

Interview

Women who dreamed of emancipation

Saturday 28 July 2012, by [ORR Judith](#), [ROWBOTHAN Sheila](#) (Date first published: April 2010).

A new generation is taking up the struggle against women's oppression. Sheila Rowbotham spoke to Judith Orr about her latest book celebrating women who were fighting for liberation 100 years ago.

Judith Orr - Your new book, *Dreamers of a New Day*, explores the period around the turn of the 20th century. What motivated you to write about this period?

Sheila Rowbotham - The book has a very long history. When I was writing *Century of Women* I worked through the period and summarised different aspects of politics and work. But I had material that I wanted to explore in more detail that didn't really fit into that very terse format.

I was originally very struck by the fact that women had ideas about not only changing women's work but also changing production, so I got interested in that. Then I thought I can't just talk about work because if you talk about work and women you have to think of other things to do with childcare and domestic work. So I began to extend into researching personal aspects of life to do with a sense of how these women wanted to be as women and their differing attitudes to sexuality.

You have said that you particularly wanted to tell the stories of black and working class women.

People who are interested in the history of women may know the big figures, most of the main people who write. But there were women who didn't write books but wrote articles in newspapers, which included some of the politically conscious working class women, so I wanted to include them. There are also African-American women who are really well known but I also bring in lesser-known people who only get mentioned in passing in other books.

There were really strong links between the Americans and the British. People today think of these links being based on the internet, but these women wrote letters and exchanged journals and read each other's books and travelled. Obviously the middle class ones could travel more but some working class women did travel later on, through unions or, for example, a group of working class women went off to Belgium to find out about mother and baby clinics.

The women were very much in contact and aware of international links, and they stayed with each other when they travelled. I didn't manage to get it in the book but when the woman who started the social settlement at Hull House in Chicago, Jane Adams, came to Britain it's known she went round Toynbee Hall, in east London, [where work was done among the poor] and was inspired by that. But in her letters back she writes of meeting trade unionists involved in the dockers' strike - this was in the 1880s, and she met Tom Mann. People see Jane Adams and her philanthropic social settlement

as apart from the British labour movement, yet she not only hung around with the Fabians but she also met working class trade union men. The links really are extraordinary.

You do get the sense of what a rich seam there is in terms of political activity, ideas and debate at the time.

Yes, these women were just ready to tackle everything. Some want to have a more humane capitalism, so they try to introduce ergonomic design into industry or try to reduce the hours of work. Then there are others who are totally anarchist, opposed to the whole system, and won't have anything to do with it at all, and then there's working class women trying to get an eight-hour day.

You write about the contradictions black and working class women faced, particularly in the area of sexual liberation where being sexually assertive could actually conform to prejudiced stereotypes rather than challenge them.

Yes, I think that really was a contradiction for these women. There were a few black women who did raise issues around sexuality. There was one, for example, who was involved in a Greenwich Village group called Heterodoxy. But it was much more complicated and particularly painful for the emancipated young women in the 1920s. At that time there was an idealisation of everything that was called "primitive", and they got really caught in that - even though they were real intellectuals they would be typecast because they were black.

What is fascinating is that many of the themes and issues these women were addressing are still current debates today - whether you can just change consciousness or change society, or if it is possible to have a career and a family.

I am really conscious of the fact that there is all this history and if people could read it they'd get the sense of how so many of these things have been thrashed out before. The Fabian women, even before the First World War, were on to the debate about work and the family. It was not quite so stark for middle class women in Britain who could still rely on domestic servants in the 1920s. In the US, where it was harder to get domestic servants, there was a stronger impetus on trying to reorganise domestic work.

What does it say about the role of the family today?

I would say the crunch comes when you've got children - I suspect also the care of old people. There's still stronger pressure on women to give up whatever they're doing than there is on men. That's not universally true because not all women can do that, but that still exists. But the problem of how you keep a job and bring up children is really hard because the possibility of living without doing full-time work is so much more difficult. If you don't do full-time work nowadays the standard of living you have is so low. There is that dilemma they were already beginning to look at - how to balance work and motherhood.

But they did have this strong idea that caring for children wasn't only the responsibility of mothers. Even at that time in the early 20th century there were some women trying to say that fathers should be involved and also that children are the responsibility of wider society. It's funny, because people accept that when it comes to schools it would be really weird for anyone who didn't have children to say, "I don't have any children, I'm not going to pay taxes." But in the Thatcher era there was a real onslaught on the idea that children of all ages are the responsibility of everyone. If women weren't having children there wouldn't be anyone working when the generation gets older.

You quote Charlotte Perkins Gilman saying that for women cloth acts as a "social skin" - a

brilliant description of the way clothes can be such a significant factor in women's lives. You describe even the impact of wearing of trousers which enabled women to ride bicycles. That obsession with women's appearance continues today.

