

Telltale Words: Depoliticizing the Women's Liberation Movement

by Carol Hanisch

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When I first saw the call for papers for this conference, I just couldn't believe my eyes. There were the words, women's liberation... late 1960s and early 1970s... revolutionary... all in the same title — and non-academic activists were even invited to submit proposals. "How brave!" I thought. In recent years, most of the academy, with some exceptions, seems to have forgotten all about the Women's Liberation Movement. Its radical roots in the 1960s have often been ignored and its referred to as "a '70s movement."

On the one hand it sort of hurts to hear your life's work called only "a revolutionary MOMENT"—but it's true. Although that enormous wave we created is still being ridden today to some extent, it has largely washed out. Yet every woman at this conference who is employed in women's studies or a related field—or hopes to be—owes her job to that "revolutionary moment."

The important part of the 1960s—what made them revolutionary—was not "sex, drugs and rock and roll" as so many claim. What made them revolutionary was STUDY... STRUGGLE... and ORGANIZE. In all of the movements, including women's liberation, there was a sizable core out to change power relationships, not just change ourselves or a piece of the culture or have a good time.

That it was only a "moment" was partly due to our own mistakes—a big topic for another conference—and partly because those who didn't want us to succeed were stronger and

better organized, and of course hugely better funded than we were.

When we became successful enough that the powers-that-be began to see us as a threat, they came after us. Not with guns and prison sentences as in other movements, but with well-funded words and ideas to swamp the early women's liberation success. We of the "study, struggle and organize" part of the '60s have striven for truth, for looking reality square in the face and "telling it like it is" in clear language. Consciousness-raising was developed as an organizing tool for getting at and understanding the reality of our lives in a collective way. And it was for every woman: you didn't need a college education or even a high school diploma to participate.

The words—the terms we used—were part of the revolutionary struggle. Often they had links to other struggles. Looking at our language reveals where we came from and our goals. No doubt new terms are sometimes needed, but we must be alert and ask "Is this new term really better?" "Does it cut us off from our history?" "What is being avoided by not using the old term?"

If we compare the passionate and galvanizing demands of the late '60s and early '70s with what passes as feminism today, we see major changes in strategy and goals. The robust cry for women to unite for organized power to defeat male supremacy has all but disappeared.

Killing off revolutionary words is a serious thing.

The process of putting the brakes on the frightening specter of angry women rising up and making big demands for big changes is reflected in the gradual disappearance of our very name: *Women's...Liberation...Movement*.

LIBERATION was the first to go. It was a partial “castration” at first as we found ourselves shortened to “women’s lib” and “women’s libber.” Next, came the “Women’s Movement,” which sounded a lot less threatening with liberation gone—and it was. That word “liberation” was much too radical for academic and foundation funding so some women became tools in its eradication.

MOVEMENT was next to go. A movement in this context is a class of people in motion. The Women’s Liberation Movement was the masses of women in motion seeking collective power to end our status as the second sex. There were many articles written by Women’s Liberation Movement activists talking about power for women, even a book call “Woman Power” by Celestine Ware—Oh, that’s right—she was a Black woman and we ALL know that no Black women considered themselves part of the so-called white Women’s Liberation Movement — because women’s historians have told us so!

So what else do the powers-that-be do—the ones who want to contain us? First they tell us that power is something unseemly for women to seek. Power is a nasty thing that should only be sought by men. Next we are told to seek personal empowerment — not the power of women uniting like a union to force social change — but to seek “agency” — more choice — for individual women. If every woman just had enough choices and “leaned in” in the right way, her dreams would come true, never mind that those choices are not good enough. Books and magazine articles urging women on to “self-empowerment” have replaced those early “strident” feminist tracts against male supremacy. Then came “Third Wave” feminism full of more of the same —

“empowerment,” “expressing themselves” and seeking “safe spaces” — not with changing the world. Feminism became whatever a woman says it is. Everyone from Sarah Palin to Lady Gaga could call herself a feminist and who could deny it?

We are now in the middle of the erasure of even the word **WOMEN**, so there will soon be nothing left of the Women’s Liberation Movement. The existence of women as an oppressed sex class is being challenged and over-ridden by “**gender**.” If it were in the way that Simone de Beauvoir talked about it when she wrote about how women are made, not born, we could welcome it. But in gender theory, women are no longer considered a sex oppressed by the other sex. We exist as a “fluid” gender, not a sex. As a gender, everyone can ignore sex class and play around with their “presentation” to suit themselves.

Meanwhile the categories of women and men can be whisked out of the way without dealing with the pesky root causes of women’s oppression. We can eliminate “the binary” in two ways: end male supremacy and therefore the oppression of women, or eliminate women by substituting gender.

On our campuses, what started out as **Women’s Studies** or **Feminist Studies** — inspired by Black Studies and fought hard for by the revolutionaries of the Revolutionary Moment — are now in danger of disappearing into the amorphous Gender or Sexuality Studies. Women’s Studies contained a good deal of Women’s Liberation content in its beginnings. Maybe if they had called themselves “Women’s Liberation Studies” in the first place — as they should have as that is where this academic program came from — it would have helped keep them on track.

