

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Moving without “The Movement”

by Sarah Chinn



PROTEST AT THE SUPREME COURT'S BOWERS V. HARDWICK DECISION IN 1986

While I know that this roundtable is designed to meditate on the changes and continuities between MLA 1968 and MLA 2018, I'd like to take us on a little detour to just before the midpoint between those moments, the 1980s, and out of the MLA, onto a college campus. A focus of the activism that this panel deals with is, after all, how scholars might transmit the tools of liberation to students, through new texts, new approaches, and new ways of reading. So it's worth thinking about how well and whether the political experiences of the radicals of 1968 found their way to later generations of students, some of whom became teachers themselves.

Despite the best efforts of the contemporary Republican party to deify Ronald Reagan, the popular consensus on the 1980s is that it was a vapid, materialistic era, one in which rampant deregulation and massive military buildup made possible financial disaster at home and permanent war abroad. The political left, both older activists who lived through the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, and younger folks who think of the 80s as part of the vague stretch of time known as "back in the day," often represent the 1980s as an ideological wasteland. Indeed, with the exception of the emergence of ACT UP in the late 80s, narratives of progressive and radical political activism often jump from the heyday of radical feminism in the 70s to anti-globalization protests in the 1990s, with a brief stop for the defeat of the ERA.

For me, however, the mid-1980s were a maelstrom of political organizing centered around several flashpoints: the anti-apartheid movement, queer organizing, sex-positive feminism, and protest against US involvement in Central America in the wake of CIA-supported coups on the one hand and the rise of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas on the other. This congeries of issues might seem incoherent, and perhaps it was: what characterized the radical politics of the 80s was the lack of a capital M "Movement." Indeed, when I heard older folks talk about "the Movement" I was hard pressed to understand what they meant. How could the SDS, protest against the war in Vietnam, Black Power, radical feminism, and gay liberation (not to mention the dozens of sectarian offshoots of these various tendencies) constitute a single movement?

One answer to this question was that it didn't. As Heidi Hartmann, Alice Echols, and others have chronicled, much the male-dominated "Movement" of the New Left, embodied on college campuses by SDS, was at best patronizing and at worst openly hostile towards the emergence of second-wave feminism from its ranks.¹ Too often, white support of movements of people of color such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords was insufficiently nuanced, and could tend towards fetishization of what we might call "oppression realness." And the responses to gay liberation were decidedly ambivalent.

Another, more sympathetic answer is that radicals in "the Movement" recognized the inextricability of anticolonialism and the work of decolonization from the ongoing violence towards people of color in a variety of sites within and beyond the US American incursions into Vietnam, bourgeois masculinist misogyny, and a rampantly consumerist culture that rendered anyone outside the

mainstream invisible (or represented them as actively dangerous). And unlike the leftists of the 1930s, on the whole, radicals in the 1960s – for better and for worse – did not have established institutions like unions and the CPUSA to fall back on either for guidance or for resources. (I think we can see the embrace of Mao as a symptom of this: a rejection of the Marxist-Leninism of an older generation in favor of a vision of top down and bottom up total cultural as well as political change.) As we like to say about the era before cell phones and video games, they made their own fun.

At any rate, whether it was accurate or not, talk of "the Movement" seemed wholly foreign to me as a politically active college student in the mid-1980s. What must it have felt like, I thought, to have such a clear sense of purpose, of goals, that one could imagine oneself as part of a single body of political action. At the same time, though, this talk felt fusty and nostalgic, another way in which baby boomers could claim their superiority over us younger folks, undefined as yet by a generational moniker, too young to be part of the punk generation and not quite young enough to be folded into what would become Generation X (in fact, I think this lack of categorization made me suspicious of the legitimacy of all generational generalizations). Plus, it wasn't clear to 18-year-old me just what they'd achieved long-term. Yes, the US had pulled out of Vietnam, but it took years and a Nixon presidency. Women still made seventy cents to men's dollar (women of color even less) and any number of us had an endless supply of stories of sexual harassment and assault. At the end of my first year of college, the Supreme Court decided in *Bowers v. Hardwick* that there was no constitutional right to homosexual sodomy. And the immiseration of poor black and brown people, hastened by urban renewal and compounded by the arrival of crack, had hardly abated. (Needless to say, I have a more nuanced view of all of this now. But bear with me).

It made sense, then, not to expect the revolution. As far as I could see, believing in the revolution just broke people's hearts when it didn't arrive. Rather, it was more effective to focus on things we could change, within ourselves and within our communities, or on specific and what felt to us like unambiguous sites of oppression (South Africa, El Salvador) and liberation (Nicaragua). As lesbians and feminists, if we had any doubt that our desires were political, *Bowers v. Hardwick* and the Meese commission proved otherwise, just as did the sex wars, into which we threw ourselves with enthusiasm. We did not doubt the inextricability of the personal and the political, one of the conceptual contributions of the 1960s that still felt fresh and important. Somehow we effortlessly combined a kind of postmodern irony about the state of the world with a rock-solid commitment to freedom and justice (to my memory, this entailed watching *Peewee's Playhouse* while we designed picket signs).

