

## **Women the Longest Revolution**

### **The Chicago Women's Liberation Union and Juliet Mitchell**

By Christine R. Riddiough

1. *How does the struggle for women's liberation figure into the broader project of human freedom? What would be necessary to emancipate women? Is this related to general social change and struggle? Is revolution a prerequisite for women's freedom?*
2. *What is to be made of the many marriages (often later described as "barren") between Marxism and feminism? Can these two political movements co-exist or can they be combined? How and to what end?*
3. *Has the situation of women in the advanced countries and around the world improved or worsened since the 1960s, and in what ways (i.e. in gender-specific or other ways)? Why do such tabulations of gains and losses matter politically? What might some of the usual methods of counting these scores have to do with freedom (as opposed to other possible goals, like equality)? What might they have to do with socialist politics?*

TI want to take you back almost 50 years to 1969 and the founding of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, an organization that relied on the work of Juliet Mitchell to plan its strategy.<sup>1</sup> CWLU played a leading role in the women's liberation movement in Chicago during much of the 1970s. I was fortunate enough to be active in the organization throughout its existence. CWLU concentrated on organizing women to achieve liberation. CWLU organizing was done with a clear focus on both strategy and theory. Theory and strategy provided the convictions and beliefs of our organization, but organizing, action and outreach were the driving forces behind it, the *raison d'être*. While we were far from being doctrinaire Marxists we did agree with Marx's sentiment that '[t]he philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it.'<sup>2</sup> Through over 90 work groups and projects that is what we did.

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 1966, *The Longest Revolution*, New Left Review, No. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), Thesis 11, Marx Engels Selected Works, (MESW), Volume I, p. 15; these words are also inscribed upon his grave.

The theory we developed acknowledged that the struggle for women's rights was not isolated from other struggles – we recognized the intersection between gender, race and class and the importance of ensuring that our theory, strategy and actions bridged those intersections. We also recognized that our activism had to relate to the conditions facing women in a concrete manner in order to communicate the liberating potential of the women's movement.

A key document adopted by CWLU at its founding conference in 1969 was the statement of political principles. It provided the basis for the organization's theory and action and stated, in part:

*The struggle for women's liberation is a revolutionary struggle.*

*Women's liberation is essential to the liberation of all oppressed people.*

*Women's liberation will not be achieved until all people are free.<sup>3</sup>*

These three points neatly summarize the position of the founders and reflect their backgrounds as part of the student, anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements. Yet, unlike many position papers and statements of the era, they are succinct. They clearly position women's liberation as a part of a larger revolutionary movement and as essential to that movement.

Many of the women who founded CWLU and many of the early members were involved in political activism through the movements of the 1960s. Heather Booth had participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer and in student actions at the University of Chicago. Vivian Rothstein, had traveled to Vietnam and met with women from their National Liberation Front. For them, as for other women of our generation, these activities gave them the energy to fight on behalf of women along with a keen awareness that the progressive movement was still primarily led by men and that even the most active women were marginalized when decisions of any consequence were made. Out of this arose a consciousness that, if women were to be liberated, women had to be made central to the struggle. The importance of actively working for change was a second lesson that CWLU members took from their involvement in other movement activities.

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<sup>3</sup> CWLU *Political Principles*. 1969. revised 1972. Unpublished.

Over the course of its existence, CWLU adopted several papers proposed by chapters to help direct the work of the organization. The first of these was *Some Thoughts on Program*, inspired by the work of Juliet Mitchell.<sup>4</sup> Presented by the Midwives Chapter of the CWLU at the organization's second conference, this paper noted conflicting views within the women's liberation movement about how to best move forward: For example, consciousness raising as the main focus for work as opposed to programs to meet immediate needs such as child care. *Some Thoughts on Program* argued

*for a program and strategy which emphasizes struggle on many different levels, none of which is a clear priority over the others, and none of which is adequate without the development of the others.*<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this idea of a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted program to struggle against the oppression of women, the Midwives said that they

*...conceived of making a visual chart. Along one side are the four major roles into which women are placed in American society – roles which oppress us. First is our role in production (as surplus, menial, malleable labor force; domestic workers and keepers of the work force); second is production (being responsible for the reproduction of the race); third is sexuality and fourth is our role as socializers of children.*<sup>6</sup>

Those are Mitchell's four categories of the sources of oppression. The Midwives recognized that an understanding of women's oppression must be coupled with a strategy to fight that oppression, and so added dimensions of struggle to complete the chart.

