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J. Zeitz

Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s — Second-wave Feminism as a Case Study

On a warm summer evening in 1979, 7000 violent baseball fans staged a miniature riot at Chicago's Comiskey Park, interrupting a doubleheader between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers and leaving their hometown stadium in tatters. 'It wasn't bad pitching that incited the mob to storm the field between games,' explained a newspaper account. 'It was disco.'¹ Weeks before, in an attempt to reverse declining ticket sales, the White Sox's corporate promotions department had designated 12 July as 'Disco Demolition Night'. Working in conjunction with Steve Dahl, a popular disc jockey who drew strong ratings in Chicago's working-class, white communities, the team offered a reduced admission rate of 98 cents to any fan who brought a disco record to the park. Between games, Dahl — who for several months had been delighting listeners by destroying disco albums on the air, because, he explained, 'disco sucks' — would detonate the records in center field, thus ridding America of the scourge that was Donna Summer. From a simple numbers perspective, the gimmick worked. Between 50,000 and 55,000 ticket-holders — well above the average attendance — gained admission to the stadium, while another 10,000 were turned away at the doors. But by the middle of the first game, which the Tigers ultimately won, four-to-one, frustrated Sox fans began throwing LPs onto the field, frisbee-style. Others heaved banners that read, 'Disco Sucks.' When Dahl blew up his accumulated cache of vinyl during the intermission, tearing an enormous hole in the center-field grass, thousands of fans stormed the field, ripping up the batting cage, tearing out bases, igniting small fires, setting off firecrackers, and screaming, 'Disco Sucks!' Thirty-nine people were arrested, and many more injured in the ensuing chaos.²

For anyone familiar with the standard historiography of American politics after the 1960s, an obvious explanation for the Disco Demolition Night riot might center on the desire of white, working-class baseball fans to strike out against an art form that they associated with African Americans, gays and

1 'Anti-Disco Night: Rampaging Fans Stop Game at Comiskey Park,' Annapolis (MD) *Capital*, 13 July 1979.

2 'Baseball, Chicago Style, Makes You Cry', Chicago *Daily Herald*, 27 September 1979; 'From Anti-Disco to Anti-Establishment', Elyria (OH) *Chronicle-Telegram*, 13 July 1979; 'Thursday Night Fever in Chicago', Chillicothe (OH) *Constitution Tribune*, 13 July 1979.

lesbians, and Latinos. A long decade of stagflation, conflicts over busing and affirmative action, fallout from the Vietnam War, and popular anxieties about relaxed sexual mores left working-class whites desperate to put a human face on the impersonal, highly disruptive social changes that were reordering their world. Disco, which claimed its roots in urban black and gay neighborhoods, and which celebrated a libertine approach to sex and personal expression, was a perfect target for white rage.³

The short-lived anti-disco movement also lends itself to a very different way of conceptualizing the 1970s. Since 1976, when Tom Wolfe branded it 'The Me Decade', writers and scholars have tended to present the 1970s as a politically barren era in which millions of Americans descended into mindless self-absorption. Standing in sharp contrast with the turbulent 1960s, the 1970s saw a popular repudiation of the civic-minded reform spirit evident in the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements. It was this sense of widespread political disengagement and extreme introspection that led Christopher Lasch to write of America's 'culture of narcissism', and which inspired historians Debi and Irwin Unger to dub the 1970s 'The Great Malaise'.⁴ Thus, the Disco riot seems to fit the picture of both disengagement and a turn to the right — or, as Bradford Martin put it in a recent volume on the 1970s entitled *Rightward Bound*, 'shared among all of these strands [art rock, heavy metal, African-American pop] of early 1970s popular music was a retreat from politics'.⁵

On the surface, there is something to this collective charge. The 1970s were a decade when millions of Americans turned to new-wave spirituality in search of therapeutic healing, and when Richard Bach's novel *Jonathan Livingston*

3 A strong analysis of the politics of disco is Carolyn Hilary Krasnow, 'The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the 1970s' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999), esp. Intro., chap. 2. For the standard narrative of the political reaction against the 1960s, see William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (2nd edn, Baltimore, MD, 1998); Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (New York 2007); Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston 1996); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ, 1989).

4 Tom Wolfe, 'The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening', in Tom Wolfe, *The Purple Decades* (New York 1983), 265-96; Christopher Lasch, *A Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York 1979); Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *Postwar America: The United States Since 1945* (New York 1990). For a similar interpretation see Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York 1982); David Frum, *How We Got Here: The '70s, the Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)* (New York 2000). For a more balanced consideration, see James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York 2005), chaps 1-2. Another break with the standard interpretation is Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and Making of Eighties America* (New York 2006), which sees fear — not narcissism — as the organizing theme of the 1970s.

5 Bradford Martin, 'Cultural Politics and the Singer/Songwriters of the 1970s', in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 132. While Martin's main focus is on the political disengagement of songwriters, he concludes, at 147, 'rising conservative political strength could not entirely overwhelm an ever more liberated popular culture'.

