

UK: Sheila Rowbotham's Dream Deferred

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In her new memoir, Sheila Rowbotham writes about the radical aspirations of feminism and socialism in the 1970s - and how many of the decade's struggles remain to be won today.

Known as an influential British historian, activist and theorist of socialist-feminism, Sheila Rowbotham played a crucial role in the formation and development of the Women's Liberation Movement in 1970s Britain. In [Daring to Hope: My Life in the '70s](#) - her latest frank, powerful and vibrant memoir - she looks back at her involvement with second-wave feminism (and broader left politics) during that tumultuous decade, weaving together personal memories and witty reflections with sharp historical analysis.

Her [first memoir, *Promise of a Dream* \(2000\)](#), charted her political transition from Methodist schoolgirl and Parisian Beatnik to seasoned socialist activist, relating her subjective experiences to a wider narrative of social, political and cultural change in the 1960s. *Daring to Hope* picks up where this left off in 1969, following her resignation from the *Black Dwarf* editorial board and from International Socialism (now known as the Socialist Workers Party). Resolving to focus on women's liberation and break with her sixties past, she describes this as a 'symbolic burning of ideological bras', marking 1970 as the beginning of a new era of further personal and political self-discovery.

Beginning with the emergence of small localised consciousness-raising groups, the first few chapters of *Daring to Hope* capture a sense of the excitement and urgency which typified the early Women's Liberation Movement. Although veering into standard narrative history at times, Rowbotham does offer a welcome personal perspective on familiar events and developments. Most memorably, her description of the first Women's Liberation Conference in Oxford brings to life the electrifying communal atmosphere and feeling of shared discovery experienced by attendees, particularly illuminating the revelatory power derived from such a large gathering of women:

'I'd never seen so many women looking so confident before. The night we arrived they kept pouring into Ruskin College with bags and babies. The few men around looked rather like women look at most large predominantly male meetings - rather out on a limb.'

As we follow Rowbotham's life through the following decade, year by year, we get a sense of how pioneering, transformative and all-encompassing the women's movement was. Her remarkably detailed accounts of different discussions and activities highlights Rowbotham's centrality as an active participant in so many feminist developments (and disagreements). Throughout *Daring to Hope* we learn, for example, about how she forged cross-class alliances in the campaign to unionise nightcleaners, defended women's abortion rights against James White's bill, argued against anti-male separatism in the women's movement, and helped create the influential socialist-feminist magazine *Red Rag*.

Rowbotham's account is also an interesting local perspective on Hackney and Islington activism,

providing a useful addition to recent academic research on the different local feminisms that coexisted all over Britain. Her involvement with the co-operatively run Market Nursery and Under Fives campaign (both photographed by the Hackney Flashers socialist-feminist photography collective) stands out as an example of feminist, socialist and 'community' issues converging in her locality. In fact, Rowbotham argues that the existence of an interconnected grassroots Left is an aspect of 1970s Britain often overlooked in favour of caricatured narratives. Making the case for a reappraisal of 1970s radicalism, her memoir brings to life an all-encompassing and far-reaching Left that diversified to include networks of schoolchildren, squatters, tenants, bookshops, women's centres, nurseries, trade unions, adult education, benefits claimants, and food co-ops - reinforced and recorded by a flourishing creative counter-culture.

Underlying her tales of activism and protest, Rowbotham's inclusion of surprisingly raw personal anecdotes and intimate thoughts allow insight into the interconnectedness of the personal and political at this time. Through her meticulously recorded diary extracts, unpublished poems and correspondence with friends and lovers, we are able to see that her ordinary musings on sex, relationships, communal living, friendship, pregnancy, personal appearance, and financial security were not separate from her life as an activist, but in fact informed it significantly. This subjectivity was at the heart of feminist consciousness-raising and theorising in the 1970s; the process of communication was a radical act that fostered collective revolt and inspired activism.

Rowbotham credits her intellectual development as a prolific historian and writer to this shared process of discovery and exchange, influenced by conversations with friends, correspondence with activists across the world, and a vibrant international and national feminist press. Throughout *Daring to Hope* she also traces her fascination with the 'living relationship' between history and activism, reflecting that 'Our history strengthens us in the present by connecting to the lives of countless women.'

Countless connections to older socialist-feminist women - Dorothy Thompson, Gertie Roche, Florence Exten-Hann, and her adopted 'feminist grandmother' Dora Russell - allowed Rowbotham (and others) to see women's liberation as a continuation of earlier decades. The book is scattered with further references to archive trips, books collected, and historical figures she admired: Alexandra Kollontai, Stella Browne, William Morris, Sylvia Pankhurst, Edward Carpenter. *Daring to Hope* gives remarkably detailed insight into Rowbotham's struggles to connect these intellectual strands and wrestle with the contradictory pulls between feminism and socialism. For her - and for many of the figures she admired - they were inseparable, but the reality of trying to connect the two was clearly difficult in the turbulent context of 1970s Britain.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Rowbotham recalled reflecting a great deal on the usefulness of feminist politics and other social liberation movements in developing new forms of socialist organisation. Ever the utopian thinker, her hope for a new social vision growing from the innovative collectivism and horizontal structure of the Women's Liberation Movement translated into a desire to 'alter socialism itself' and imagine a politics 'concerned with questions of control, consciousness and changes in everyday life'. The final chapter of *Daring to Hope* addresses her collaboration with Hilary Wainwright and Lynne Segal to theorise this in the pivotal *Beyond the Fragments* (1979), which brought together twenty years of activist experience and remains essential reading for historians and activists today.

Ultimately, this dream of a more open, co-operative and democratic Left was not to be realised as the decade ended with a fractured women's movement, a divided Labour Party, political turmoil in the unions, and the brutal onslaught of Thatcherism. However, Rowbotham ends her memoir on a positive note. Although defensively forced to lose much of the utopianism of the 1970s, she argues that the 1980s saw the continued resistance of a fragmented - yet potent - socialist-feminist

movement, as well as the flourishing of unexpected solidarities inspired by precedents set in the previous decade.

In the final words of the book, Rowbotham passes her baton to a new generation of energetic young activists, confident that the daring resolve of 1970s radicalism will be remembered and, hopefully, surpassed:

‘Suffice to say that as I write, time, and the wasteful contradictions in capitalism, throw up many surprises, including a rippling mood of rebellion among many young women worldwide, whose hopes are higher and whose confidence is far stronger than anything I could have imagined in 1970.’

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