Underscoring the conviction of early CWLU activists of the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, the Midwives' paper recognized:

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<sup>4</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 1966, *The Longest Revolution*, *New Left Review*, No. 40, In which Mitchell traced the evolution of socialist views on women from Charles Fourier, August Bebel and Karl Marx to Simone De Beauvoir and Kate Millet.

<sup>5</sup> Midwives Chapter. 1971. *Some Thoughts on Program*. Unpublished.

<sup>6</sup> *Some Thoughts....* , pg. 1 - The paper notes that these four areas were taken from Mitchell *The Longest Revolution*.

this is just a two dimensional chart. It helps us look at different types of program necessary to organize around women's oppression as women. But it is clear that women are not only oppressed as women, but are also part of all other oppressed groups within this society (e.g. blacks, workers, students, gay people). Because of women's interrelatedness to all of society we must have a view of program which says that our oppression as women cannot be separated from the oppression of all other groups. That means that our movement must work on program which struggles against all kinds of oppression and must respond specifically to the ways the oppression of these groups affects women in them<sup>7</sup>.

This paper and what came to be called the "Mitchell chart" were very influential in the CWLU. Discussion of the strategic program proposal in *Some Thoughts on Program* took place at the second CWLU conference in April 1971. A lively debate resulted in the adoption of the chart as a tool for CWLU planning and strategy. In the course of the debate, the strategic areas were changed to reflect the outward oriented work of the organization: direct action, education, service. Throughout the remainder of CWLU's existence, the Mitchell chart guided the organization's work

	Production	Reproduction	Sexuality	Socializers of Children
Service	Legal Clinic and DARE <i>Job discrimination cases</i>	Pregnancy Testing HERS Line Emma Goldman Clinic <i>Alice Hamilton Clinic</i> <i>Abortion Counselling Service</i>	Legal Clinic <i>Lesbian rights cases</i> HERS Line Emma Goldman Clinic Rape Crisis Line	Legal Clinic <i>Divorce and child-support cases</i>
Education	DARE <i>SECRET STORM</i> LIBERATION SCHOOL <i>Women &amp; the Economy</i> WOMANKIND <i>Don't buy Ford Parts</i>	Outreach <i>SECRET STORM</i> LIBERATION SCHOOL <i>Our Bodies, Ourselves; Prep. Childbirth</i> WOMANKIND <i>What about Birth Control</i>	Lesbian Group LIBERATION SCHOOL <i>Our Bodies, Ourselves; Sexuality</i> WOMANKIND <i>Reply to Ann Landers</i>	Outreach <i>Park District</i> LIBERATION SCHOOL <i>Families; Free Children</i> WOMANKIND <i>and Jill came tumbling after</i>
Direct Action	Direct Action for Rights in Employment (DARE)	Abortion Task Force & Health Group <i>"Abortion 7" Defense</i> <i>Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC)</i>	Rape Crisis Line	Outreach <i>Park District</i> <i>Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC)</i>

Fig. 1: The Juliet Mitchell Chart showing programs of CWLU (ca. 1974.)

<sup>7</sup> Midwives Chapter. 1971. *Some Thoughts on Program*. Unpublished.

CWLU developed programs in each of the areas of the chart. The primary education programs were the Liberation School for Women, *WOMANKIND* newspaper and the Speakers' Bureau. Each of these programs focused on the range of issues defined in the Mitchell chart. Service programs of CWLU included the iconic Abortion Counselling Service ('Jane'), the Legal Clinic and the Rape Crisis Line. Action programs ranged from Action Committee for Decent Childcare to workplace organizing with the Chicago City Hall janitresses (Direct Action for Rights in Employment) to demanding equity for women in Chicago Park District sports programs.

