as something to be desired and therefore still uphold male supremacy.

Juliet Mitchell is a Marxist feminist whose ideas, as in *Woman’s Estate*<sup>1</sup>, typifies the conceptual style of interpreting a group’s very concrete grievances, like those of the feminists, as basically irrelevant to or symptomatic of the larger struggle where all groups participate in abstractions called ideologies. Predictably, if contradictions are found in the theory, Mitchell calls for an “overview”, an abstraction that will enlarge itself to accommodate them. When interest groups

---

<sup>1</sup>Juliet Mitchell, *Woman’s Estate*, Pantheon books, 1971, p. 23.

such as students, women, Blacks or homosexuals formulate their priorities stemming directly from their situation, Mitchell accuses them of being helplessly short-sighted in refusing to see their needs as a symptom. What they need to understand, she continues, is the “totalism”, the analysis to end all analyses.

The fully developed political consciousness of an exploited class or an oppressed group cannot come from within itself, but only from a knowledge of the interrelationships (and domination structures) of all the classes in society ... This does not mean an immediate comprehension of the ways in which other groups and classes were exploited or oppressed, but it does mean what one could call a “totalist” attack on capitalism which can come to realise the need for solidarity with all other oppressed groups.

Mitchell might easily be accused of conceptual imperialism considering the “totalist” terms she uses serve to gobble up lesser terms reducing them to subsidiary categories under the authority of her original Marxist idea. According to Mitchell individual groups responding in their own way to their own interests must learn to see the way and sacrifice. Her idea that they must renounce their individual concern for the good of the total is an abstraction that has ceased to represent any interests at all, since it has come to be so large it cannot relate to diverse interests in any way.

The totalist position is a precondition for this realisation, but it must diversify its awareness or get stuck in the mud of Black chauvinism, which is the racial and cultural equivalent of working class economism, seeing no further than one’s own badly out of joint nose.

Mitchell’s ideas invalidate all forms of individualism in the same way the organised left and organised right have historically co-opted women from working in their own interests. Women are asked to be “totalist” in the same way citizens are asked to be “patriotic”. We are being asked to switch one kind of paternalism for another. We are asked to comply with an hierarchical meta-analysis which we cannot assume with the even most remote faith has any connection with our immediate grievance. What is good for all is supposed to be good for one.

With the spectre of totalism looming intimidating over us we are called upon to *justify* and rationalise the authenticity of our interests, i.e., stop *pursuing* our cause and be drawn into the diversionary web of *defending* it. We are so accustomed to thinking in terms of one group’s interests being more significant, more basic, than another’s that we are baited into self-rationalisation rather than question the value of pitting one group against another in the first place.

Not only does the “totalistic” approach make for much scrambling as to which cause is prior, it suggests that *when the nature of the problem is totalistic so then the solution must be*, which brings us to the place women have always been shafted. Groups may function under the illusion they are “all in it together” for just so long, usually as long as they are theorising, e.g., like the promises made to the feminists before the Civil War. When it comes to doing something specific about this abstractly designed situation, one cannot so easily search and destroy the totalistic enemy. Solutions, in short, necessarily imply specific choices to be made about what will be done first and for whom. Thus the cause most efficient at coercing the others will be given priority and the

others will wait. Either that or the totalistic solution will be so diffuse as to mobilise energies that will help no one. Women lose either way when they see their struggle against sexism in the context of any larger struggle.

If the feminist struggle is not tangential or subsidiary to other political movements then how can it be characterised?

Because most women live or work with men for at least part of their lives they have a radically different approach from others to the problems they face with what would ordinarily be called "the oppressor." Since a woman generally has an interest in maintaining a relationship with men for personal or professional reasons the problem cannot only be reduced to or located with men. First, that would imply removal of them from the situation as a solution which is of course against her interests. Second, focusing on the source of the problem is not necessarily the problem. It is a mistake to locate a conflict with certain people rather than the kind of *behaviour* that takes place between them.

It seems to follow then that women because of their interest in preserving a relationship with men must relate to their own condition in an entirely different, necessarily situationist basis. It follows that the energies of feminism will be problem-centred rather than people (or struggle) centred. The emphasis will not be directed at competing us-against-them style with mythological oppressor for certain privileges but rather an avoidance of any pitting of sides against each other. E.g., if a competitive situation already exists between the sexes, learning Karate will only reinforce the stockpiling of arms, on both sides; the terms of the struggle don't change the balance of power on both sides.

