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Women's Liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly

> Approximately fifty members of the five Chicago radical women's groups met on Saturday, May 18, 1968, to hold a citywide conference. The main purposes of the conference were to create and strengthen ties among groups and individuals, to generate a heightened sense of common history and purpose, and to provoke imaginative programmatic ideas and plans. In other words, the conference was an early step in the process of movement building.
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> —*Voice of Women's Liberation Movement*, June 1968[1]

EVERY ACCOUNT OF THE RE-EMERGENCE of feminism in the United States in the late twentieth century notes the ferment that took place in 1967 and 1968. The five groups meeting in Chicago in May 1968 had, for instance, flowered from what had been a single Chicago group just a year before. By the time of the conference in 1968, activists who used the term "women's liberation" understood themselves to be building a movement. Embedded in national networks of student, civil rights, and antiwar movements, these activists were aware that sister women's liberation groups were rapidly forming across the country. Yet despite some

1. Sarah Boyte (now Sara M. Evans, the author of this article), "from Chicago," *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement,* June 1968, p. 7. I am grateful to Elizabeth Faue for serendipitously sending this document from the first newsletter of the women's liberation movement created by Jo Freeman.

early work, including my own, the particular formation calling itself the women's liberation movement has not been the focus of most scholarship on late twentieth-century feminism. For the sake of this article and in the spirit of an ongoing conversation, I will begin by offering a definition specific to the moment:

> **Women's Liberation** was a radical, multiracial feminist movement that grew directly out of the New Left, civil rights, antiwar, and related freedom movements of the 1960s. Its insight that "the personal is political," its intentionally decentralized structure, and its consciousness raising method allowed it to grow so fast and with such intensity that it swept up liberal feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) in a wildfire of change. After 1970 "women's liberation" was a label appropriated by a very wide variety of groups of women who may have had little or no connection to its originators.

Now, it is true that temporal boundaries are hard to draw. We can locate many of the first women's liberation groups starting in 1967 and 1968, the moment described at the start of this article. There are, however, numerous precursor groups that make trying to define the precise originators difficult.[2] Many identify the West Side Group in Chicago as

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2. See Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: Longman, 1975); Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979); and Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). See also Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 225–45; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America,* rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2006), chap. 4; and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), chap. 2.

In Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), one can find reprints of some of the earliest black women's groups. See especially Patricia Robinson and Black Sisters, "Poor Black Women," September 11, 1968 (p. 135) and Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson, "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women," mimeographed position paper, Mt. Vernon, NY, 1969–70 (pp. 93–95). Barbara Winslow describes a women's liberation group in Seattle that had its own political

the first, followed quickly by a group in New York City that later became New York Radical Women. But we also know that there was a radical black feminist group before that in New Rochelle and Mount Vernon, New York, and that other groups were appearing, apparently spontaneously, in many places, such as Gainesville, Florida, Seattle, Washington, and New Orleans, Louisiana. These original groups and their successors persisted until the mid-1970s, but changing contexts, structures, and ideas, as well as the enormous breadth of the movement, make it hard to locate the precise moment when women's liberation merged or morphed into something else. What is interesting is that, by the mid-1970s, the label "women's liberation" was pretty much gone, superseded by "radical feminist," "socialist feminist," "lesbian feminist," "womanist," or just "feminist." Even though the women's liberation movement was the spark that lit the fire, the term "women's liberation" receded for many decades to brief mentions in accounts of the rise of late twentieth-century feminism. It is only now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, that we have the serious beginnings of a literature that explores and redresses this history. This article draws on the findings of this literature.[3]

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roots in part of the "old" Left. See Barbara Winslow, "Primary and Secondary Contradictions in Seattle: 1967–1969," in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 225–48.