All women need “a purse of her own” as Susan B. Anthony used to say, but we need much more. Somehow many people, including those who call themselves feminists, seem to forget that

women are the reproductive class — the class that carries and births the next generation of the human race — something the whole of society benefits from. Since the roots of our oppression lie in this female reproductive capacity, this is a dangerous thing to ignore. It is necessary to unite and fight to protect ourselves from exploitation as the world's baby-makers.

We need men to step up and share the childcare and housework and we need our government to provide free 24-hour childcare just as it provides kindergarten. We need reasonable paid parental leave and elder care leave.

We need a sharing—by men and by society—of the burden that falls on women because we are still relegated as the caretakers of the young, the old, and the sick. Some women have managed to escape that burden, but it is usually because they can afford to hire some other woman, often a woman of color or an immigrant, to do it for them. Even many rich Black women have maids.

We need equality whether we have--or aspire to have--children or not. There are many needs that must be met for women's liberation to be realized, especially for those who want both liberation AND children. We shouldn't have to choose between work and having a child or trying to do it all or foisting it off on another woman. Unfortunately those demands are no longer front and center as they were during the revolutionary moment, except in some individual organizations. Perhaps we have to spend so much time trying not to get pregnant that we forget that sometimes we do want to be parents.

There are many other terms that have been replaced that show the change in goals and strategy. I only have time to go into a few of them, but I have a handout here with a longer list. I'm sure you can add on to it.

Let's talk about **abortion**, now known as **choice**.

Roe V. Wade was handed down by the Supreme

Court to placate a loud and feisty Movement demanding "Free abortion on demand" and "Repeal all abortion laws." The placating pretty much worked. With Roe, too much of the Women's Liberation Movement declared abortion rights won and moved on, leaving behind poor women, rural women, those in the so-called "flyover zone" and others without easy access to an abortion. We didn't finish the battle in those areas, and now these are the places where the anti-abortion forces have a strong foothold. Unfortunately for us, Roe was not about every woman's right to an abortion and repealing all abortion laws, it was about the right to privacy.

Once the mighty abortion rights movement abandoned itself to the wrong-headed strategy of "pro-choice," the word "abortion" as used by our side was pretty much off the table, making it harder to make demands for abortion once again.

Some other terms:

Battered women or **violence against women** has become **domestic violence** or **domestic abuse**, taking the emphasis off the fact that nearly all batterers are male. This gets in the way of effective solutions.

Rape has become "**non-consensual sex**. To see what's wrong with that, just imagine yelling "Help! I'm having non-consensual sex" instead of "Help! I'm being raped." Rape has a history.

In many cases, abortion, battered women and rape crisis center workers have softened their words and divorced themselves from the women's liberation movement because of their need for funding. These centers should be taxpayer-funded through the government, but for the most part, they are not. Most are foundation-funded.

Foundations are a financial tool for rich people to avoid paying taxes on their excess profits and to improve their image while promoting their interests. They give back a few pennies of what

they already stole from workers and consumers. In modern capitalism, everything is for sale and exploitation—including women and feminism. Foundation money has played a huge part in defanging radical feminism. Big foundations fund smaller foundations. For example, the Ford, Rockefeller and other large foundations fund the Ms. Foundation or the Feminist Majority Foundation, which in turn distributes the funds to groups that follow their liberal line that doesn't really threaten the one per cent. Corporate funding from such financial giants as Goldman Sachs and the Bank of America also have had their fingers in the feminist pie. You can find this out with a Google search.

Neither foundations nor the government will fund revolutionary organizations or projects, so those projects get watered down, both in name and in their practice. It's a terrible dilemma. Groups need money to carry on their work, but the work becomes only what the foundations and the wealthy approve of. Worse, this watering down eventually effects even groups that don't get the funds themselves but have to deal with the anti-radical fallout. The only alternative is to depend on donations and/or dues or do grassroots fund-raising. Hard as it is to compete with the corporate-funded groups, I wouldn't look to them for any "revolutionary moments" in the future, much less for the real revolution we so badly need.

We must also face the fact that universities are not the hot-beds of radical activity that they were in the 1960s. They too depend more and more on corporate grants. This no doubt has a lot to do with the austerity being imposed on education funding and huge student debt, but it's not going to get better until we make it better.

Academia itself has contributed greatly to replacing the language of struggle with the elitist and often inaccessible language of the academy, like post-modernism, binary, agency, deconstruct, complicate, and so on. Neither the

words nor the concepts have much meaning to most women's real lives. They serve only to make even students feel stupid.

The Women's Liberation Movement itself is not blameless in all this backsliding. The threads of self-empowerment and individualism, division and disunity, were in the Movement from its beginnings. There were women in consciousness raising groups, for instance, who resisted attempts to draw conclusions, make judgments and take positions. The forerunner of "self-empowerment" was striving to be the mythical "liberated woman."

It is crucial to study the backlash and how it works so we can defend against it and not repeat previous mistakes. To make the "revolutionary moment" more than just a "MOMENT"--is going to require less "sex, drugs and rock & roll" and a good deal more "study, struggle and organize."

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