There was not such an emphasis on how the body was represented then - they didn't have that - but they did have an awareness of how women were forced to wear clothes that meant they couldn't move. There were different reactions - some people said that what we need to do is ignore clothes, there were people who didn't bother about their appearance and then there were people who said that what we need is rational dress. But others found that rather severe and had a romantic idea about creating a more natural look. For example, in the 1920s there were people who did free expression dance in Greek tunics.

Then there were women who believed that if you wanted to put extreme views about changing women's position you had better do it in a very smart hat, so they dressed in completely conventional clothes. So there was a whole range of different views on how to negotiate appearance. But appearance was always important, whatever strategy was adopted.

For many working class women smart clothes were a sign of pride. There were the very militant telephone operators, well-paid young women in the US, and once on a picket they dressed up in really flashy clothes and went into a posh hotel in order to stop the scabs coming in. Though I remember in the printers' strike in Britain women from mining communities being horrified by the women who were supporting the printers coming along in high heels. The women from mining communities had all this experience of picketing and said they were wearing all the wrong clothes!

It seems some stereotypes haven't changed. You have women a century ago complaining that as rebels they are portrayed as "unsexed and deranged". Do you think feminism still has those connotations for young women today?

I thought that when I was at university. Before there was a women's movement we had a completely hostile stereotype of what feminists are like. Of course we didn't know about all these women who had a broader view on what women's emancipation would be. I never thought there were people campaigning for birth control and going on about sexuality and imagining that you could look after babies in a different way - I didn't know there was that kind of interest in how you lived your life.

Your book is coming out just when there is a new interest in talking about women's liberation and challenging sexist stereotypes. What's your experience of what's being termed "the new feminism"?

When I was writing this book it seemed as though a lot of the interest in feminism had really gone down, so I couldn't imagine whether there would be a big audience for it but I really hoped that people of another generation would be interested.

I noticed among my students, mainly young women in their early 20s, about two years ago there was an interest in talking about feminism again. Before then, although students were interested in gender in relation to other topics, they certainly wouldn't be saying they were feminists. So people are identifying as feminists quite consciously.

One example of this interest is Women, the series of three documentaries shown last month on BBC Four in which you appeared. I thought it was telling when you said how much you loved going on demonstrations and Germaine Greer said she hated them!

When I discovered these individualist anarchist women in the US it seemed to me that Germaine's

radicalism is more that kind of radicalism - it's this tenacious, tough defiance in politics. The ideal is when you can be an individual and in harmony with a group acting in a cooperative way in common.

Those are the times I have felt really happy - when individuals consciously decide to go on a demo because it's something they believe in and then they also get a connection to others through their decision to demonstrate. It is not being submerged into a kind of collective in an authoritarian way but having the ability to move between an individual making an individual decision and then acting in solidarity with others.

I can remember when we had the first Women's Liberation Conference in Ruskin. About 500 people came and we weren't expecting them. That was quite amazing - you suddenly discovered that there weren't just these little groups of us but there were a few hundred of us. The following year we went on a march and there were thousands.

It's always so mysterious why it is that at certain times a movement appears. However much you do history and try to understand social movements it's always elusive to really see why little networks suddenly coalesce into something bigger.

One question that was not addressed in the documentaries was that of class - there was no discussion of the impact of class on your experience of oppression.

It's even more difficult now because class is almost taboo - people are not encouraged to talk about class. Somehow it's ignored, yet inequality has become more extreme since 1979. I believe women's chances of freedom are certainly better in a more egalitarian society with strong emphasis on cooperative and social provision. That isn't a sufficient guarantee of women's freedom and emancipation but it's certainly a better context to work within than a society with very marked inequalities and a tendency to rely on competition and the market.

Some women were able to get into somewhat better positions in the 1980s because they could get jobs in middle management in, for instance, the developing service and retail sector. So there were these changes in possibilities for women within capitalism but for women who had any social needs it has got more and more difficult and they have been pushed down with low pay.

What do you think is the legacy of those dreamers of 100 years ago?

There are different ones. The very individualistic women had defiance and resolve to really very bravely challenge convention, whereas the women intent on creating a more social kind of society had a vision, a social vision.

For example, there were people who were saying that motherhood isn't only the responsibility of individual mothers; that it's also important for society to take on responsibility for caring for children. From that came a vision of society that was based on human need. So, implicit in the gender critique of the ways in which life was arranged in the immediate daily sense was a deeper economic questioning.

They brought amazing energy and conviction to the feeling that you could change society. The Americans particularly wrote utopian novels - they were really ready to imagine all sorts of things. So I hope that young women will start imagining again because I do think that the changes in women's lives affect not only men but the whole way that work is structured and consumption is organised. It goes into much deeper social changes than people imagine when they start questioning simply how women are represented.

Interview by Judith Orr, April 2010

P.S.

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* Sheila Rowbotham's new book, Dreamers of a New Day, is published by Verso .