ABSTRACT

The radical as the past in the present:
How to write histories of the British Women’s Liberation Movement

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British feminism, both since the early nineties and before, has shown a certain amount of anxiety about ‘forgetting’ the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of the late sixties, seventies and eighties. Sheila Rowbotham, a feminist and socialist active in the WLM from the late sixties, explores this concern in a number of her writings, but through doing reveals a crucial tension. On one hand she demonstrates a clear intellectual position which argues in favour of the importance of tradition and legacy. She warns future feminism against needless repetition, ‘by mining our memories we might save someone sometime in the future’ (1989:299), and emphasises the difficulty of thinking of everything yourself, ‘(t)here are things you need to know from people who know more. Everything does not pop in to our heads (1979:48).

However, in the very same texts she simultaneously employs a textual ‘structure of feeling’ which encourages the reader to yearn for the sense of ‘newness’ Rowbothan uses to describe the early years of the WLM.

In this paper I want to ask the following questions:
• What is at stake in emphasising the importance of tradition to political movements?
• Is there a way of ‘recognising’ the past without trapping the structure of feelings associated with newness – especially belief in change – in the past?

I want to suggest that radical politics – including anti-war activism and women’s liberation – is linked to the ‘sixties’ and ‘seventies’ past in the British political imaginary. Rather than either ‘building on’ these traditions or mourning the loss of the sixties as the ‘Real Thing’ (Stacey 1997) for radical politics, I’d like to discuss ways in which the affective resonances of the ‘radical past’ can be freed. To do this I draw on the sixties aesthetic of the million-strong Stop the War demonstration held in London 15 February 2003. Through peace slogans, sixties-style lettering and flowers, clothes and songs, the radical as the past infused the present: ‘belief in change’ was associated with the sixties yet was no longer lost. I will close by suggesting ways in which this might inspire a methodology for writing histories of the WLM.

Bibliography:

Rowbotham, Sheila, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright (1979) Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism  London: Merlin Press