3. See Rosen, *The World Split Open;* Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: A Memoir of Revolution* (New York: Dial Press, 2000); Evans, *Tidal Wave*; Baxandall and Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters*; Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Sonia Shah, *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire* (Boston: South End Press, 1999); Nancy Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). See also local studies cited in this article, fn. 12. I should note that *Feminist Studies* has played a key role in generating this new literature. Nancy Hewitt traces the origin of *No Permanent Waves* to conversations within the editorial collective of *Feminist Studies*, and several of the articles in that collection were originally published in *Feminist Studies*.

Why has the women's liberation movement been, until recently, such a minor footnote in the dominant narratives of late twentieth-century feminism? One answer is that feminist historians, many of whom were themselves movement activists in this period, wrote — as historians are wont to do — about a more distant past. One can easily see the questions posed by the women's liberation movement in the scholarship they produced on working women, suffrage, the dynamics of power in private as well as public life, gender ideologies, black women, and so on.[4] Research on the materials produced within the women's liberation movement, however, would not happen for decades, and, in the absence of empirical research, a series of misconceptions about Second Wave feminism came into being to fill the void.

Theoretical attention to Second Wave feminism emerged first among literary and social science scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, but their interest was more in the development of theory than on movement activism. It was these academy-based theorists who fixed the perception of 1970s Second Wave feminists as white, middle-class, self-interested, and anti-sex. In so doing, they were identifying a real weakness in feminist self-representations as well as feminist activism that lacked a language to adequately deal with the conundrums of gender, race, and class. Only in the 1980s did the vocabulary of intersectionality present a breakthrough that has become foundational to all feminist theory. However, feminists of the 1980s were not the first to think about the ways that oppressions occurred simultaneously, and the presumption of an almost

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4. To get a sense of this early paradigm-shifting work see, for example, Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters of South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Nancy Cott, *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women* (New York: Dutton, 1972); *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism: 1870–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); and Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975).

total rupture with earlier feminist movement theorizing on race unfortunately, in my view, cut them off from important feminist roots.[5]

Popularized versions of Second Wave feminism have also generated myths that make it difficult to perceive the critical role of the women's liberation movement in the re-emergence of feminism. The most popular one is the simplistic, media-dominated account starring "famous" women such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. It offers a chronology that traces major legal and legislative changes — *Roe v. Wade*, Title IX, and the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) — and relegates the women's liberation movement to a brief mention, as if the radicals were on the edges of the movement, not at the center. Then there are the myths that come straight from the movement's opponents — that the women's liberation movement is populated by shrill, man-hating, ugly, anti-sex/over-sexed lesbians — which remain a genuine obstacle for contemporary activists and for the students in our classrooms. And finally there is the myth that the women's liberation movement rejected its New Left roots because of the extreme sexism of that movement.

Many of us have chafed at these assumptions for a long time, and some have written books to challenge them. But very few have isolated this particular revolutionary moment for closer examination. Looking closely at women's liberation activists pushes us to question whether the women's liberation movement was all-white and middle class. This stereotype is frequently linked to other assumptions, such as that the movement was uniformly antisex, antimotherhood, and uninterested in labor discrimination. It is critical to note that women's liberation emerged not only in a context of racial polarization in the broader society but also at a time when the left itself was self-consciously fragmented by race. Whites who had been most active in the black freedom movement were asked by their black comrades to leave the black movement and do antiracist work in their own communities. Black power advocates insisted that minorities had to organize separately in order to discover their own power and to affirm identities that had been denigrated and marginalized by US culture. The result was that while feminism emerged in every facet of the 1960s freedom movement, it flowed in parallel streams with varying

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5. For an excellent analysis of this process, see Leela Fernandes, "Unsettling 'Third Wave Feminism': Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect," in *No Permanent Waves,* 98–118.