Seagull, 'a wispy little fable' according to *Publishers Weekly*, proved a runaway bestseller. The story of a maverick bird who sets out in solo flight in the service of personal discovery, the novel declared: 'Irresponsibility? My brothers! Who is more responsible than a gull who finds and follows a higher meaning, a higher purpose for life?' It seemed a fitting emblem for the age. As if to prove that they were completely incapable of making connections with other living beings or meeting even minimal responsibilities, in 1975 American consumers made a millionaire of Gary Dahl, a California advertising executive who 'invented' the pet rock. For \$4 (roughly equivalent to \$15 in today's money), holiday shoppers could purchase a stone imported from Baja, California, along with an instruction manual that advised owners how to make their rocks perform simple tricks like 'stay', 'roll over', and 'sit'. 'A pet rock is lovable and hardly ever has accidents,' explained a print advertisement. 'Your pet rock requires no expensive pet food — it also requires no cheap pet food — no grooming, no baths or flea powder, no expensive shots!' Boasted one contented owner, 'It's easier to train than kids and won't annoy your neighbors.'⁶

For all the popularity of maverick gulls and pet rocks, however, the 'Me Decade' synthesis ignores the intensity of grassroots politics in the 1970s. The Comiskey Park riot was far from being a simple example of narcissism and political disengagement, or an example of a reaction against grassroots 1960s liberal excesses. Three unusually weak presidential administrations created a power vacuum at the top, leaving ordinary citizens to sort out the world at the local level. They often did so in radical ways. It would be as much a stretch to characterize the riot that engulfed Comiskey Park in July 1979 as an exercise in disciplined political protest as it would be to dismiss it as just one more example of the inner-directed culture of the 1970s. But it is worth remembering that the same demographic group that raged against disco in 1979 swung the most wildly between left and right in the following year's election cycle. Roughly 27 per cent of Democratic primary voters who backed liberal Senator Edward Kennedy against incumbent President Jimmy Carter ultimately voted for Ronald Reagan in the general election. Most of these crossover voters were blue-collar men — a demographic group that broke for Reagan by a margin of six points.⁷ Viewed in this light, Disco Demolition Night supports an altogether different interpretation of the 1970s as a decade that saw ordinary Americans gravitate to radical grassroots alternatives, both left and right, out of frustration with the political center.

Politics in the 1970s often hinged on the personal, but it was no less serious or radical for that. The decade gave rise to wide-reaching grassroots political

6 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York 2001), 78–9; "Pet Rock" For Christmas, *Lima (OH) News*, 5 December 1975; 'Domesticated Rocks Sell Fast as Gifts', *Mansfield (OH) News Journal*, 21 December 1975; 'Now It's a Pet Rock Show', *Charleston (WV) Daily Mail*, 5 December 1975.

7 Tim Stanley, "'Sailing Against the Wind": A Reappraisal of Edward Kennedy's Campaign for the 1980 Democratic Party Nomination', unpublished paper, courtesy of the author; 'Massive Shift to Right Story of '80 Elections', *U.S. News & World Report*, 17 November 1980, 26.

impulses that have only recently drawn the attention of most scholars. The example of organized labor is telling. Not only did the seventies witness some of the postwar era's most protracted and intense strike waves; the decade also saw unionized workers in the Rust Belt experiment with bold ideas like collectivization and employee ownership — ideas that challenged the core foundations of America's postwar political economy. When steel companies in eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania announced massive plant closures in 1977, just years after they had exacted costly tax incentives and infrastructure improvements from local governments, labor organizers proposed that the cities of Pittsburgh and Youngstown exercise the power of eminent domain to seize the abandoned facilities and convert them into community-owned or worker-owned entities. Though the plan never materialized, it proved wildly popular among many local union members. Historian Staughton Lynd, who chronicled these developments while volunteering as a community organizer in both cities, concluded that:

in the industrial heartland . . . consensus support for the right to private ownership and management of property eroded. The traumatic collapse of the steel industries in those communities, with the social distress that followed, led to the appearance of new ideas.⁸

From the other side of the ideological spectrum, the organization and self-conscious political engagement of 50 million evangelical Christian voters in the mid-1970s constituted a radical form of grassroots activism, albeit of a different kind. Spurred in large part by battles over the Equal Rights Amendment and drawn out of their political shell by the Supreme Court's legalization of abortion rights in 1973, millions of fundamentalists and charismatics coalesced to press a strident agenda that ranged between opposition to state-sponsored childcare centers and advocacy of stronger public morality laws.⁹

Even more than labor or the 'Christian Right', second-wave feminism stands out as a striking example of radical grassroots politics, 1970s-style. Its very scope and diversity challenge the notion of a disengaged polity comprised of narcissistic pet-rock owners. Far from being the sole preserve of well-educated, elite women in New York and Los Angeles, second-wave feminism in its early years — from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s — enjoyed broad demographic appeal, was thoroughly decentralized, and engaged millions of constituents in a dialogue about heretofore unconventional topics, including the relationship between the nuclear family and the industrial economy, state socialism, the politics of sexuality, and the meaning of gender.

8 Jefferson Cowie, "Vigorously left, right, and center": the crosscurrents of working-class America in the 1970s', in Beth Bailey and David Farber (eds), *America in the 70s* (Lawrence, KS, 2004), 75–106; Staughton Lynd, 'The Genesis of the Idea of a Community Right to Industrial Property in Youngstown and Pittsburgh, 1977–1987', *Journal of American History* 74(3) (December 1987), 926–58.

