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BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS, FEMINISM AND POWER

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Abstract: Liberal feminism was strongly influenced by the strategies and vision of the black civil rights movement. Similarly, radical feminism was shaped by the strategies and visions of the black power movement. This article offers a comparative perspective of the strategies and visions of feminist, civil rights, and power movements.

Keywords: liberal feminism, black power, civil rights, radical feminism

The visions and strategies of liberal and radical feminism find their roots in the black political theories and social change movements of the 1960's. Liberal feminism paralleled the black civil rights movement in an analysis which minimized the differences between men and women (blacks and whites); a vision of equal opportunity and integration in the public sphere; and strategies which worked within the existing system to make legal changes in government and business, and to educate men and women about mistaken cultural ideas.

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In contrast, the analysis, vision and strategies of radical feminism drew from the black power movement. Parallels include: an analysis framing the differences between men and women (blacks and whites); a vision of global liberation and self-determination; design to dismantle the existing system, and to create autonomy through self-education.

The visions and strategies of liberal feminism and radical feminism were flawed in that they were based on an analysis that reduced all oppressions to the dimension of gender, and more narrowly, gender as defined by white middle class heterosexual experience. Similarly, black movements did not always take perspectives other than race, and at times, class, into account. The complexity of multiple identities was not consistently present in any of these movements, although African American women were addressing concepts concerning multi-faceted oppressions during this time period, providing an important body of critical writing.

Feminist theory describes the status/position of an oppressed group, i.e., women. Charlotte Bunch, in her article "Not By Degrees", argues that feminist theory plays a critical role in, as Bunch states "naming reality". (Bunch 1979). The theory provides a vision of how society should be structured. Once this vision exists, with an analysis of what has gone wrong, feminists can develop strategies with which to address the current reality.

The contemporary women's movement developed as an outgrowth of the black civil rights movement of the 1960' and 1970's. Ironically, white women who worked in groups devoted to addressing racism, seemingly, lost sight of race (and class) issues once they began leaving those organizations to form their own, based around the pursuit of women's rights, as they defined them. This is the most basic and fundamental criticism of both liberal and radical feminism. Both factions of the early feminist movement were comprised mainly ~ white middle class, college educated women. Their theory and practices were influenced by their class and race privileges, though they seemed unable to recognize this.

Comparing Strategies

Liberal and radical feminists learned key lessons about social analysis and action from their involvement in, and/or awareness of the black civil rights, and black power movements. Mainstays of feminist thought and practice for example the saying, 'the personal is- political', nonviolent direct action, radical language, and the role of women as activists; are legacies of the black movements of the sixties. In this section I will outline some of the prominent strategies of liberal and radical feminist movements and compare them with those of black movements.

Black Civil Rights / Liberal Feminist Strategies

Liberal feminists used strategies intended to win legal equality for men and women in the public sphere, resulting in the full integration of society, equal employment and educational opportunity, and the desegregation of public facilities. Because the goals of liberal feminists and black civil rights activists were similar (respective to sex and race), many of their strategies were similar. Both movements used international organizations to advance their cause. "In fact, the stated purpose of NOW was to act like an NAACP for women" (Giddings 1984:30).

Both movements sought to create integration and equal opportunity within the existing system through lawsuits, new legislation, and increased participation in the political process. For example, the liberal feminist strategy for ensuring "equality of rights" (Morgan 1970 NOW Bill of Rights, p.512), was ratification of an *Equal Rights Amendment*; while black civil rights activists had sought similar protection in the passage of the *Civil Rights Act*.

Both groups filed lawsuits against - government and businesses to challenge sex and race discrimination, targeting practices like segregated want ads, segregation in the public schools, medical schools, *and sports programs*. Liberal feminists took a lesson from the nonviolent direct actions (sit-ins, marches) that black civil rights activists directed against the segregation of public facilities, and held their own demonstrations and marches. For example, liberal feminists picketed men's clubs that did not admit women as members. In both movements, the focus was on removing barriers which kept women, and blacks from realizing their full potential as individuals. Both shared the strategy of using education to remove those barriers, change societal attitudes, and to point out the errors of prejudice.

