

# 'Liberate socialist eminences from their bourgeois cocks!'

Women '68ers, marching on alone

**Lynne Segal**

It is hardly news that history has its blind spots, hidden even from those attentive to its most neglected byways. These are often within emancipatory struggles that are swiftly disregarded once their fervour fades. When disputed legacies originate in confrontational, often anarchic challenges to the prevailing order of just about everything, systematic accounting tends to dull precisely that chaotic and confused excitement which it presents as emblematic of the rebellions in question. Most historical texts on the 'long sixties', encompassing the twenty years of popular protest movements from 1956 to 1976 – and even those on its flashpoint, '1968' – readily encompass the diversity and distinctiveness of the engagements and revolts of its varied activists. Yet there is one cluster that once again tends to fall beneath their radar: women's struggles. The historical narratives and the familiar memorabilia of the 1960s – and even more so of 1968 – all continue to place men, definitively, at their centre.

As this year's commemorations and condemnations kick off (with Sarkozy suitably making a fool of himself by adopting Thatcher's former role as chief scold), we see all over again the significance of the decade reduced to the student graffiti adorning Parisian walls. These once imaginative but now rather tired and untroubling slogans direct us into gardens of earthly delight, on the back of tigers of wrath: 'Demand the Impossible', 'Don't Live with Dead Time', and all the rest of it. There is, however, still neglect of that group which was there in almost equal numbers alongside, but clearly distinct from, the angry and rebellious young men whose names reappear in scholarly and popular restaging of those years alike. What were they doing, what were they thinking, those without the raggedy beards – long-legged in their mini skirts, spinning to the drumbeat of 1960s' rock; soon visible marching in step with male comrades, listening just as eagerly to those leaders of the Left, hurling their passionate words from formal platforms, at barricades, astride the bonnets of overturned cars?

These images bear some relation to the stripped-down, prone and servicing shapes in the sexist litter then saturating much of the 'underground' or alternative press – its nadir, perhaps, one long and tedious cartoon strip from Paris, May '68, which concludes: 'Some comrades from the *council for maintaining the occupations* are going to come and fuck me violently. Judging by their practice, their theories must be truly radical.'<sup>1</sup> Radical, indeed, in that the graphic display of so much infantile braggadocio, with its predatory intent no longer hidden behind syrupy sentimentality, was already helping to generate its own comeuppance.

Surely women's presence during those antinomian flashpoints, when some declared madness the new sanity, amounted to more than these depictions of them in under-

ground magazines and outlaw manifestos as masturbatory aids and sources of male bonding. For even as so many male militants were already worrying that their revolution was over before the decade itself was out, scores of women were suggesting that the spirit of the 1960s was crucial for them. 'Freedom Now! We Love You!', young women in the US Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) concluded their statement addressing their male comrades in the summer of 1967. Given that their main concern was the destructive impact of what they newly identified as 'male chauvinism', it was a love that for many years went unrequited – mocked and rejected by those to whom it was proffered. Whisper it softly in today's culture of blame and victimhood, but such defensive derision would eventually rebound, for it was women who can in the end, perhaps, be seen as that decade's most decisive victors. Something in the 1960s' air, as well as that small package in their handbag or by their bedsides, was giving women a new-found energy. It was the spirit some took with them into the 1970s, still marching (by then, more confidently) along many of the same pathways they had trod during the previous decade, albeit with one or two critical new swerves.

### **Sexual-political slippage**

If there is any agreement about the 1960s, it is that this was a time of sexual challenge to the prudery, hypocrisy and stolid family conservatism dominating the postwar world of the 1950s. But it was only women's determination to seek sexual pleasure outside marriage, and to flaunt it, which was actually new (and soon, too, that of other sexual dissidents). Double standards had long made straight men's engagement in sex outside marriage an activity that was tolerated, if not encouraged. That 1960s' women were far from the mere passive objects of men's desire (notwithstanding the surrounding priapic iconography) was affirmed by various feminist writers when asked to commemorate '1968', twenty years ago now, in 1988. Angela Carter, for one, rejoiced that this was a time when sexual pleasure was suddenly not only divorced from reproduction, but also from women needing to use it for 'status, security, all the foul traps men lay for women in order to trap them into permanent relationships'.<sup>2</sup> Sheila Rowbotham described how she and her friends struggled throughout the 1960s 'with all the contradictory versions of sex, morality and what being a woman was meant to be about', determined to outwit the conspiracy of fathers, teachers, ministers and dons, trying to keep them chaste.<sup>3</sup>