degrees of awareness of one another in the very early years. While the mainstream media's face of women's liberation most often was white and middle class, its actual actors were not. Benita Roth, Kimberly Springer, Maylei Blackwell, Sonia Shah, Cherríe Moraga, Paula Gunn Allen, and others have traced the lineages of feminism in African American, Chicano, American Indian, and Asian American movements.[6] Roth's work identifies the distinct paths taken by black, Chicana, and white feminist organizing efforts. The intersections of these streams become most visible at the local level. Anne Valk's fine-grained study of Second Wave feminism and black liberation in Washington, DC, casts a wide net and yields a wonderfully complex story of their overlapping commitments. Rosalyn Baxandall analyzes an array of radical black feminist groups and writings in the 1960s and early 1970s, and Carol Giardina draws on black feminist writings and actions both before and after the self-designated early women's liberation groups began to form to trace multiple lines of communication and mutual influence.[7]

As an expression of the New Left, women's liberation was inspired by the models of anticolonial revolutions and by Black Power, models that often had different meanings for white women and women of color. Subsequent generations have rightly seen in the words of white women in the late 1960s and early 1970s an untenably unified concept

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6. See, for example, Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!*; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Shah, *Dragon Ladies*; Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution*; Devon Abbott Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Persephone Press, 1981); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983); and Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

7. Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Baxandall, "Re-Visioning"; Carol Giardina, *Freedom for Women: Forging the Women's Liberation Movement, 1953–1970* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010).

of "woman"—the "we" that is critical to the project of building a movement but that is inevitably fraught by the impossibility of collapsing the diverse experiences of half the population. There is no doubt that white women too often universalized their own experience by presuming to speak to and for "all" women. But later generations failed to notice that women of color from the beginning raised the problem of their double and triple jeopardy, pointing out the sharp differences in experience when gender intersects with race and class. It simply will not do to erase the theoretical and strategic feminist voices of women such as Pat Robinson, Francis Beale, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Florynce Kennedy, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Martinez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Shirley Lim.[8] Paying attention to these women pluralizes the "women" in the women's liberation movement.

To acknowledge that conversations about race were difficult is altogether different from claiming that there were no such conversations. Women's liberation was multiracial from the outset, and race was often at the center of its discourse, even if it took place in a context of racial polarization. Given the reality of segregated living and community spaces, the diverse voices of the women's liberation movement did not always speak directly with each other, and when they did, they often did not listen well.[9] This story is not reducible to anything simple or monolithic, and it deserves a serious and complex analysis.[10] We have to clear away the myth that feminists were "all white" to get at the generative

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8. For some of the earliest statements, see Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970); and the articles by Robinson and her group reprinted in *Dear Sisters*. See also Barbara Omolade, "Sisterhood in Black and White," in *The Feminist Memoir Project*, 393–94.
9. The term "identity politics" did not exist until sometime in the mid-1970s, but the idea had its roots in the politics of the late 1960s. The Combahee River Collective wrote one of the early articulations of this concept in 1977, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," reprinted in *Home Girls,* ed., Smith, 264–74.
10. There are many ironies in this complex story. Within the first year, there was a so-called feminist/politico split, which outside New York was more a debate than a split. The argument, led by white women on each side, referenced race throughout. Those arguing most strenuously for a separate women's movement modeled their proposal on the separatism of Black Power, while others feared prioritizing gender in a way that could detach women's liberation from the struggles over race and class. Such ideological debates,

aspects of the conversations and debates that did occur and to understand why and how they were so difficult.

The emergence of intersectionality as a theoretical concept did not so much represent a break with former feminist theorizing as something that grew out of those early conversations and the conundrums that those debates revealed. In the 1960s and 1970s, there really was not a language with which to describe the simultaneity of race, class, and gender, and activists steeped in Marxist tradition defined their task as proving that the hierarchies of gender were fundamental forms of oppression against a long tradition in which sex was a "secondary" oppression, subordinate to the "fundamental contradiction" of class. Modes of analysis for race, class, and gender at that point formed separate streams with an assumption that only one of those could be "primary." As a result, conversations regularly broke down, and women of color, quite rightly, often felt that their insistence on their double and triple jeopardy fell on deaf ears. Ironically, it may be that those who were most enamored of Black Power as a model embraced a kind of separatism that, by the mid-1970s, had produced the white and middle-class "feminist subject" described by Jane Gerhard. Gerhard's analysis of the evolution of cultural feminism in the mid- to late 1970s demonstrates how "the universal category of 'woman' in cultural feminism … relied upon psychologically essentialist readings of gender that attempted to elide racial difference."[11] Yet I would argue that it has been a mistake to read the works of people such as Carol Gilligan and Andrea Dworkin as descriptors of the movement as a whole, because that would have us lose sight of ongoing grassroots efforts to build coalitions across lines of race that never stopped.