Liberal feminist strategies were aimed at enforcing existing structures to create opportunities and legal protections. Women (white middle class women) were individually responsible for taking advantage of these opportunities through "life plans" (Friedan 1963 p.326), and by changing the inequalities in their marriages and household responsibilities. These individual reform strategies contrast sharply with the political and economic based strategies of black power and radical feminism.

Black Power / Radical Feminist Strategies

Radical feminists used strategies designed to unite women so they could work collectively for global self-determination, or liberation, for women as a political class. Strategies for self-determination and liberation were directly patterned after those of the black power movement. These movements sought to identify a globally defined class of oppressed people as a power base for future liberation. Radical feminists (falsely) universalized their experiences to include women of every economic class and race, and black power activists, incorrectly emphasized their similar status with the people of Africa, and all people of color. Radical Feminists and black power

activists also sought liberation from structures seen to function as psychological controls, attacking institutions like police and the courts (black power) and marriage bureaus (radical feminism).

Radical feminist and black power strategies for self-determination included; creating a separate identity, creating a radical body of theory and language, and re-education within the oppressed group. To establish a separate identity, these movements split from integrationist organizations to form groups that excluded men, or whites respectively. These groups continued to narrow their criteria for membership in an attempt to eliminate the "enemy within. Black power groups at times ostracized members who were deemed 'not black enough, light skin, association with whites, etc. Radical feminists limited the number of married women who could participate in their groups.

These movements also published radical theory to educate, and assert their autonomy. Radical feminist borrowed directly from black power theory in their premise of class struggle and domination through psychological coercion; their 'manifesto' format, and their language of self-determination, colonization, and liberation. For example, radical feminists asserted that their bodies had been colonized by men, and self-determination would entail freeing their bodies from male control. Another strategy shared by these movements was re-education, designed to free the group from the "oppressor's ideology'. Radical feminists used consciousness raising groups for this purpose. These groups were directly modeled after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as developed by Ella Baker, and shared the following characteristics; they were leaderless, decentralized, consensus-based and oriented toward symbolic actions to challenge and educate society (Cook 1988:51). The emphasis was on personal experience, personal appearance, and autonomy (from the dominant class).

Radical feminist strategies often addressed sexism as the source of, therefore the key to, ending all other oppressions. In contrast, black power strategies recognized a dynamic between two oppressions, race and economic class, "Black Americans have two problems; they are poor and they are black" (Carmichael 1968:62). Although the radical feminist movement grew out of the liberal feminist movement, it also grew away from it. Radical feminist strategies to gain liberation for women as a class, by abolishing institutional/psychological controls, contrasted with liberal feminist strategies to gain rights within the existing public structure. Radical feminist strategy dealt with 'the annihilation of female and male roles'. The strategies employed were frequently ad hoc and symbolic actions. For example, radical feminists conducted the 'Burial of Traditional Womanhood' during an anti-war demonstration at Arlington Cemetery. Small groups, such as consciousness raising groups, engaged in picketing marriage bureaus, guerilla theater and demonstrations, such as WITCH groups, which hexed Wall Street, and the insurance industry. Radical feminist were also concerned

with throwing off the marks of their female oppression. The Freedom Trash can is a vivid symbol of radical feminist strategies. Women threw into the can objects of female oppression such as bras, girdles, and, make-up. Women would publicly engage in hair-cutting ceremonies during larger scale events, symbolically removing an emblem of their oppression. Women learned about these ideas in consciousness raising groups. Consciousness raising groups were intentionally small, and leaderless, so women could examine who they were as individuals and as women. They could look at the things they did and said which reflected their oppression and internalized patriarchal values.

Radical feminists came from liberal feminist organizations and also from civil rights groups and left groups. Radical feminists also adopted some of the strategies of the black power movement. 'Sisterhood is Powerful' is comparable to the 'Black Power' slogan and even the symbols are similar; a clenched fist within a woman's sign, and a raised black fist. Black power advocates also supported highly symbolic personal strategies such as advocating African dress, and Afros, rather than attempting to mirror white culture.

Like women's consciousness raising groups, black power proponents believed in decentralized groups, although these groups were focused on 'black' issues rather than male/female issues. The intent was similar, giving the participants in the group the opportunity to examine their own behavior and attitudes about who they were, as black individuals, and how they should reflect that in society.