Women fought to establish that it was possible, if certainly still often perilous, to leave home, have sex and much else besides (though not yet to obtain a mortgage or other basic financial backing), free from dependence on any one man who had authority over them. The cultural impact of these intrepid sexual pioneers is evident in the research of that meticulous historian of the 1960s, Arthur Marwick. He provides figures from West Germany, where he grew up, on shifting attitudes to cohabitation: while 65 per cent of single German women still disapproved of cohabitation in 1967, a mere six years later only 2 per cent of women had any such objections. On a somewhat different playing field, the figure for single men dropped somewhat less precipitously, though also significantly, from 43 per cent to 5 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, women working alongside or within the various civil rights, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and, eventually most importantly of all, the anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s, had also been learning how to organize, how to work politically, and how to bond with each other – if at first rather hesitantly. The direct action involved in such political work often combined with at least some attachment to the various avant-garde stirrings of the alternative cultural scene, while women were already especially prominent in some of the grassroots community projects. 'I find myself happier than I ever dreamed I could be', Alix Kates Shulman begins her semi-fictionalized memoir of women's political awakening in the 1960s, *Burning Questions*.<sup>5</sup> It is this harnessing of energy among women, a time when for many the space between



suddenly desiring change and believing it could happen was shrinking, that slips out of the prevailing 1960s' accounting – although it is obvious when women write their own accounts, such as Sheila Rowbotham's excellent memoir of the decade.<sup>6</sup>

Symptomatic of the slippage is the most recent scholarly overview of the 1960s by Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Europe and North America, 1956–1976*.<sup>7</sup> Horn attempts a far-reaching coverage and assessment of the political and cultural achievements, defeats and thwarted aspirations from those years, while pondering whether some of its lost causes might ever be regenerated. He begins with the restless desires of cultural rebels, outcasts and dropouts discarding bourgeois respectability in the late 1950s and early 1960s, highlighting especially the detached, ultra-libertarian, anti-capitalist disdain enlivening the Situationist texts of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. From there, he ranges broadly across the rebellious 1960s' landscape, encompassing the cross-class and cross-race civil rights alliances, black liberation and student struggles in North America, as well as the various workers' struggles, anti-war movements and student insurgencies that sprang so vibrantly to life across Europe.

As we know, the eyes of the world fixated on the emblematic uprising of May '68, when students held their ground against the excessive police violence used against them, building barricades and fighting back, while millions of French workers soon took to the streets, triggering three weeks of extensive strike action that both paralysed the state and almost toppled de Gaulle. Horn, however, draws our attention back to other working-class struggles, such as that of the Italian labour movement, where from '68 onwards industrial struggles continued right up until 1976, making Italy's unionized workforce the best protected and most democratically organized in Europe. Rejecting the authoritarianism, cultural conservatism and extreme moderation of the Old Left (whether nominally communist or social democratic), Horn appropriately identifies the 1960s' spirit in the commitment to direct action, to participatory democracy and above all to the autonomy of diverse struggles, thereby aligning support for collective struggle with respect for individual resistance. Women's presence, however, receives little more than *one page* in his penultimate chapter, which is somewhat surprising since their organized movement had already peaked before his end-date of 1976.

The 'spirit of the sixties' was the cradle of feminism. Women's liberation did not emerge merely as a reaction against the supposed 'male' priorities of that decade; women were already there, already fighting, organizing, and beginning to think collectively, both with and without men. Although it was the movement politics in the USA that, in the early years, served as the main inspiration for women's movements around the world, there were already feminist stirrings everywhere. The diverse Marxist currents in the forefront of the radical workers and student uprisings in Europe were, for sure, usually less open to prioritizing women's perspectives, but within them women were transformed simply by the struggles themselves. In Britain, Juliet Mitchell wrote the influential feminist text 'Women, the Longest Revolution' for *New Left Review* in 1966. This was followed a few years later by the articles Sheila Rowbotham published in *Black Dwarf*, heralding 1969 as *The Year of the Militant Woman*. Hunting for ideas on how to bring women's personal issues to politics back then, Rowbotham interviewed sewing machinists on strike at Ford factories and other militant working-class women who, alongside female guerrilla fighters in Vietnam, provided early role models for Women's Liberation.<sup>8</sup>

The sardonic Situationist-inspired slogans that have settled into the memory of the 1960s were racing around the world at the same time that a few other, more sharply combative, ones were first uttered – though these were rather quickly actively repressed, almost never to reappear in the memorializing of that time. 'Liberate socialist eminences from their bourgeois cocks!' was the slogan unfurled at the German SOS (Socialist German Student Organization) in 1968, as Helke Sander and other women addressed their male comrades, only to be rather more swiftly buried, especially as this poster was accompanied by dire graphic representations of how this could be done.<sup>9</sup> Hidden from history such slogans may remain, yet they expressed one of the more lasting revolts of '68, if one that would be, mercifully, somewhat tamed as the decades rolled on.