9 See Daniel Kenneth Williams, 'From the Pews to the Polls: The Formation of a Southern Christian Right' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2005).

This article will explore '1970s-style' grassroots politics by focusing on the second-wave feminist movement, and then — briefly — on the powerful backlash that it provoked among anti-feminist activists who coalesced around the anti-ERA movement. Contrary to popular conceptions, I argue, the 1970s were characterized neither by depoliticization nor by a clear rightward shift, but rather by a polarization of politics, and a politically engaged citizenry.

The litany of feminist political achievements in the 1970s is impressive by any measure. On the federal level alone, women won passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, which cut off federal funds for educational institutions that discriminated against women; an extension of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 covering most white-collar employees; the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which forbade lending institutions from discriminating against women; and congressional approval of the Equal Rights Amendment. States modernized their divorce and rape laws, women achieved parity with men on college campuses, and the wage gap continued to close. On the judicial level, a generation of feminist lawyers convinced the federal courts to employ the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to strike down laws that privileged husbands over wives in state probate courts; restrictions on women's rights to register driver's licenses in their own names, or establish legal domiciles separate from those of their husbands; and gender differentials in state and federal pensions and Social Security payments.¹⁰

For the purposes of this article, the key importance of feminism was not so much its success during the 1970s, but the fact that it was a mass-based grassroots movement. There is no better testament to its widespread appeal than the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, an event sponsored by the National Organization for Women and its 35 state chapters that saw over half a million women participate in a day of protest and political advocacy. 'Young and old, rich and poor, white and black are meeting in towns and cities,' reported Hayward, California's *Daily Review*.

They're confronting the paramount issues of women's rights as they see them: Job and pay equality, day-care centers for children, so mothers may work, abortion reform, the image of women as presented in the media, admittance to 'men's only' restaurants and organizations, etc.¹¹

Unlike first-wave feminism, which focused narrowly on voting rights, the movement concerned itself with a wide array of subjects, from bread-and-butter issues such as workplace and credit equality to such domestic concerns as marriage equality and sexual liberation, to overtly political agendas like electing more women to public office.¹²

¹⁰ Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago 1986), 59.

¹¹ 'Even Grandmother is Joining "Women's Lib"', Hayward (CA) *Daily Review*, 19 July 1970. On the movement's strength and diversity, see 'Female Liberation Ranks Swelling Across Country', *Oakland Tribune*, 24 May 1970.

¹² Martha Weinman Lear, 'The Second Feminist Wave: What Do These Women Want?' *New York Times Magazine*, 10 March 1968, 24.

In many ways second-wave feminism was a child of the 1960s. At the urging of prominent women in the labor movement, in 1961 President John F. Kennedy created the President's Commission on the Status of Women, which in turn empanelled constituent state commissions to help prepare annual reports on gender inequality. Over the next half-decade, members of the federal and state commissions brought to the public's attention lingering inequalities in employment, wages and education, and sparked consideration of 432 bills at the congressional level, and countless others at the state and local levels, to redress these problems. The establishment of women's commissions ultimately provided much of the impetus behind passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the inclusion of women in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which barred employment discrimination on grounds of race or gender. The commissions also provided an organized political forum for thousands of women's rights activists, including core labor feminists from the Midwest, who furnished the movement with much of its early intellectual energy and talent. It was out of frustration with the government's refusal to enforce the gender components of Title VII that representatives of the state commissions founded the National Organization for Women in 1966, thus giving birth to second-wave feminism's most powerful lobbying group.

Alongside NOW there emerged a cohort of younger activists who cut their political teeth in the civil rights and anti-war movements.¹³ Veterans of lunch-counter sit-ins, voter registration drives and campus shut-downs, these young activists grew increasingly disenchanted by the misogyny that infected the New Left. When Mary King and Casey Hayden, two stalwart staff members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), attempted to introduce a working paper on the role of women in the civil rights movement, chairman Stokely Carmichael quipped that 'the only position for women in SNCC is prone'. Were New Left women only consigned to second-class citizenship within the movement, matters would have been bad enough, but many of the same men who argued passionately against racial violence and military aggression proved remarkably violent and aggressive toward their female colleagues. When SDS veteran Marilyn Salzman Webb attempted to voice the concerns of New Left women at an anti-war demonstration in January 1969, male protesters taunted her with cries of 'Fuck her! Take her off the stage! Rape her in a back alley! Take it off!' In the aftermath of this episode, activist Ellen Willis decided that a 'genuine alliance with male radicals will not be possible until sexism sickens them as much as racism. This will not be accomplished through persuasion, conciliation, or love, but through independence and solidarity.' Many other women came to the same conclusion.