Secondly, the women's liberation movement, as a radical New Left movement, was confined neither to major cities nor to the United States. As someone who was active in the South, I have long chafed at the assumption that the movement was centered in New York with outposts in

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however, quickly became hair-splitting as the movement took on its own momentum with no single group or point of view clearly in control.

11. Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920–1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 182. Gerhard builds her case on a close analysis of cultural feminist theorists, including Dorothy Dinnerstein, Carol Gilligan, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Susan Brownmiller.

Chicago and Berkeley. The complex realities in the United States are just beginning to emerge in local studies such as Judith Ezekiel's on Dayton, Ohio; Anne Enke's on Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit; Anne Valk's on Washington, DC; and Carol Giardina's on Florida.[12] The international links of the movement were also there from the outset. The very term "women's liberation" owes much to Vietnamese and other anticolonial liberation struggles.[13] Across the globe, antiwar and anticolonial movements during 1968 spawned feminist activism in countries as diverse as Japan, Mexico, France, Germany, Italy, and England. This feminist activism was not in imitation of what was happening in the United States. Each country had its own feminist history and roots, although the founding stories are remarkably similar. All of them shared a focus on personal freedom and a radically egalitarian willingness to challenge every form of hierarchy.[14]

Thirdly, the stereotype that women's liberation activists were "shrill" and "ugly" points us to the militancy of the women's liberation movement and the radical, utopian, sometimes apocalyptic, expectations of a particular moment in the New Left, both in the United States and around the world: the belief that everything could change, perhaps overnight. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, revolution seemed possible, even imminent. This meant that people threw their whole lives into the struggle, convinced that it could transform the world almost overnight.

The radicalism of the women's liberation movement (compared to the liberal movement, which I hasten to point out also had some deep roots in the New Left) was its cultural challenge not to unjust laws but to the very definitions of female and male, the entire system then called "sex roles" by sociologists. Women's liberation linked structural inequalities to lived personal experience; "the personal is political" erased

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12. Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); Enke, *Finding the Movement*; Valk, *Radical Sisters*; Giardina, *Freedom for Women*. See also Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions*; and Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.
13. It should also be noted that the use of "women's liberation" in anticolonial struggles was rooted, in turn, in the rhetoric of the Bolshevik and Chinese Revolutions.
14. For an analysis of the international emergence of feminisms in 1968, see Sara M. Evans, "Sons, Daughters, and Patriarchy: Gender and the 1968 Generation," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 2 (April 2009): 331–47.

boundaries between public and private. The writings of the women's liberation movement, frequently cited and anthologized, were clearly foundational to everything that came later.[15]

The energy and intensity of those first two to three years cannot be overstated and is extremely difficult to communicate to people in a later, more cynical time. Arguments were fierce because the stakes were high. In many places that energy shifted very quickly from naming the problem to doing something about it: start a journal, write a book, create a daycare center, set up softball teams and karate classes, organize clerical workers, hold a demonstration, dramatize with guerilla theater. There is a reason that the August 1970 Women's Strike for Equality was so massive and that the label that the media picked up for what women wanted was "women's liberation," even though the strike was initially called by NOW. Many members of NOW had been ignited by the militant language and public presence of the women's liberation movement and embraced that label. In cities across the country, tens of thousands used humorous guerilla theater to underscore their angry critique of women's subordination. They quickly got the attention of politicians who soon were falling all over themselves to figure out "what women really want," making possible an avalanche of legal changes from congressional passage of the ERA and Title IX to public funding for rape-crisis hotlines and shelters for battered women.