### **Inside a women's sign**

Women crossed class and race barriers to stand up for each other. As Barbara Epstein recalled in *The Feminist Memoir Project*, white women such as herself gained strength from supporting black women when involved in voter-registration campaigns in the southern states of the US in the mid-1960s:

I lived with local families, often at some risk to them ... I had a lot to observe. Black women ... seemed stronger. More important ... They occupied more social space than white women ... In effect the Black women I saw and worked with provided a different model of what it meant to be a woman in our society.

This opened up a whole realm of possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Later, white feminists participated in the rallies held in support of jailed Black Panther sisters, such as Joan Bird, and raised the huge sum of money to pay her bail, at the close of the decade. Here, too, women fighters in Vietnam provided other models for women in the 1960s, as lifelong feminist and anti-war activist Leslie Cagan recalled, when describing the electrifying impact of meeting some of them in Bulgaria in the spring of '68.<sup>11</sup>

Strength was necessary for women to withstand the heckling some received when they rose to speak at student meetings, as Ellen Willis, a member of the New York Redstockings collective, reported in early 1969:

This isn't the protest against movement men, which is second on the agenda, just fairly innocuous radical rhetoric – except that it's a good looking woman talking about women. The men go crazy. 'Take it off! Take it off the stage and fuck her!' They yell and guffaw at unwitting double entendres like 'We must take to the streets.'<sup>12</sup>

Sheila Rowbotham similarly found herself an object of derision when speaking at a British student rally in 1968, recalling

It was like a living nightmare. Stubbornness kept me in front of the microphone ... Somehow through the whistling and laughter I managed to speak about [the underfunding of] further education.<sup>13</sup>

Amy Popkin has commented on the 'second-level' chauvinism evident at that time, which meant that women would not be taken seriously when they reported on anything other than the problem of men's sexism. No matter, women were getting on with their activism anyway, with the rhizomatic spread of feminism throwing its shoots right across the USA. It was in 1968 that Jo Freeman published the first US national newsletter, *Voices of the Women's Liberation Movement* in Chicago; *No More Fun & Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* appeared some months later in Boston; the movement staged its first widely reported protest (at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City); Shulamith Firestone published 'Women and the Radical Movement'; Adrienne Rich wrote her poem 'Planetarium', which began 'A woman in the shape of a monster/ a monster in the shape of a woman/ the skies are full of them.'<sup>14</sup> And so they were.

'WOMEN OF THE WORLD UNITE, WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR MEN!' was yet another banner unfurled in 1968. Unite they surely did, continuing many of the old struggles, but losing some of the men they had fought with, who dropped faster by the wayside. As Joan Baez addressed her old comrade and lover Bob Dylan, in 1972: 'You left us marching on the road and said how heavy was the load/ The years were young, the struggle barely had its start/... And we're still marching in the streets with little victories and big defeats/ But there is joy and there is hope and there's a place for you.'<sup>15</sup> Bobby, however, like many men from those years who did not make their way into the sprouting and fragmenting Leninist groups, had long since left it to the women to march on alone – for a while still hoisting that clenched fist, but inside a women's sign.

## Notes

1. Peter Stansill and David Zane Mairowitz, *BAMN: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965–70*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 141.
2. Angela Carter, in Sara Maitland, ed., *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the Sixties*, Virago, London, 1988, p. 214.
3. Sheila Rowbotham, 'A Muggins Twice Over', *New Statesman & Society*, 10 June 1988, p. 26.
4. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 805.
5. Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning Questions*, Knopf, New York, 1978.
6. Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, Penguin, London, 2000.
7. Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.
8. Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 209.
9. Reported in Renny Harrigan, 'The German Women's Movement and Ours', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 27, July 1982, pp. 42–4.
10. Barbara Epstein, 'On the Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement from a Strictly Personal Perspective', in Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitoe, eds, *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1998, p. 175.
11. Leslie Cagan, 'Something New Emerges', in Dick Cluster, ed., *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee*, South End Press, Boston MA, 1979, p. 237.
12. Ellen Willis, reported in Amy Popkin, 'The Personal is Political', in Cluster, ed., *They Should Have Served*, p. 198.
13. Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, London, Penguin, p. 188.
14. Adrienne Rich, 'Planetarium', [www.americanpoems.com/poets/adrienne\\_rich/7091](http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/adrienne_rich/7091), accessed 25 March 2008.
15. Joan Baez, 'To Bobby', *Come from the Shadows*, A&M Records, May 1972; [www.lyricsdownload.com/joan-baez-to-bobby-lyrics.html](http://www.lyricsdownload.com/joan-baez-to-bobby-lyrics.html), accessed 25 March 2008.