While middle-aged activists worked primarily through state and federal women's commissions, NOW, and labor unions to press for reform at the political and economic levels, many younger feminists focused on personal

13 This paragraph is drawn from Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York 2000), esp. 108–35.

'consciousness-raising', a term coined by Kathie Sarachild, a onetime civil rights worker in Mississippi who became a founding member of the New York Radical Women and the Redstockings, two small but widely influential groups composed mostly of baby-boomers. In thousands of living rooms around the country, converts to second-wave feminism met to discuss issues ranging as far and wide as sexuality and body image, workplace exploitation, consumer imagery of women, abortion, and the politics of the nuclear family. It was Carol Hanisch, another veteran of the Mississippi movement, who first observed in 1968 that 'the personal is political', and this credo became the driving force behind much of what commentators soon dubbed 'radical feminism'.¹⁴

Many younger women were indeed pushing the limits of the mainstream feminist agenda as defined by organizations like NOW. Groups such as the Boston Women's Health Collective, which published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a widely read medical self-help book, encouraged women to assume responsibility for their gynecological care rather than entrust their bodies to male medical authorities. An 18-year-old woman who had recently visited her gynecologist told *Ms.* that she felt 'helpless and at the mercy' of her doctor. 'I realized what I don't know about my own body would fill a book. I am eighteen and as the awareness of womanhood grows, so does my pride of being a woman. I am learning everyday the frustration and strength that goes along with liberation.'¹⁵ For such women, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was just the answer.

But the book went a good deal further, informing readers that 'When women feel powerless and inferior in a relationship, it is not surprising to feel humiliated or unsatisfied in bed.'¹⁶ For some younger feminists, reforming institutions like marriage was an inadequate answer to the power imbalance inherent in heterosexual relationships. Thus, many embraced 'lesbianism', preferring to forge romantic, social and sexual unions with women rather than men. Some lesbian feminists were genuinely gay or bisexual, while others embraced homosexuality more out of conviction than instinct. 'Politically, I wanted my energy to be going to support wimmin [*sic*] and to building a feminist revolution together, not struggling with individual men,' wrote one such woman.¹⁷ Though lesbian separatists represented only a small minority of women in the 1970s, by challenging what poet Adrienne Rich termed 'compulsory heterosexuality' they raised the specter of a general revolt against heterosexuality and marriage.¹⁸ Ann Koedt, author of the famous underground

14 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, op. cit., 196–201; Amy Kesselman, 'Women's Liberation and the Left in New Haven, Connecticut, 1968–1972', *Radical History Review* 81 (2001), 15–33; Deborah Ann Gerson, 'Practice from Pain: Building a Women's Movement Through Consciousness Raising' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of History, University of California — Berkeley, 1996).

15 Denver, CO, to Editors, 30 November 1973, *Ms.* Letters, Box 1, Folder 9.

16 Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York 1982), 26.

17 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, op. cit., 169.

18 See Adrienne Rich, 'It Is The Lesbian in Us', *Sinister Wisdom* 1(3) (Spring 1977), reprinted in Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York 1979), 199–202.

tract 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', concluded that the prevailing medical wisdom about female sexuality was both incorrect and part of a larger edifice supporting male domination. Men feared lesbians, she wrote, for 'they will become sexually expendable if the clitoris is substituted for the vagina as the center of pleasure for women.'¹⁹

Younger, radical feminists also embraced a more confrontational style than their middle-aged sisters. In a particularly famous episode of second-wave radicalism, a group of New York-based activists affiliated with WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) protested outside the 1968 Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, discarding (but not, as urban legend soon had it, burning) bras, corsets, make-up and other fashion accessories that shackled women. 'Our legs, busts, mouths, fingers, hair, abdomens, and vaginas are used to sell stockings, bras, fashions, cosmetics, hair coloring . . . powders, sprays, perfumes . . . and such obscene things as deodorants for our vaginas,' the Boston Collective complained. To many radical feminists, doing battle with the lords of body image was a natural extension of the larger struggle for equal rights.²⁰

Not everyone agreed. Within second-wave feminism there emerged divisions between lesbian feminists who urged separatism and straight feminists who insisted on a fully integrated and egalitarian society. There were also splits between middle-class and working-class feminists, anti-choice and pro-choice feminists, white women and women of color and, most prominently, between different generations of feminists. Speaking for many middle-aged activists, Betty Friedan denounced the 'abusive language and style of some of the [younger] women, their sexual shock tactics and [their] man-hating, down-with-motherhood stance'. Their solution was to 'make yourself ugly, to stop shaving under your arms, to stop wearing makeup or pretty dresses — any skirts at all.'²¹

In this atmosphere of internecine struggle, no one person or outlet could claim ownership of the movement. But only one magazine pitched a large enough tent to include every competing faction, and that magazine was *Ms.* Founded in 1971 as a mass-circulation feminist journal, with an editorial board that read as a virtual *Who's Who* of American radical feminism, *Ms.* soon hit a raw nerve with hundreds of thousands of women across the country (and many thousands of men).²² Its trial issue sold 300,000 copies within eight days and elicited an astounding 20,000 letters-to-the-editor.²³ During its heyday in the mid-1970s, it was just one of roughly 200 feminist magazines in

19 Ann Koedt, 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', in *Notes from the First Year* (New York 1968).

20 Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, op. cit., 27–8.

21 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, op. cit., 87.