Looking at Visions

Each movement - liberal feminism, radical feminism, black civil rights, and black power carried out strategies intended to realize their vision of some ideal future. What follows is an attempt to briefly profile how these strategies reflect each group's vision, and to consider how each vision incorporated race, class, gender and sexual identity perspectives.

Black Civil Rights / Liberal Feminism
Strategies of liberal feminists (working with male allies, education and legal challenges) reflected a vision of full integration and equal opportunity within current society. This vision assumes that, as individuals, the only difference between men and women is the different opportunities they have for education and employment. Strategies resulting from this vision attempt to remove structural and attitudinal barriers in order to provide equal competition for these resources.

The vision of liberal feminism generalized the experience of heterosexual white middle class women (and men) to all women (and men) . It did not take race,

class or sexual identity into account except to assume that all perspectives were the same. Critiquing the liberal feminist analysis found in the liberal feminist classic, "The Feminist Mystique", Zillah Elsenstein says, "Friedan misses the point in that idealogy about feminity applies differently to women of different economic classes and races, and that the way one relates to it is not a matter of individual choice" (Eisenstein 1981:184). For example, while Friedan wrote about the problems of bored house-wives, 60% of black women worked, 40% of those as domestics (Langston 1989). At first, lesbians were not part of the vision--their presence in NOW was deemed a "lavender menace".

For liberal feminists and black civil rights advocates, these strategies reflected their vision of how to correct the county's problems. Liberal feminists saw little difference between women and men. Leaders such as Betty Friedan, believed the problem was that women were being excluded from public life. If women were given the opportunity to compete, regardless of her sex, she could achieve greater independence. Liberal feminists perceived the problem to also be one of education; people had bad idea/attitudes' about women. If educated, society would acknowledge that the criteria for opportunities should be on an individual basis of competence, not sex. These wrong ideas/attitudes were perpetuated through ignorance.

These improper ideas were also perpetuated by legal barriers. Barriers which NOW recognized and sought to change in its Bill of Rights. Barriers in the areas of; sex discrimination, maternity leave rights, tax deductions for home and child care expenses, equal and unsegregated education and equal job training opportunities for women. Black civil rights liberals also attributed the perpetuation of inequality to the 'bad attitudes/ideas' of particular whites.

Strategies of the black civil rights movement (legal challenges, new legislation, education, nonviolent direct action) reflected the vision of a racially integrated society achieved by nonviolent means. Inherent in the vision is the assumption of a pluralistic society whose institutions can offer equal opportunity to individuals living within that society. Thus the emphasis is placed on removing barriers to individual equality and opportunity in the public sphere.

The black civil rights movement focused on black/white relations, not directly on other racial experiences. Black civil rights movement strategies, like integration, were criticized because they did not address the economic situation of blacks. Shirley Chisholm noted that "They can ride in the front of the bus but few can afford the fare." (Chisholm 1973) Gender issues were not addressed, the vision of equality for blacks was seen as adequately encompassing black male and female experience. Although Cynthia Washington recalled having equal responsibility in the movement, many women, such as Ella Baker, spoke of sexism, "I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are

accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role" (Washington 1977/ Baker 1973:351).

Black Power / Radical Feminism
Radical feminist strategies (separate organizations, radical theory, collective actions against institutions, and self-education) reflected a vision of women achieving global self-determination or liberation, as a political class. The assumption of psychological coercion by a ruling class of men, led to strategies that emphasized separation, the elimination of institutions enforcing existing heterosexual relations, and the creation of a new female identity.

Radical feminists falsely generalized white middle class sex roles, to people of all races and classes. This led to faulty assumptions. For example, it was assumed that the family as an institution, was universally oppressive, an assumption that was disputed by many women of color at the time (Maria Varela, quoted by Sutherland 1970 p.377). The movement lacked a race or class analysis except to say, "male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination...all other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy" (Redstockings 1975:113). Analogies to black experience, like slavery, were used as if they applied to white middle class women. In practice, consciousness-raising groups marginalized women whose behavior or appearance were not characteristic of white middle class norms. This included "visible" lesbians, despite the rhetoric embracing lesbianism as the ultimate rejection of heterosexual institutions.

