October 2011

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The Bombshell

The Forgotten First Wave

Winnifred Harper Cooley, Ada Nield Chew, Mary Beard, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Jane Addams, Mary Church Terrell, Mona Caird, Ernestine Rose, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, Phillis Wheatley, Catherine Webb, Beatrice Webb, Charlotte Wilson, Mary Gawthorpe, Mary Ware Dennett, Octavia Hill, Margaret McMillan, Selina Cooper, Vida Scudder, Eleanor Marx Aveling, Annie Besant, Dora Montefiore, Olive Schreiner, Marie Jenny Howe, Nella Larsen, Voltairine de Cleyre, Edith Ellis, Elsie Clews Parsons, Suzanne La Follette, Rosa Graul, Angela Heywood, Lois Waisbrooker, Elmina Slenker, Margaret Sanger, Marie Stopes, Rose Witcop, Dora Russell, Eleanor Rathbone, Alice B. Stockham, Georgia Kotsch, Crystal Eastman, Helen Campbell, Mary Macarthur, Hannah Mitchell, Lillie D. White, Lizzie Homes, Clara Zetkin, Christine Frederick, Lillian Gilbreth, Sarah Lees, C. Helen Scott, Helena Borm, Miriam Daniell, Isabella Ford, Eleanor Rathbone, Anna Julia Cooper, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Olive Schreiner, Maggie Lena Walker, Ellen Gates Starr, Vida Dutton Scudder, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Darlene Clark Hine, Sylvia Pankhurst, Jane Hume Clapterton, Teresa Billington-Greig, Margaret Ashton...

These names represent only a fraction of the ordinary and extraordinary women, rich, middle class, poor, black, white, radical, conservative, liberal, socialist, communist who from the 1880s to the end of the 1920s in England and the United States, fought to reform, transform, and re-imagine every aspect of daily life. The agendas of these adventurous innovators were myriad, their policies and utopian ideals often incompatible, but their common goal was for an improved world economically, politically, socially, culturally, sexually, and spiritually, for women -- and men. They advocated for the vote, equal pay, education, contraception, equal rights within a marriage, divorce, legalized abortion, free love, childcare, healthcare. They reconsidered their clothing, their role in the global economy, gender divisions, motherhood, housework, sex practices, language, even consciousness itself. Sheila Rowbotham's unique and revelatory book *Dreamers of a New Day: Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* is a seminal work of history profiling an astonishing number of visionary women who incontestably changed life as we know it -- then were preeminently forgotten.

Rowbotham, Professor of Gender and Labor History at the University of Manchester, is perhaps Britain's most significant feminist thinker and author of numerous groundbreaking books. In *Dreamers* she employs her Marxist-feminist approach to the past. Her thematic chapters cover subjects such as aspirations, sex, motherhood, housework, labor, and consumerism, each topic unraveled and explicated through individual women's direct experience. The result is an extraordinary layering and intermingling of an impressively wide range of personal stories of feminist activism. Apart from gender, there is almost no privileging of any particular voice, group, race, class, movement, or political party. The narrative strands, non-linear and sporadic, function almost like electricity with randomly alternating particles and waves, to luminous effect.

The scope of what these early "dreamers" envisioned for women was formidable. In 1899, Maggie Lena Walker, a former washerwoman turned economic reformer in Atlanta, Georgia, began a Penny Savings Bank where poor women could get loans. It grew into the large entirely black-owned Consolidated Bank and Trust Company. She founded a female insurance company and opened a department store to create employment for women. She set up an educational loan fund and started a weekly newspaper advocating suffrage and condemning segregation, calling for streetcar boycotts decades before the Civil Rights movement.

Elsie Clews Parsons, an anthropologist who wrote on sex and birth control imagined a more fluid definition of sexuality in her 1914 *Journal of a Feminist*:

> The day will come when the individual... [will not] have to pretend to be possessed of a given quota of femaleness and maleness. This morning perhaps I feel like a male; let me act like one. This afternoon I may feel like a female; let me act like one. At midday or at midnight I may feel sexless; let me therefore act sexlessly... It is such a confounded bore to have to act one part endlessly.

Many women such as free lover Elmina Slenker recommended "Dianaism," a non-penetrative sexuality enabling couples to explore sexual pleasure in new ways, liberating them from the domination-submission paradigm. Dianaism would lead to fewer abortions and infanticides and enable women to "have none but wished-for children." Anarchist and author of *A Sex Revolution* (1894), Lois Waisbrooker promoted Dianaism over contraception because "The sex fountain is the source of power and consenting to tamper with it to please men diverts that power to man's use."

Like Waisbrooker, some feminists were wary of how women's increased sexual freedom would be exploited by men. Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed that women were adapting themselves to "the overdeveloped sex instinct of men" and thought psychoanalysis a new means of female oppression invented by men to retain the power that older systems of control "no longer assured him."

The concept of motherhood was deconstructed. Lillie D. White told women to ignore "wifely and maternal ties and burdens" and "unlearn... any duties of any kind to gods, men, or communities." Georgia Kotsch, a socialist, wrote that "the mother function" and the "mother

instinct" were the "last citadel" of masculine psychology's way of managing women. And Crystal Eastman called not only for equal paternal care but proposed "marriage under two roofs" with husband and wife living in separate quarters and dividing childcare. Shorter workweeks and shared jobs were called for to allow fathers to do their part. In her article "Fifty-Fifty Wives," Mary Alden Hopkins observed that no progress would be made until attitudes towards domesticity changed and women shed their sacrificial mentality.

This historical period of enormous possibility for sexual and social reform was, however, doomed to end. With the Great Depression and World War II, feminism lost cohesion; divisions once tolerable became lethal. The rise of capitalist consumerism and a flourishing market economy stimulated private consumption rather than social transformation, and advertising aimed at and depicting women created a different concept of self-realization. "The first responsibility of an American to his country," the Muncie, Indiana Chamber of Commerce announced in the mid-1920s "is no longer that of a citizen, but of a consumer."

While reading Rowbotham's book I kept feeling frustration and loss. Why had I heard of only a handful of these women who had struggled so valiantly on my behalf? How was it these intrepid women, dreamers who had made real so much that we now take for granted, were all but excluded from our cultural heritage? Except for the suffragist movement, Rowbotham writes, the overwhelming creative force for change engendered by these women, "seemed to have been deleted from the record." The attitude toward feminists became *You won the vote now go away*. Rowbotham's explanation for the historical silence regarding much of these women's achievements is that they were never at the center of power, their struggle perceived as marginal and therefore unworthy of entry into the historical canon. Her book stunningly redresses this entrenched bias toward the telling of history, rebalancing our frame of reference, and allowing women's voices from the past to be heard once again and to inspire.

Rowbotham ends *Dreamers of a New Day* with a quote from Waisbrooker: "The first step... is to believe that it *can* be done; the next that it *will* be done, and lastly to determine to do it *ourselves.*" This rallying call against complacency was implemented by Rowbotham's own students in 2008 (two years before *Dreamers* was published). The University of Manchester had refused Rowbotham's request to continue teaching despite her contractual obligation to retire at the age of 65. (The University had just hired Martin Amis, age 58, on a part-time salary of £80,000, higher than her own.) Her students, with the encouragement of academics worldwide, began a vigorous protest campaign and saved her job.

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