22 The editorial board in the early 1970s included such feminist luminaries as Gloria Steinem and Patricia Carbine.

23 Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York 2003), 92.

regular publication, but it stood out for its wide commercial appeal. By 1976 the magazine claimed a total readership of over 2.12 million people (19 per cent of whom were men). Advertising surveys also revealed that its subscriber base attracted more women of color and a greater balance between middle-class and working-class readers than any of its competitors in the women's magazine market.²⁴

From the start, *Ms.* addressed a wide range of issues — some, clearly political, others more personal, but all of a highly controversial nature. In her provocative feature 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War', Anselma Dell 'Olio provided a digest of scholarly works such as *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millet, and relatively obscure tracts like 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', which examined the power relationships behind contemporary heterosexual relationships. For those readers not interested in deconstructing sexuality, the magazine's first stand-alone issue included a long piece on women welfare recipients, which provided a detailed analysis of state and federal policies toward working and poor families, and made an implicit case for government-subsidized childcare and a living wage; and an article entitled 'Heaven Won't Protect The Working Girl', which detailed the statutory and executive decisions governing workplace discrimination, and encouraged working women to know and demand enforcement of their rights.²⁵ Both the size of the readership and the range of the articles reveal the persistence of mass grassroots radical political sentiment into the 1970s.

One of the magazine's signature themes was the 'click' moment — the split second when a woman discovered her personal or economic subordination in a patriarchal world. Tens of thousands of readers each year wrote to the magazine to share their revelatory experiences, like a woman from Greenville, South Carolina, who had been married for 27 years, worked 12-hour days at her family's mom-and-pop business, and assumed sole responsibility for household maintenance. 'I thought I had a normal marriage,' she wrote,

then one day I asked myself why was it always my responsibility alone to maintain the home and children in addition to carrying a full load with the business? I questioned my husband, and with this, brought out the true colors of my marriage . . . I also requested a pay-check and some form of checking account with my own money. This also brought a negative response. He stated that since he was head of the household, these were privileges due him only. Click!

The woman in question divorced her husband.²⁶

24 Memorandum from Elayn Bernay to *Ms.* Sales Staff, 'Re: One-to-One Comparison', 10/4/77, Box 149, Folder 1, Gloria Steinem Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter Steinem MS).

25 Anselma Dell 'Olio, 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War'; 'We Have Had Abortions'; 'Welfare is a Women's Issue'; 'Heaven Won't Protect The Working Girl'; all in *Ms.*, Spring 1972.

26 Letter from Greenville, SC, to editors, undated, ca. mid-1970s, Box 1, Folder 8, *Ms.* Letters 1972–1980, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (hereafter MS Letters). The Schlesinger Library stipulates that the authors of the letters-to-the-editor catalogued in its *Ms.* Magazine collection remain anonymous.

The magazine ran stories on the Swedish welfare state, which, with its extensive public funding for childcare centers and aggressively egalitarian school curriculum, struck the editors as a potential model for developed nations such as the United States. *Ms.* also published a report on the wives of servicemen who were being held as prisoners of war in Vietnam, and path-breaking articles on spousal abuse and rape.²⁷

Ms. resonated with large numbers of otherwise moderate women who appreciated its discussion of bread-and-butter issues. Thousands of readers shared stories like that of a woman from Piedmont, California, who attempted to cash in stock certificates that had been issued in her name, only to be told by her broker that company policy required her husband to sign off on the transaction. Another correspondent, a young, married nursery school teacher from North Hollywood, was turned down for a credit card on the grounds that she was likely one day to become pregnant, leave her job and become a default risk, while a soon-to-be divorcée from Annandale, Virginia, was charged an above-market rate for automobile insurance 'due to my separation and assumed emotional instability'. Even high-earning professional women faced stiff obstacles to obtaining financial services. A medical doctor from Monrovia, Indiana, reported that her bank's loan officer would discuss mortgage rates only with her husband, and that the best disability policy her insurance agent was able to sell her rang in at 150 per cent of the amount of her husband's premium.²⁸

Ms. also carved out space for younger readers. A regular department entitled 'Stories for Free Children' used short-form fiction to expose young readers, both boys and girls, to new ideas about gender equality, while in 1972 the *Ms.* Foundation for Women, a non-profit organization associated with the magazine, bankrolled *Free to Be You and Me*, a record of children's music and short stories. The brainchild of actress Marlo Thomas, *Free to Be* drew on the talents of a host of popular entertainers including Harry Belafonte, Alan Alda, Mel Brooks, Carole Channing and Dianna Ross, and included short songs and plays that exposed young listeners to ideas about gender, childhood and family that were startlingly radical for their time. In a comedy skit reminiscent of the old Catskills Borscht Bowl Circuit, Brooks and Thomas performed the parts of two newborn infants who come to the mutual realization that gender — that is, what it means to be a boy or a girl — is a socially constructed idea. Alda sang a ballad about a young boy, William, who wants more than anything in the world to own a toy doll (which, Alda's song suggests, will prepare him one day to be a good father and citizen), while Thomas read the part of a conventional little girl whose favorite refrain is 'ladies first, ladies first'. When the same little girl insists on being first in line during a school trip to the local zoo, she is eaten by a lion. As feminists would discover later in the decade, the idea

27 'Think About Our Government — Now Think About Sweden's Policy', *Ms.*, February 1973; 'Bring the POWs Home', *Ms.*, December 1973; 'Rape Crisis Centers', *Ms.*, September 1972.

