



Impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Women's Liberation Movement

by Carol Hanisch

I want to thank the organizers of this symposium for inviting me to be on this panel. Not only am I pleased to be here, but preparing this presentation has caused me to remember a whole lot of things about the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s that I usually don't have occasion to think much about. At first, I was worried that I wouldn't have enough to say, but I was really amazed when I started making a list of all the ways in which the Chinese Revolution had affected my political work and my life.

I was excited to see that William Hinton would be the keynote speaker. His book, *Fanshen*, really "blew my mind," as we used to say back in the '60s. Kathie Sarachild had encouraged me to read it soon after our group—New York Radical Women—began. *Fanshen* opened the door for many of us to communist theory and practice—and it gave us an enormous amount of help in our immediate organizing and theory building, as well as serving as a step to the works of Mao himself.

In fact, Bill Price (who some of you may remember used to write for the *National Guardian*!) arranged for a few of us to visit Bill Hinton on his farm. We spent the afternoon doing some manual labor. My job was to liberate the corn stalks from the oppressive wild morning glory vines. After we talked and ate, Bill Hinton disappeared for a few minutes only to return with a stack of wonderful, colorful revolutionary Chinese peasant posters. I had never seen anything like them. This was art that I could really appreciate!

Many of us radical feminists soon discovered Mao was easier to read than Marx, Engels and Lenin, and what he had to say was both concrete and relevant to our own struggle. Besides, the male Left was using Marx, Engels and Lenin to bludgeon radical women

theoretically about how wrong we were to try to start an independent women's liberation movement that dealt directly and exclusively with women's oppression. Later, when we went to these original sources (which were also Mao's original sources) and read them for ourselves, we discovered much of what had been quoted at us wasn't quite accurate or had been taken out of context and wasn't quite applicable.

We also found that Mao wrote a lot about the problems within the movement and how to handle them, which was something always on our front burner. At first we read snitches and snatches, such as those found in the *Little Red Book*, which it seemed everyone was reading. Later, many of us moved on to his essays and eventually delved into his Selected Writings. We didn't say, "Chairman Mao says..." as a top-down directive, as some groups did. We didn't even say, "Now we are going to apply the theory of the Chinese Revolution to our struggle." It was just there and we used it because it worked.

I have a hard time separating the influence of the general Chinese Revolution from the Cultural Revolution. To me the Cultural Revolution seems a continuation of the Revolution: a means to make it go deeper so that it didn't get caught in the bureaucracy and complacency that sets in once power is won militarily and a new group of people—including opportunists in the revolutionary movement itself—have a stake in creating the new status quo. It's a continuation of the process by which the masses of working people, including women and minorities, take total political, economic and social power. It's the next step to achieving real communism; that is, a society completely devoid of class, including that of sex and race. We considered sexism and racism more than just a tradition of behavior or a bad or ignorant habit. Being materialists (in the Marxist

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sense), we asked, “Who benefits?”

I also had some trouble sorting out just what came to the Women’s Liberation Movement from the Chinese Revolution and what came to us from the Black Revolution—first from the Civil Rights Movement and later from the Black Liberation Movement. I think it’s fair to say that the Civil Rights Movement inspired both our understanding of the need for a mass, grassroots women’s liberation movement and the initial use of the radical weapon of consciousness raising as its organizing program. The knowledge that came from the Chinese Revolution helped deepen that understanding and helped us further develop consciousness-raising into the powerful tool that it became before liberal revisionism took it over and depoliticised it.

In fact, we had a poster composed by Kathie Sarachild that we hung in our New York Radical Women meetings in 1968 that read:

Speak Pains to Recall Pains
— the Chinese Revolution

Tell It Like It Is
— the Black Revolution

Bitch, Sisters, Bitch
— the Final Revolution

Another example was Mao’s essay “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People.” We realized very early on that there are contradictions among women just as there were among the Chinese people that had to be understood and addressed. We used consciousness raising to delve into and try to resolve contradictions among women, such as why some women said they liked to wear make-up while others said they hated it, why some women loved their mothers for teaching them to be feminine and why some hated them for it, why some women wanted daycare so they could join the public workforce and others wanted to stay home with their kids.

Criticism/self criticism was also employed by our movement. In fact, I think the first time it appeared in writing was in a paper I wrote in the fall of 1968 called “What Is to Be Learned: A Critique of the Miss America Protest.” It took a critical look at how the demonstration, which had originated in our group, New York Radical Women, had been carried out. It criticized certain theoretical tendencies represented by several anti-woman picket signs and actions as well as took ourselves to task for not speaking up about these

things and trying to prevent them from happening. By the way, there were some very angry young men on the fringes of the picket line at the Miss America Protest yelling at us, “Mothers of Mao,” although it would have been more accurate to call us his daughters.

Self-reliance was another concept that aided our struggle. Though we welcomed help from men, we knew we had to ultimately rely on women. One area where this was very successful was in the self-help abortion movement where groups of women learned to perform abortions themselves and did them quite competently before abortion became more legal and more widely available.