Finally, the women's liberation movement's New Left roots have been obscured by the myth that it rejected the New Left because of exceptionally harsh sexism in those movements. This myth allowed subsequent generations to feel sorry for New Left women, to distance themselves from an experience they considered "outrageous" and "dated," and to dismiss the other concerns of the New Left as irrelevant.

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15. No account of the Second Wave can ignore early papers and books, many of which were quickly anthologized. Some of the books published in 1970 include Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970); Leslie Tanner, ed., *Voices from Women's Liberation* (New York: Signet, 1970); Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman*; Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970); and Celestine Ware, *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation* (New York: Tower, 1970). Note that three of these have "women's liberation" in the title, and two (Cade Bambara and Ware) are authored or edited by black women.

This stereotype grew from a widespread and consistent pattern of sexism that goes beyond the New Left. The founding documents of every branch of late 1960s feminism that was born from radical and anti-colonial movements, whether in the United States or around the world, cite the sexism women experienced in those movements as what gave rise to the feminist movements of the time. Yes, women were angry, often extremely angry, but their rage was not because those movements were *worse* than other environments.[16] In a world where extreme sexism was, in fact, the norm, many facets of the civil rights and student movements were often substantially better, and those were the very spaces that produced a feminist response.[17] As activists, women had developed the tools of movement building: understanding how power operates, the ability to name and challenge hierarchies of all kinds, organizing strategies, self-confidence, and courage. Freedom movements in the 1960s, like abolition in the 1830s, were what some of us call "free spaces," environments that enabled a new sense of possibility by giving the women not only egalitarian ideals but also the skills to challenge hierarchical structures and attitudes.

While sexism was in the air everywhere, these were the women who could smell its toxic odor, and they had the skills and the confidence to act. Their feminist reaction to sexist colleagues and comrades — how dare you treat us this way? — took them in a new direction and allowed them to name the lived experiences of millions of women. How they did that, however, was deeply shaped by their roots in the New Left.[18]

Here is where local studies can help us begin both to understand what worked so well and to wrestle with the movement's limitations.

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16. See, for example, Marge Piercy, "The Grand Coolie Damn," and Robin Morgan, "Goodbye to All That," both in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*.
17. In my research for my 1980 book *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, I found that the parts of the movement that enabled a feminist reaction were those with the greatest opportunity for women to develop leadership and movement-building skills. Where leadership was most monopolized by men, for example in the draft resistance movement and some parts of the campus-based student movement, there were fewer spaces for women to develop the strength and self-confidence to confront the sexism that was invariably there.
18. For a discussion of the concept of "free space," see Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

This creative outpouring of new ideas, organizations, and institutions coexisted with dilemmas that were never fully resolved: race was a problem, a deep division, and class shaped where and how activists organized and built institutions.[19] The effort to find "the truth"—or correct line—led in some places to a kind of feminist sectarianism as one group split from another over ideological differences; attacks on leaders caused many brilliant trailblazers to burn out or withdraw.[20]

Women's liberation disappeared from the landscape, a victim mostly of its own success but also of its internal weaknesses and the massive backlash that it provoked. Utopian expectations for revolutionary change were no longer tenable after the mid-1970s, and many people were burned out in the effort to get there. But the women's liberation movement did change the world as we know it, and we must not forget.

This article is based on a keynote address for a conference on "Women's Liberation: A Revolutionary Moment" at Boston University, March 29, 2014.

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19. On this point Anne Enke's spatial analysis of feminist activism in Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis is especially revealing. See Enke, *Finding The Movement.*
20. For a fuller discussion of these problems, see Evans, *Tidal Wave*, chap. 4.