28 Piedmont, CA, to Editors, 7 August 1973, *Ms.* Letters, Box 1, Folder 2; North Hollywood to Editors, undated, *Ms.* Letters, Box 1, Folder 1; Annandale, Virginia, to Editors, 28 December 1972, Box 1, Folder 1; Monrovia, Indiana, to Editors, 21 June 1973, Box 1, Folder 1.

behind this cautionary tale — that if little girls wanted to be treated as equal to little boys, they needed first to forfeit certain social privileges — would become a matter of some contention in the heated battle over the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁹

In a testament to its extensive reach, the magazine received thousands of letters from young readers, including a ten-year-old from St Louis who wrote to complain that the *Thorndike Barnhart Junior Dictionary* contained an entry that read, 'The fair, gentle, or weaker sex means women. The sterner or stronger sex means men.' 'If this is true,' asked the correspondent, 'why do we live longer? Please publish this letter.'³⁰

In effect, *Ms.* not only reflected the willingness of millions of women — and not a few men — to engage with radical theories about gender, sexuality, and political economy. It also encouraged a sizeable minority of the 1970s youth generation to question widely held assumptions about masculinity and femininity, and to apply their questions to unfolding struggles within American churches and schools, and within the changing nuclear family. In this effort, *Ms.* was increasingly joined by local bodies which offered young people a forum to discuss gender and its many implications. In Forest View, Illinois, two high-school teachers attended night-time women's studies courses at the local state college and used their newfound knowledge base to offer gender workshops at their local school. 'We don't call it women's lib,' they explained, echoing a common refrain in feminist literature. 'We call it human lib. We acknowledge that the traditional sex roles are good for some people, but we want to give them (the students) different ways of thinking.' On some level, second-wave feminism made a clear impact. By the late 1970s, surveys found that roughly 56 per cent of young people agreed that 'men and women are born with the same human nature; it's the way they are brought up that makes them different,' while between 91 and 95 per cent of all college-aged respondents agreed that 'women should receive equal pay with men for equal work'.³¹

By far the most popular refrain among young women and girls who wrote to the magazine was that schools and municipalities practiced wholesale discrimination in their athletic policies. 'I'm in the 8th grade at a private school (6–12),' wrote a girl from Oldenburg, New York,

[and it's] bad enough since the lower school always gets the short end of the stick, but being a lower school girl, you don't get any end of the stick at all. Since the boys get soccer, hockey, baseball and tennis, we . . . thought that we should get a chance at tennis too, but the male teacher that was in charge said no, no lower school girls.

29 Mary Frances Berry, *Why the Era Failed: Politics, Women's Rights, and the Amending Process of the Constitution* (Bloomington, IN, 1986); Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago 1986), esp. chaps 9, 10.

30 St Louis, MO, to Editors, undated, ca. 1973, *Ms.* Letters, Box 1, Folder 3.

31 'Students Get Insight into Feminism', *Chicago Daily Herald*, 14 November 1972; Daniel Yankelovich, *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70s* (New York 1974), 98.

When the writer in question took the matter up with her guidance counselor, he remedied the situation, thus teaching her an important lesson: 'not all men are M.C.P.'s! I'd personally like to thank Mr. Elliott Simons *and* you too! . . . P.S. Right on! I'm with you all the way!'³²

A natural advocate of equity in sports, *Ms.* ran a powerful compilation of kids' letters in its September 1974 issue entitled 'Baseball Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend', celebrating the 'thousands of girls' who were 'challenging old-fashioned ideas — like the myth that girls are too fragile, or the myth that girls are never as good as boys at athletics'.³³ By 1973 Americans should have known better. The year before, Billie Jean King, the 29-year-old, top-seeded women's tennis pro, humiliated Bobby Riggs, an overweight ex-Wimbledon champion who claimed that no woman, no matter her age or skill level, was any match for a man, however old or out-of-shape he might be. (Riggs was both.) Billed as the 'Battle of the Sexes', the event drew 43 million television viewers, who gamely suffered through extensive commentary by ABC's veteran sportscaster Howard Cosell. In the commercial spirit of the occasion, King entered the stadium in the arms of four muscular men dressed as gladiators, followed by Riggs, who arrived on a golden chariot pulled by scantily clad women billed as 'Bobby's Bosom Buddies'. Then came the dénouement: King easily dispensed with her opponent in three straight sets. 'Equality for women!' Cosell cried.³⁴

Popular demand at the grassroots level produced tangible results. Though he praised 'women who do not hold office, but who hold the hands of their husbands who do hold office', though he privately referred to the National Federation of Republican Women as 'those shitty ass old ladies', and though he once struck a woman in the face over a political disagreement, Richard Nixon responded to the intense organizing efforts of NOW, labor feminists, and representatives of the federal and state commissions on the status of women, all of whom challenged inequities in federal funding and employment.³⁵ With some reluctance, he signed Title IX into law and threw his support behind the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, thereby criminalizing many of the abuses brought to public light by readers of *Ms.* magazine.³⁶

It is difficult to overstate the importance of measures like Title IX, which revolutionized women's athletics by forcing secondary schools and colleges to

32 Oldenburg, NY, to Editors, ca. 1973, *Ms.* Letters, Box 1, Folder 3.

33 'Baseball Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend', *Ms.*, September 1974.