Feminism as situationism means that elaborate social analysis and first causes a la Marx would be superfluous because changes will be rooted in situations from which the problems stem; instead change will be idiosyncratic to the people, the time and the place. This approach has generally been seen as unpopular because we do not respect person to person problem-solving or are embarrassed by it or both. We characterise these concerns as petty if they cannot immediately seem to identify with any large scale interests or if those concerns cannot be universalised to a "symptom of some larger condition." Discussing "male chauvinism" is as fruitless as discussing "capitalism" in that, safely reduced to an explanation, we have efficiently distanced ourselves from a problem and the necessity to immediately interact with it or respond to other people. *Such theoretical over-articulation gives one the illusion of responding to a critical situation without ever really coming to grips with one's own participation in it.*

Originally the feminists were accused of not having one comprehensive theory but a lot of little gripes. This made for much amusement in the media because there was no broad-based theoretical connection made between things like married women taking their husband's names, inadequate day care facilities, the persistent use of 'girl' for woman and women wanting to work on equal basis with men. Rather than this diversity being seen as a strength it was seen as a weakness. Predictably a few Marxist feminists rose to the occasion, becoming apologists for the cause and made feminism theoretically respectable, centring women's problems around the 'ideology of reproduction' and other such vague notions.

Feminism has traditionally tried to find ad hoc solutions appropriate to needs at the time, i.e., centred around the family or community of friends. However, certain unscrupulous, legal, well-publicised (as well as theoretical) attempts have been made to bring women's liberation into the big time.

For example, some friends and I were recently involved in setting up a feminist conference on divorce. We found some speakers who would describe how to go about getting a divorce and some attorneys who would give free legal advice to women who wanted it. Various workshops were organised around topics that interested those involved or concerned with divorce. A huge number of women from the community came, attracted because of the problem-centred topic, women who would probably not have identified themselves with the mystifying concept of feminism. Everyone participated enthusiastically exchanging advice, phone numbers, lawyers names. Some women cried in the workshops, overwhelmed at the supportiveness of women in similar predicaments.

The conference was running smoothly when a speaker from the National Organisation for Women made a presentation of the official national position on divorce and the organisation's plans for the future. Included was a proposal that couples should be able to pass a test before they married so only qualified people could participate in this kind of legal arrangement. Presumably those who could not pass the test created by the law makers would be discouraged, thus preventing any future divorces.

Aside from the obvious fallacy of believing more laws will change what existing laws have created and thereby save people from themselves, the N.O.W. proposal exemplifies the attempt to solve the problem of women's liberation by high-handed monolithic means very similar to the Marxist Branka Magas' ambition of 'seizing the culture.' The impulse to coerce people by national laws is similar to the impulse to create a revolution to change the balance of power. Each kind of grand scale change will find reasons to service its own magnanimous authoritarianism. Moreover each side claims what's good for all is good for one and therefore any means can be used to advance the ambitions of the revolution, in model of the corporation.

These occasional large scale proposals lead people to believe such a thing a non-situationist Women's Liberation Movement exists, a veritable army clamouring in unison for national reforms. The media perpetuated it. But there is no feminist movement per se. Feminists have been too busy working at their community based projects within families, communes, working places, to focus on building an image or identity for themselves. Further, a single movement image or principle would be counterproductive and have women constantly comparing their lives with the image, monitoring life styles and their work to see if it was in *compliance* with the MOVEMENT.

The 'movement' at the same time has been criticised for not being cohesive and for not having a program. Exactly. That's the point. The diversity in which feminists implement and practice change is its strength. Feminism has no leaders in the lieutenant sense for the same reason. There is nothing to lead. We plan no revolution. Women are doing what they can where they can. We are not unified because women do not see themselves as one class struggling against another. We do not envision a women's liberation army mobilised against male tyranny. Solidarity for its own sake is the stuff governments are made of and adapting these methods only reinforces the perspective of us against them sex-class antagonism. Identifying with other strugglers in such paranoid fashion encourages brutal competition and keeps the contest going. What's more, stressing solidarity can only lead to a self-consciousness about what we are doing as personalities, thereby accentuating our individual differences and causing conflicts before we even begin to apply ourselves to the practical problems of sexism.

The National Organisation for Women notwithstanding, feminism begins at home and it generally doesn't go a whole lot further than the community.

Midwives and witches practising their herbals and healing arts figure prominently in our individualist tradition. Women in families passed on information on how to diagnose pregnancy, prevent conception, cure infections, stop bleeding, prevent cramping and alleviate pain. Quietly, sometimes mysteriously, women have ministered to children and friends without elaborating on the policy of it. Their effectiveness inspired awe and fear and risked ridicule but they did not stop to explain or mystify what they were doing, they merely did it. What mysterious description remains of midwife methods, a female lore passed along from mother to daughter, has been deprecated as 'old wives tales.'