The Mitchell chart was also used to advance the theoretical perspective behind CWLU strategy. An example is the work of the Lesbian group of CWLU. In 1972 it proposed that CWLU adopt the position paper *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism*<sup>8</sup>. The paper stated:

*to understand how women's oppression and gay people's oppression are related to each other, and to discover the relationship of lesbianism to the women's movement, we need a deeper understanding of the structure and functioning of our society. ... we want to examine these questions from our perspective as socialist-feminists.*

It went on to describe the intersection between women's oppression and that of lesbians and gay men. The paper suggested that a more complete understanding of the oppression of gay men and lesbians involved going beyond the obvious issue of sexuality to issues related to production, reproduction and socialization of children.

Let me fast forward to today (and take a few steps back) to look at the situation we now face. Issues related to gender continue to shape our lives, our political debate, and our activism, although in many respects differently from 40 or 50 years ago. Gender shapes our lives from the very beginning. Two characteristics of gender as defined in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and even today – as borne out by the law recently enacted in North Carolina – stand out:

- Gender is perceived as binary – you are defined as either female or male when you're born - when the doctor, nurse or midwife wraps the baby in a pink or blue blanket.

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<sup>8</sup> Blazing Star Work Group. 1972, *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism*. Unpublished.

- Gender is a personal characteristic – everybody has one gender, the one they’re born with and that defines who they are and how they should act throughout their lives.

But the last 50 years have seen those views questioned, largely because the women’s liberation and the LGBT movements have exposed sexism as an underlying basis for them. Organizing by groups like CWLU played a central part in changing the situation of women and lesbians and gays and rethinking our views of gender.

Let me focus on that second characteristic, long held by many, that gender is a personal characteristic. Early socialist feminists recognized that that view was too narrow and that we needed to understand gender as a system that plays a central role in maintaining the status quo. Socialist feminists understand gender as a system that is designed to control behavior. Not only is it used to control behavior, but is used in such a way that people believe that the gender system is just common sense. For example, until the women’s movement of the 1970s took hold, most people believed that it was unnatural for people to be attracted to others of their own sex and that ‘a woman’s place is in the home.’

To dig deeper into this, in the 1920s, Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci wrote in the *Modern Prince*:

*...there is no abstract “human nature”, fixed and immutable (a concept which certainly derives from religious and transcendentalist thought), but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations....<sup>9</sup>*

Gender is part of this human nature that is historically determined. As a system, gender can be viewed as essential to the cultural/social hegemony that Gramsci describes as how the ruling class rules. The State/political society uses force or command to ensure that people are controlled. But for many societies the direct use of force is not necessary, since the ideological hegemony of civil society defines what makes sense and thus maintains control.

Sometimes people resist that hegemony in individual ways. For gay/lesbian working class people and people of color in 50s and 60s gender was expressed in non-conforming ways – butch/femme roles and

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<sup>9</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, 2012.

drag queens – as a way of rebelling against the gender system. The binary perspective on gender is one of those “common sense” notions that was used to keep women and LGBT people in line. And, we must add, it also has kept men and heterosexual people from speaking out for fear of losing what limited status and power they might have.

Speaking at the Boston conference on women’s liberation in 2014, Linda Gordon noted that the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s added a very important perspectives to that of the new left:

*Gender is not a characteristic of individual people.... Gender is an overall system..., it is a system we all live in.*

Gender is a *system* that is used to control people, especially women and people who are LGBT, but its effects are played out at *the individual, personal* level.

Some of that control is now breaking down as evidenced by the recent dramatic turn-around in support for same-sex marriage, but the “War on Women” and the Tea Party attacks on LGBT people demonstrate that there is still much that needs to be done to really tear down that wall of gender. Central to that effort is recognizing that while individual gains – such as freedom to marry – might be achieved, they must be part of a larger strategy that addresses the position of women and LGBT people in society. Juliet Mitchell’s ‘Women: The Longest Revolution’ gave us an important starting point for understanding the connection between socialism and feminism. Through Mitchell and Gramsci and current thinkers and activists like Linda Gordon, we can chart the next steps in that revolution. The gains of the last 50 years provide a solid base for the next phase as the revolution continues.