In this paper, I want to suggest the importance of developing a methodology for writing histories of the Women’s Liberation Movement which refuse to fix the ‘structure of feeling’ of radical politics – specifically belief in change - in the past.

Radical as the past

I want to open by offering a reading of Shelia Rowbotham’s work. Rowbotham is a socialist, a feminist and an academic who as written a number of important and hugely influential texts on British WLM and socialist politics from the very late 60s and early 70s up to the present day. (See bibliography for details of the publications I am using).

- Her texts set up two intertwined ‘arguments’ one intellectual and one affective.

The intellectual argument emphasises the importance of tradition in political movements: ‘by mining our memories we might save someone sometime in the future’ (1989:299), ‘(t)here are things you need to know from people who know more. Everything does not pop in to our heads’ (1979:48). However she simultaneously employs a textual ‘structure of feeling’ which encourages the reader to yearn for the sense of ‘newness’, Rowbotham uses to describe the early years of the WLM. This sense of newness – the experience of not having a precedent - is one she returns to again and again in her writing from as early as 1979 (Beyond the Fragments) to her more recent accounts in 1999 (Threads Through Time) and 2000 (Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties), each time as an intellectual source of concern and a textual moment of fantasy. I want to suggest this is so significant because newness as a trope becomes associated within the texts with excitement and belief in radical politics as an agent of change.

- This means that Rowbotham wants us to remember the distinctiveness of the early seventies, wants us to build the movement based on that remembering, yet that would preclude the very quality – the ‘newness’ - of her representation of the WLM. Rowbotham’s writing evokes a sense of belief in change so effectively, but the trope of newness locates that feeling always in the past.

Kobena Mercer, writing in 1992, has suggested that the association of the radical with the past became a potent tool of the New Right in the eighties:

... as a metaphor for the opposition between progressive and reactionary forces, the figurative meaning of the left/right dichotomy has been totally reversed: over
the past decade the right has faced the future as an agent of radical historical change, while the left – and what used to be called the new left – has experienced a crisis of agency that has left it disaggregated and fragmented: fading away into the past, like a forgotten memory of something that happened a long time ago.

(1992:424)

The question I want to ask is: how can the feeling of radicalism – the linked feelings of newness, excitement and belief in change - be freed from a location of always in the past?

**Peace, love and understanding: sixties-ness as methodology**

- A sixties-aesthetic became one distinct style of the million-plus Stop the War (StW) demonstration held in London 15 February 2003. For many protestors, it is as if the act of demonstrating itself was seen as ‘very’ sixties. Through these specific resonances of the sixties for Stop the War, I hope to develop a way of reading and writing about the WLM as it is located both within the more conflictual associations of ‘the seventies’ and ‘the eighties’.

Sixties-ness as ‘style’ was played with by many protestors through home-made banners, placards, t-shirts and painted faces. Many took the Valentine’s day theme as an opportunity to play with sexual puns, while others embellished very familiar slogans, ‘Make love not war’, ‘Give peace a chance’ and CND symbols in purple and yellow, psychedelic or flowery lettering.

But the sixties as the feeling and spectacle of protest was added to by the significance of knowledges about the sixties past in discourse surrounding the Stop the War movement. In newspapers, on news programmes, on alternative websites and in many informal pub discussions explicit comparisons were made with the Vietnam War and the anti-Vietnam War movement: was Stop the War more successful than the anti-Vietnam campaign? (Socialist Alliance online, Socialist Worker online) Was Iraq Blair’s Vietnam or his Suez canel? (Happold online). Sixties as style and feeling of protest, therefore, co-existed with a set of knowledges, drawn from specific books, source material and memories but also from a circulating general knowledge.

- These aspects merged creating a kind of ‘sense of the sixties’ that could be used to understand and interpret the then current situation.

- What is so helpful about the ‘use’ of the sixties on the 15 February is that the past was treated playfully and not revered as a ‘now lost Real Thing’ and that the knowledges that were produced on and around the demonstration were melded within a range of affective resonances which dislodged any fixity.

**Methodology and ways of re-thinking about the WLM**:

Histories of the WLM which free the feeling of radicalism might operate through a ‘sense of the past’ which could be conceptualised as a collage. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermath has suggested:

Collage was a favourite surrealist method because it took material objects out of conventional contexts and brought them together in an arrangement that was new but at the same time linked by means of this very amputation with plural contexts that retained a ghostly presence in the collage image. (1991:99)
This suggests a history which is reconstituted through its explicit existence in the present. In this, knowledges and structures of feeling are dislocated from any sense of representing the ‘real’ of the past and relocated through their relationship to each other and politics in the present.

This might include:
1) moving away from linear narrative as structuring framework
   • juxtaposition of now and then rather than ‘building on’ past
   • Prioritising daliness of politics over over-arching assessments of success and failure

2) Politics of memory which celebrates the co-existence of playful associations with knowledges:
   • No reverence, sense of being always less radical than past
   • Scope for evoking the feeling of belief in change within aesthetics of past

Bibliography


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