The current feminist wave maintains this individualist tradition in that women's health problems have surfaced as the principle concern. Small projects have sprung up all over the country for the purpose of meeting local needs for adequate abortions, birth control, pregnancy-testing and general medical care. Previously women had limited facilities or had to rely on the paternalism of doctors. New women's groups discovered there are many routine examinations and services that can be performed safely at little or no cost by women themselves.

Just such a group has organised around these interests at our local women's centre, providing various services, i.e., abortion referrals and information to the community on a daily basis, as the demands arise. Those involved see their function as community action problem solving, assessing the needs of women and coming up with the most efficient way of fleeing that problem with the resources available. Of course, there are things we've learned are within our ability to do and things we must refer. Pregnancy tests are done quite simply and for free by volunteers at the centre. Abortion cases are referred to a competent carefully checked out physician who charges a minimum fee. A list of the cheapest and best venereal disease clinics has been completed and distributed by flyers. The scope and ambition of our project is dictated entirely by the interests of the people nearby. We enthusiastically co-operate with other groups on the mutual exchange of information but have no intention of expanding. We have too much to do to create an analysis or policy, and we haven't the time to stop and observe what's going on.

## Where Do We Move From Here?

Where do we move from here? Feminists have always possessed an exuberant disregard for the 'why?' questions, the theoretical mainstay of our menfolk. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* for one was severely attacked by reviewers for spending all those pages *not* formulating a theory on why sexism existed. Our disinterest in theoretical speculation has been construed as a peculiar deficiency. Of course. Similarly our distrust for logic and that which has been unscrupulously passed off as the Known in the situation. We can't 'argue rationally' we are told and it probably is true that we avoid this kind of verbal jiggling. But the fact is we haven't any real stake in the game. KNOWLEDGE and ARGUMENT as it relates to women is so conspicuously alien to our interests that female irreverence for the intellectual arts is rarely concealed. In fact, women seem to regard male faith in these processes as a form of superstition because there appears no apparent connection between these arts and the maintenance of life, the principle female concern.

Women's occupation centres basically around survival processes, the gathering of resources, the feeding, clothing and sheltering of children and meeting the necessities of life on a day to day basis. Our energies must necessarily be applied to 'how to' questions rooted in our practical responsibilities. Observing and evaluating life routines must be the occupation of the comparatively



idle, those with less responsibilities, i.e., men. Similarly, an old joke points at the delusionary importance men invest their work with: the head of the family reports to his friends, "I make the big decisions in the family like whether Red China should be admitted to the UN and my wife makes the small ones like if we need a new car and what school the kids should go to."

Because women have no vested interest in theoretical assumptions and their implications and hence no practice in the arts of verbal domination they will not easily be drawn into its intricate mechanics. Instead, even young girl children, appraising their lot, acquire an almost automatic distrust (like Lucy of *Peanuts* fame) for the theoretical in the situation and rely on their wits and instincts of the moment to solve pressing practical problems. Women are suspicious of logic and its rituals the same way the poor are suspicious of our legal labyrinths. Veiled in mystification both institutions function against their interests.

The province of our interests, the ministering of practical needs as women, has been so seriously and consistently devalued that there is scarcely anything we do that is regarded as significant. Where our conversation is about people and problems it is perjoratively referred to as gossip; our work, because it is necessarily repetitive and home-centred, is not considered work, but when we ask for help with it is called nagging. When we won't argue logically it is the source of great amusement and it never occurs to anyone to ask us if we wanted to pursue such competitive fancy in the first place.

We must learn to see our so-called defects as advantages, as a problem-to-problem, person-to-person approach to Living rooted in the individual situation. We must learn to value other than the traditional ways of 'knowing' and instead smarten our senses and quicken our responses to the situations in which we find ourselves.

Feminism means finding new terms to deal with traditional situations, not traditional terms to deal with what has been called a new movement. It is a mistake for us to argue the validity of our cause; that would imply we wanted in. It would suggest there was a contest going on that we consented to enter, and there would be a dominating winner and a dominated loser.

Arguing a case for feminism is a form of appeal, like a powerless class asking for power or a PR enterprise attempting to sell something to a potential buyer. Feminism means rejecting all the terms we are offered to gain legitimacy as a respectable social movement and redefining our real interests as we meet them. So when our disinterest in aggression is called 'passivity' and our avoidance of systematic organisation called 'naive', we must heartily agree. How else can you get anything done?

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Lynne Farrow  
Feminism As Anarchism  
1974

Retrieved on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [www.anarcha.org](http://www.anarcha.org)  
Originally published as an article in Aurora, a New York feminist magazine.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)