To work through these questions, I'd like to spend the space I have here focusing on the movement that absorbed much of my political energy during my college years: the activism against apartheid and specifically for the divestment of university funds from companies that did business in South Africa. I threw myself into anti-apartheid activism: I marched, protested, spoke at rallies, posted

fliers, and spent endless hours at meetings. I slept in our replica shanty and was arrested when it was dismantled by university police. Even though I recognize now how low the stakes were for me as an upper-middle class student at an elite university, and how rife with contradictory meanings was the construction of an imitation shanty on the grounds of the alma mater of a former director of the CIA and current vice president who oversaw the Reagan policy of “constructive engagement” with the South African government, anti-apartheid activism was the seedbed for all my political action thereafter. It deepened my historical understanding of colonialism and transnational white supremacy; it brought me into contact with activists in other movements, especially CISPES; it opened my eyes to the ongoing segregation in the Northeast and the virtual apartheid that was fast becoming the rule in public schools after the collapse of busing and other desegregation initiatives. It taught me how to back up political claims with research (ah, those endless fact sheets!). It also married my political commitments to my academic work, leading me to take classes in South African history and literature, and to write a senior thesis comparing the role of South African women in two different movements in the 1950s and 1970s.

One thing that was missing, though, was meaningful interaction with older activists. I knew a few long-time New Haven radicals through my anti-apartheid work, and a guy who claimed to be a former Panther came to planning meetings. Occasionally we worked with a black church out on Dixwell Avenue. The CISPES crowd was a bit older, mostly grad students and some faculty, but they were also less exciting, less sexy than the anti-apartheid crew. My deepest contact with more experienced activists was with a bunch of older lesbians who were friends with our women’s rugby coach (could I be any more of a cliché?), and through women, mostly veterans of lesbian feminism, whom I met through volunteering at the local feminist bookshop. Through them I learned about the struggle for LGBT rights in Connecticut, as well as the awesome lesbian bar – Promises! – out in Branford. We learned about the thriving feminist scene in the city, and the monthly dances for women held at a local church (fun, but not nearly as exciting as Promises, with its butches, watered-down drinks, and early electronic dance music). These women wanted to teach us, and we wanted to learn: about underground abortion networks, about lesbian separatism, about the sexual liberation that many 1970s lesbians embraced. We felt like part of a transhistorical community, both with the bar dykes and with the wiccans and jocks.

This was markedly different from my experience in anti-apartheid activism. There was a decided presentism about much of what we did, for all of our veneration of prior struggles. Most importantly, many of us did not have the tools to learn effectively from the past. Although not all of us realized it, in pushing for divestment, we were borrowing an approach from the anti-Vietnam war movement and their focus on Dow Chemical as the producer of napalm and agent orange. Some of us had parents who had been in “the Movement” twenty years earlier, a few were the biracial children of couples who had met through radical activism, and some were products of the black political establishment, so they brought that history with them to a certain extent.

But even so, there was a kind of disconnection between what was happening on campus in 1986 and what had happened in 1968.

There were some lessons we *had* absorbed – people of color were at the forefront of the movement, and we were careful to maintain gender equity in our work. We weren’t interested in the virtues of Mao versus Trotsky versus Lenin. But I didn’t even think to miss the kind of cross-generational community I had in my lesbian politics.

A large part of this is the structural limitations of the college experience. A movement populated primarily by eighteen to twenty-two year olds will have a hard time thinking in an engaged way about the past. I was aware of the radical histories of New Haven, but the kind of complex understanding of the histories of slavery and segregation that is part of antiracist politics today wasn’t available in the same way. I realize, too, that antiracism at home was not enough part of the explicit mission of the movement – in more recent discussions with fellow students from those days I’ve been much more aware of how racialized experience divided many of us in ways that weren’t visible to me then.

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I think, too, that the older lesbians – I’m older now than they were then – saw the direct results of their work in us younger women. We could be out as dykes, as feminists, in ways that were possible to them only through great sacrifice. We shared a vocabulary not just of desire but also of political commitments, and it was a badge of honor and sophistication among our small lesbian community to be able to invoke – both admiringly and with affectionate mockery – the language of 1970s radical feminism. I like to think, too, that we recognized that we would not have been possible without them, and that we still had plenty in common, as we too had friends who had been disowned by families, bashed, raped, and harassed for being queer and out.

Interestingly, my lesbian activities felt less “political” than my anti-apartheid work because it was part and parcel of my daily experience. Living in an all-women house, debating monogamy, visiting our local women’s bookstore was just the texture of my life. And we were aware that these activities were ones we had inherited from the generation of women who came before us, and ones we had to struggle through together for ourselves. We knew patriarchy was playing the long game, and that our liberation was the work of a lifetime. By contrast, anti-apartheid work felt *new* – something that differentiated us from those who had come before. We had no war in Vietnam to unite us, no dream of revolution to inspire us, no Marxist sectarianism to rupture our work (although I do remember one sexy Trotskyite grad student who caught my attention with talk of permanent revolution and Mexican exile).

Looking back now from the distance of thirty years, it's even harder to draw solid conclusions. Apartheid came to an end, Nelson Mandela ended up leading South Africa, and yet the nonracial paradise we believed would come into being with the rule of the ANC is far from here. Ironically, my feminism has fared better: none of us expected patriarchy would loosen its hold much, or that homophobia would ease. We knew that not everything could be appropriated without cooptation – we knew that marriage wouldn't fix queerbashing or that hiring women as corporate leaders couldn't palliate, well, much of anything. At the same time, I've found the malleability and mutability of feminist and queer politics endlessly nourishing.

Or to put it in the ironic, noncommittal, evolutionary terms my 1988 self would have immediately understood: *la lucha continua*, kinda?

Notes

- ¹ See Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," [Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism](#), ed. Lydia Sargent. Boston: South End Press, 1980; Alice Echols, "Daring to be Bad," [Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1989.



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