Our knowledge of the Chinese Revolution fueled our determinism not to succumb to liberalism. In 1975, Redstockings exposed Gloria Steinem’s connection to the CIA and criticized the liberal ideology put forth in her *MS. magazine*. Even during the most viscous attacks on us from both the Right and the Left—including a good part of the women’s movement—we were able to hold pretty strong to our position that this was relevant information that people needed to know. I remember one of our group bringing to a meeting some copies of a flyer put out by OBU (One Big Union) typesetters in New York, which set the type for our book *Feminist Revolution*. On it were excerpts from Mao’s “On Liberalism” set in various typefaces. Instead of being interested and supportive of us in our discovery of Steinem’s CIA history, many movement people of all kinds attacked us for refusing to be liberal on this issue. Instead of dealing with the political issues raised by Steinem’s sudden rise to power in the Movement and the effects of her corporate-sponsored liberal politics, they accused us of “horizontal hostility,” jealousy, being “unsisterly” and just plain not being nice. Some women couldn’t admit a woman could possibly do anything wrong, a reactionary form of identity politics that was setting in.

We knew Steinem and her wealthy supporters represented not only the “capitalist roaders” but the “male supremacist roaders” in our Movement and would destroy its momentum if not exposed and stopped. But by the mid-1970s, the Women’s Liberation Movement was already too weak, too sold out, too carpet-bagged by opportunists, too confused by liberals, to be able to get its act together. Redstockings put out a book entitled *Feminist Revolution*, which was our attempt to combat the revisionism that was going on, and if you read it, you will see many influences of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in its pages.

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It wasn't just on the theoretical level that we learned from the Chinese Revolution, however. Inspired by an episode described in *Fanshen* where a group of militant women confronted a man who beat his wife by beating him up, a small group of radical women paid a visit to a man who had been cheating on his wife. They decided to cut his long hair to teach him a lesson. There were four or five of them, but even so, they couldn't carry out their action, finding the man too strong. They hadn't learned yet that numbers are often not enough; you have to know how to fight. On another occasion that I know of, a similar group did successfully confront a boss who had refused to pay a woman who had worked for him as a waitress what he owed her when she quit.

One of the most controversial policies of the Cultural Revolution seems to have been that of sending the intellectuals to the countryside to work and learn from the people. I have to confess I loved that policy. I was literally born on a small farm in rural Iowa. I had been able to attend college only because the Soviet Union had launched Sputnik and in the ensuing national panic, loans and scholarships suddenly became widely available.

Although my family was nowhere near as poor as the Chinese peasants, I felt an immediate affinity to the people in Long Bow. I knew firsthand what it was like to live without indoor plumbing, to watch my father go to the bank hat in hand every time he needed a loan to buy seed or to fix a piece of broken equipment, to live in terror of the mortgage on the farm being foreclosed. I had often been scorned as an ignorant "hick"—sometimes even by my movement comrades. The idea that the poor might have a lot to teach the well-off intellectuals was a great source of strength when it came time for me to take some leadership in the movement. To be honest, I can still think of a lot of people—both in and out of the movement—who would benefit from being sent to work in the cabbage patch or maybe on a Kelly Temp clerical assignment! As my friend Ros Baxandall pointed out, we could start by sending ex-President Bush to work the supermarket scanner.²

Mao's teachings on having genuine humility in dealing with people also had a very profound effect on me. Somewhere in his writings he talks about how the organizer should not enter a meeting with an air of importance and take the best chair but should sit among and just be one of the people.

What's more, going to the countryside is, in a sense, what a bunch of mostly young, mostly intellectuals, did when they went to join the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. I was one of them and it totally changed the direction of my whole life and outlook. Experiencing the obvious and raw power of class politics in semi-feudal Mississippi made me political in a way that I had never been before. I even lost my remaining fear of communism one day when I heard a woman sharecropper, who had just come back from a trip to Washington DC with the Freedom Democratic Party, remark: "Every time I asked for something for a decent life, they called me a commonist. Well, it looks like I'm gonna have to get me some of that there commonism."

I learned so much from people poorer and less well educated than I was. Much of my own lingering attitude of superiority, which came with my college degree and white skin, and so many of my misconceptions, which came from my ignorance, were stripped from me during the nine months I spent in the Mississippi Movement. When I found out the Communist Party had done a similar thing in China, I knew they must be on the right track!

These are some of the concrete influences of theory and practice of the Chinese Revolution on the Women's Liberation Movement.

There's something else, however, that we absorbed from the Chinese revolutionary experience that's harder to put into words: Call it inspiration, call it hope, call it desperation, call it courage, call it the subjective conditions, call it the spirit of revolution. Whatever you call it, it was there for us and we added to it. Then it disappeared and nearly everyone who experienced it, longs for it.

What I want to know is, how do we get it back?

1 A leading independent radical newspaper published in the U.S. from 1948 to 1992.

2 President George Bush the First was widely reported as being unfamiliar and amazed upon being shown a supermarket scanner during a grocers' convention in 1988.

Delivered at a panel at a 30th Anniversary Symposium on "China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" at the New School for Social Research in New York on December 14, 1996, an event organized by the China Study Group and co-sponsored by *Monthly Review* and the Economics Students Union of the New School. The panel on "Impact of the Cultural Revolution Outside China" was moderated by Bertell Ollman and also included Amiri Baraka, Robert Weil, Paoyu Ching and Peter Kwong.