34 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, op. cit., 159–61.

35 On the long legacy of labor feminism, which remained a powerful force in 1970s politics, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique* (Amherst, MA, 1998), chaps 6, 7; Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Automobile Workers, 1937–1975* (Ithaca, NY, 1990); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); Kathleen M. Barry, *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants* (Durham, NC, 2007), esp. chaps 6, 7.

36 Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York 1994), 110–11; Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York 1981), 235–6.

offer women equal opportunities to play sports. Between 1971 and 1996 the number of girls participating in high-school sports teams increased from 300,000 to 2.4 million, and by the end of this interval, girls accounted for 40 per cent of all varsity athletes.³⁷ In so doing, Title IX allowed millions of young women in the 1970s to develop a sense of independence and personal consciousness they might otherwise have missed. 'I can remember a few years ago when I used to watch the neighborhood boys play basketball and football and I would feel bad because I wasn't playing,' a 16-year-old woman from West Virginia wrote to *Ms. Magazine* in the mid-1970s. 'I thought back then that it was "improper" for me to play ball with them. But now I really feel wonderful . . . I jog, play almost all sports, ride motorcycles, and I really feel good about it. Now I realize than God created men and women equal.'³⁸

No more or less than other twentieth-century political movements, second-wave feminism drew heavily on the rhetoric of personal discovery. 'As we grew older,' one activist said, 'we saw our mothers — our role models, the women we were to become — thwarted in their effort toward self-realization and expression.' 'My liberation has been a personal movement,' wrote a college student who decided to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. 'I am not ready for the experience of motherhood. I have not grown up enough myself. I have not found a place in society; I am not liberated yet. I want to be a mother, but first, I must be a woman — strong, independent, and free.' When asked what 'the Movement [has] to say to those women who insist — as so many do — that they like being wives and mothers and are perfectly happy in these roles,' Gloria Steinem invoked the language of autonomous individualism. 'The Movement says the point is *choice!*' she told an interviewer.

If women really like these positions, then that's fine. But women also should be able to be engineers and jockeys and truck drivers and nuclear physicists. The whole point of the Movement is individual choice — for both men and women. The point is to become individuals.³⁹

A good example of this focus on autonomous individualism — and also a good example of the serious political overtones of the 1970s — was the way in which television treated feminism. Scholars have noted the utter banality of late-1960s TV programming, which featured such forgettable but then-popular shows as *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*. The latter followed a family of two parents and their six children, managing remarkably to make absolutely no mention of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, drugs, sex, or campus unrest. As late as 1970 the top contenders in the Nielson ratings were *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in*, *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *Mayberry R.F.D.* and

37 Dean J. Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle and Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 254.

38 Sophia, WV, to Gloria Steinem, undated, Ms. Letters, Box 1, Folder 11.

39 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, op. cit., 3; Letter to Editors, ca. 1973, Ms. Letters, Box 1, Folder 4; Liz Smith, 'Gloria Steinem, Writer and Social Critic, Talks About Sex, Politics and Marriage', *Redbook*, January 1972, 72.

Family Affairs — mostly escapist offerings that were about as apolitical and irrelevant as they could be. The 1970s, however, gave rise to edgy, explicitly political sitcoms like *All in the Family*, the decade's most successful television show, which followed the lives of Archie and Edith Bunker. Archie, played by the veteran character actor Carroll O'Connor, and his wife Edith, played by Jean Stapleton, were the creations of the television producer Norman Lear, whose audacious gamble — that Americans were ready for comedy that confronted some of the weightier social and political questions of the day — paid handsome dividends for CBS, the show's parent network. Over the course of the turbulent 1970s, viewers watched with glee as Archie came to weekly blows with his left-wing graduate-student son-in-law, Mike Stivic, whom he derisively called 'Meathead', over such contentious issues as the war in Vietnam, civil rights and race relations, urban blight, and crime. Archie freely invoked racial epithets such as 'spade', 'hebe', and 'spic', and lamented the steady dissolution of the stable, solid, white working-class world he had known as a young man.

When Archie and Edith took to the airwaves, in 1971, they initiated a frank discussion about questions that had previously been taboo on television: gender equality, racial integration, breast cancer, draft dodging, interfaith relations, unemployment. O'Connor's character consistently gave voice to the petty prejudices and fears that the show sought to dispel — 'You think it, but ole Archie he says it, by damn,' a working-class viewer told *Life* magazine — while Edith, Archie's seemingly dim-witted wife, consistently brought him around to a more levelheaded way of making accommodation with the post-1960s world in which they lived. Archie may have been a laughable chauvinist — he may have suffered vicious ridicule at the hands of Lionel Jefferson, the quick-witted teenage son of the Bunkers' black next-door neighbor, George Jefferson — but the show was more subtle than first met the eye. Just as often as the joke was on Archie, it was also on Meathead, the jeans-wearing, book-toting grad student (and later college professor), whose own insensitivities toward his working-class in-laws, not to mention to his wife, Gloria, betrayed the hypocrisy of white liberals.

