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Society books

Book of the day: “Daring to Hope” by Sheila Rowbotham review - on the frontline of 70s feminism

Tuesday 30 November 2021, by [ROBERTS Yvonne](#) (Date first published: 29 November 2021).

The historian recounts her fight for liberation in a memoir that underlines her radical credentials and her refusal to forsake utopia.

Sheila Rowbotham, co-founder of the first Women’s Liberation conference in Oxford in 1970, dared to hope then that the revolution, if not nigh, was at least possible. By the end of the decade – a period of profound dislocation and dissent that included a miners’ strike, the three-day week, the Vietnam war, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the rise of gay liberation, a Labour government introducing deep welfare cuts, followed by the election of Margaret Thatcher and the arrival of neoliberalism – Rowbotham writes: “Socialist feminists like me did not give up on hope but the daring was diminished.”

She deserves to be better known by younger generations

Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s records an exhausting life of activism, lecturing, pamphleteering, editing, book writing, journalism, travelling, speech-making, struggling with the emerging ideas and conflicts in the allegedly non-hierarchical sisterhood (“Who was to start a meeting when everyone was competing not to be leader?”), motherhood and, as a sexual libertarian, a complicated love life with, at one point, three men on the go and a communal house in Hackney to maintain on a highly unreliable income. “A vision of us birthing a new politics of harmony” did not allow for much sleep.

Rowbotham, now in her late 70s, is a multi-award-winning social historian and co-founder of the History Workshop movement [[1](#)], viewing history from the perspective of women and “ordinary people”. For decades, she has been a chronicler of radical groups in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, China, Russia and Britain (as documented in 1972’s *Women, Resistance and Revolution* and *Hidden from History* [[2](#)] in 1973). Crucially, what she learned helped to shape the ideas that sparked the second wave of feminism.

Rowbotham deserves to be better known by younger generations. *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* [3], first published in 1973 and reprinted several times over the decade, is still a powerful primer to how "in a world defined by men" women face huge barriers to "heave ourselves into the future". Then, it was about mutual support and grassroots collective action to run nurseries, rape centres and refuges, unionising contract cleaners and supporting female strikers – discovering that what women had in common was systemic discrimination. The personal had become political. "That sense of recognition that could signal new ways of seeing," she writes.

Rowbotham has wisdom – and wit. When Paul Atkinson, the father of her son, Will, announces that they will be "practising celibacy and [having] historical outings", she writes: "I must respect a man's right to choose", drily echoing the pro-abortion slogan. (One friend says of leftwing feminist men: "Somehow, once they got over their chauvinism, their life leaked out.")

In 1970, Rowbotham was 27. It was a time when rape in marriage was permitted, a woman needed a male guarantor [4] to obtain a mortgage, equal pay legislation was still to come and among the left's many factions, women were seen but definitely not heard.

The first Women's Liberation conference [5] demanded equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, contraception and abortion on demand and free 24-hour nurseries. Even then, Rowbotham worried that "once achieved, women would remain oppressed". Her aim as a socialist feminist was not to "lean in", climb the corporate ladder and contribute to the maximisation of economic growth but to create a better society.

In *Daring to Hope*, Rowbotham writes of her disenchantment with traditional Marxist history because it neglects the role of housewives in supporting the economy, and the issues of sexuality, sexual oppression and motherhood. In the 70s, she questioned the whiteness of the women's movement. "Is this a movement for liberated women or a movement to liberate all women?" she asks.

At the end of the decade, along with Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, Rowbotham wrote *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* to try to strengthen the fraying bonds of solidarity when hope had been destroyed by the rise of the right. "Sisterhood demands a new way of living," she writes. "The ultimate oppression of women forces a redefinition of what is personal and what is political."

If that sounds antiquated, it demonstrates just how much daring has been diminished.

Yvonne Roberts

Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s by Sheila Rowbotham is published by Verso (£20). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

P.S.

- The Guardian. Mon 29 Nov 2021 07.00 GMT:
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/about-us/>

[2] <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780904383560/hidden-from-history/>

[3] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/1768-woman-s-consciousness-man-s-world>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2004/apr/18/womenandmoney.observercashsection>

Available on ESSF (article 60308), [Women, finance, independance in Britain: You've come a long way, Jenny](#).

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/feb/26/forty-years-womens-liberation>

Available on ESSF (article 60309), [Britain: Forty years of women's liberation](#).