The black power movement's strategies (separation from whites, direct action against institutions, and the creation of a positive black identity) reflected a vision of economic and political self-determination for blacks as a class coming about by force, if necessary. Inherent in this vision was the identification of a white capitalist state, ruling through economic and psychological control. Resulting strategies focused on removing those controls and replacing them with economic independence and black pride.

The black power movement incorporated race and economic class into its vision (coalitions with poor whites were considered as a strategy). Black women, in particular, grappled with how to incorporate gender perspectives into the movement. The attempt to create a positive black identity led to an "exhibitionism of manhood" (Giddings 1984:315), prompting Francis Beale to say, "those who are exerting their manhood by telling, black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position" (Beale 1970:93). The assumption of heterosexual experience (debates over birth control, heterosexual families) in the black power movement left other sexual identities invisible.

These strategies reflect the different philosophy which radical feminist/ black

power groups operated under. Their vision of 'what ails society' was different from the vision held by liberal feminist black civil rights groups. For radical feminists the biggest philosophical difference was the shift from the public sphere to the private sphere. The slogan 'the personal is political' reflects this ideological change. Radical feminists recognized that there were biological gender differences between women and men. Their focus was on the ways in which these gender differences were exploited by men, particularly in the private sphere. In fact, radical feminists saw male supremacy as the root of all oppression. Female oppression continued because men benefitted, not merely economically but also psychologically from women' oppression. Radical feminist visions of the future was one in which male institutions such as the family and romantic love, were destroyed. The vision held that such change could only occur when women as a group were self-defined, without traces of this male oppression.

Black power movements shared many similar ideas in their vision of the world. Black power groups recognized that differences existed between whites and blacks. Stokely Carmichael, in "The Black Power Revolt", defines black power as "the creation of power bases from which black people can work to change statewide or nationwide patterns of oppression through pressure from strength not from weakness."(Carmichael 1968) To define their strength, it was necessary for blacks to gather in small, decentralized groups, and focus on the personal in order to determine what defined them as black, as opposed to white. They needed to define what their strengths were, and what talents and needs they possessed. Then, and only then, could the group work for the economical, political and social changes which black power held as its vision.

Conclusion

Liberal and radical feminist visions and strategies were influenced by the black movements of the 1960's. Liberal feminism most closely parallels the black civil rights movement in its focus on integration and removing barriers to individual achievement in the public sphere. Radical feminism parallels the black power movement in its emphasis on class liberation through the elimination of institutional and psychological controls. The full range of class, race, gender, and sexual identity perspectives was not consistently present in any of these movements. The writings of black women theorists often pointed out these omissions and contradictions, pushing the movement visions and strategies toward a more complex, multi-fauceted treatment of oppression.

Liberal feminism has been critiqued for its white middle class focus. Liberal feminism not only overlooked gender differences, it also overlooked racial and class differences. ZIllah Elsenstein, in *Feminist Mystique and the Politics of NOW*,

articulates this crisis, "this pluralist view of politics ignores the relation between power and privilege because it assumes equality of opportunity" (Eisenstein 1981). Furthermore, many of the concerns which Friedan and NOW articulated as universal feminist concerns were in actuality, middle class concerns. For example, poor women and women of color did not need access to the job market...they were already there. What they needed were fair wages for work they already did. Liberal feminism did not incorporate sexual identity into their vision, and in some instances actively sought to prevent its inclusion, such as the ouster attempts, in NOW, of the "Lavender Menace."

Similarly, while black civil rights did struggle for equality on the basis of race, they were not as actively involved in incorporating gender, class or sexual identity into their vision. Many black civil rights groups survived on the labor and contributions of women, black and white, yet women seldom held key leadership roles or had input into policy development in those organizations. That is not to say that women were excluded, rather that their involvement was limited.

Radical feminism also tended to focus on white middle class attitudes and beliefs. Racial differences and sexual identity tended to disappear. Many women of color felt that their ideas, natural from their perspective, were viewed as unenlightened by white radical feminists who analyzed conduct solely through a white middle class female/male perspective and ignored possible racial or class differences. However, the continued critique of heterosexuality, within the radical feminist movement, may have encouraged early lesbian feminist politics.

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