A less durable Lear creation, but one that enjoyed a popular, nine-year run, was *One Day at a Time*, which premiered in 1975. The show followed the lives of a 34-year-old single mother, Ann Romano, and her two teenage children. In the pilot episode we learn that Ann, played by actress Bonnie Franklin, divorced her ex-husband because she wants to develop a sense of personal autonomy and identity. She has never been in the workforce and has never supported herself — she has always lived either in her father's house or her husband's house. For Ann, the 1970s are a decade of personal renewal. On one level, the series was explicitly concerned with contemporary political and social issues. In the first five minutes of the pilot, the actors manage to address stagflation, gay rights, adultery, and Title IX, and over the course of the first season, these themes and others are frequently rehearsed, as viewers follow the travails of Ann's younger daughter, Barbara, who is the only girl on her high-school basketball team, and her older daughter, Julie, who grapples with

choices about sex and relationships. The series was shocking in its frank discussion of such themes as teen pregnancy and substance abuse. Even in its humorous moments, as when Ann is surprised but nonplussed to find a copy of *Playgirl Magazine* in 14-year-old Barbara's possession, it demonstrated a willingness to address questions that were heretofore absent from the television screen. Still, however explicitly political the show may have been, it was primarily concerned with Ann's journey to personal discovery. In this sense, it was emblematic of the larger feminist movement of the 1970s.

Not everyone approved of this focus on personal development. When younger, more radical feminists echoed Carol Hanisch's observation that 'the personal is political', they raised the ire of middle-aged women's rights activists like Betty Friedan, who decried the 'wallowing, navel-gazing rap sessions, the orgasm talk that leaves things unchanged, the rage that will produce a backlash — down with sex, down with love, down with child-bearing'. These were distractions, Friedan feared, that would divert feminist attentions from 'serious political action'.⁴⁰ In truth, there was considerable continuity between the concerns that radical feminists discussed at consciousness-raising sessions and the nuts-and-bolts political agenda that organizations like NOW pressed at the local and national levels. There was, for example, a logical connection between articles in *Ms.* like 'Is There Sex After Sex Roles?' which dissected the economic and physical power dynamics behind contemporary sexual mores, and the feminist legislative agenda, which included the modernization of laws governing rape and reproductive services.⁴¹

When she scored younger feminists for their 'man-hating, down-with-motherhood stance',⁴² Betty Friedan got it wrong. Most younger women who identified with the movement were suggesting something entirely more radical than a simple rejection of men. They proposed to reconfigure heterosexual marriage, an institution that they understood as central to the distribution of legal, economic, and social privileges in America. When asked whether she agreed with the Australian-born writer Germaine Greer that a woman's first step to personal liberation was refusing to marry, Gloria Steinem told a New York television audience,

I think we ought to refuse to marry according to the present law. I mean, Germaine is not talking about the loving partnership of two people; she's talking about the law. And the law is still based on the kind of old English principle that a married couple is one person and that person is the man, so when a woman gets married, legally she loses a great many of her civil rights and in some ways she becomes a child again. The man becomes financially responsible for her, which he should not have to be.⁴³

40 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, op. cit., 165.

41 'Is There Sex After Sex Roles', *Ms.*, November 1976.

42 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem* (New York 1995), 268; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, op. cit., 87.

43 *Eyewitness Exclusive*, Saturday, 2 October 1971, WABC-TV, transcript, Gloria Steinem MS, Box 3, Folder 2.

Ms. ran long articles profiling the challenges of modern fatherhood and masculinity, while Steinem publicly advocated the creation of:

men's liberation groups where men could sit down and discuss how they are depressed into ridiculous roles in jobs and in marriage. Men shouldn't have to prove their masculinity by winning fights in bars, earning lots of money and being the sole supporter of families. Men should not have to pay alimony. It's ridiculous for a man to be forced into supporting another adult for years and years.

Instead, Steinem suggested that policymakers look to Sweden, where:

men and women . . . work shorter hours, then have time together at home to run the household and rear children. Children need both mother and father. The trouble now is that they often have too much mother and not enough father.

However socially conservative and insensitive this argument may have been to the growing number of single mothers who, with their children, suffered the highest poverty rates by the late 1970s, Steinem's oft-repeated case for a Swedish-style social democracy was radical in its own right. It endorsed a wholesale redistribution of economic power, a redivision of labor, and a reorganization of American industry. In this sense, the personal was indeed quite political.⁴⁴

To be sure, such ideas hardly dominated the worlds of electoral politics or public policy during the 1970s. In those spheres, the conventional portrait of the decade as having been marked by political alienation and a reaction against the 1960s retains its plausibility. Yet the political dynamic of the 1970s was more complex and more interesting than one might imagine from these accounts. In important respects — not least in the case of second-wave feminism — this decade saw a broadening rather than a narrowing of the 1960s reform impulse, and the development of the tradition of grassroots radical mobilization.

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44 'The Fathering Instinct', Ms., 1974; '2 Feminist Movement Leaders Say Men Need Liberating, Too', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 September 1970. On the rise of female-headed households and correlating poverty levels, see William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York 1991), 224–6; Karin Stallard, Barbara Ehrenreich and Holly Sklar, *Poverty In The American Dream: Women & Children First* (Boston 1983); Lenore J. Weitzman, *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences For Women and Children in America* (New York 1985), chaps 9–10.