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Issue 31

It is now 20 years since the Women's Liberation Movement entered the arena of public politics in Britain. *Feminist Review* has chosen to mark the occasion with a special anniversary issue that charts some aspects of the impact of feminism across those two decades. Our aim in putting together this issue has, however, never been to trace a history whose origin is fixed in the meetings and marches of 1969. When women's liberation re-emerged in the wake of the 1968 student movement, its ideas seemed not only profoundly subversive, but also fresh and new. Since then, we have gone a long way towards recovering the histories of feminism's precursors in earlier generations and centuries. What is more, feminists have learned – often painfully – that women's liberation, indeed any social movement, has no single point of origin; it is born in a diversity of times and places. It is this that we have tried to reflect in FR31, by bringing together contributions from a variety of standpoints and perspectives. Some are written by the 'activist generation': feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s – Angela Y Davis, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and others who made a significant mark on the theory and practice of the early movement. Other pieces feature women who were struggling in their own ways with women's issues long before the emergence of the contemporary women's movement. There are contributions by young women born after the mid-1960s, for whom the issues put on the agenda by the women's movement – contraception and abortion rights, equal pay and opportunities, economic independence – have been a part of their birthright, rather than something to be fought for from the beginning.

Emerging from this collection, then, is a variegated picture of two decades of feminisms. Feminism today appears as a set of ideas and practices which, though they clearly take their inspiration from many aspects of the 1969 movement, appear in forms never anticipated by early second-wave feminists. Those of us involved in women's liberation 20 years ago have seen many feminist ideas become part of the common sense of our culture; yet those ideas may be expressed in forms we barely recognize as feminist. In watching those developments, we have come to see the limitations of a politics that subsumes its adherents under the single category of 'woman'. Women, we have learned, are a heterogeneous constituency divided by lines of class, race and ethnicity, national and social status, etc. Many women have little access, or are indeed profoundly hostile to the social forms and political practices of the women's movement avant-garde. Today, feminism is learning to reconstitute itself as a social force that takes account of women's difference. The danger now lies in the

reification of differences rooted in experiential identities: a danger addressed by many contributors to this issue in their comments on the politics of identity.

The dispersal and diversification of contemporary feminisms has raised particular questions for us as an editorial collective. Where should the major emphases of this issue lie? How do we assess feminism's part in the politics of the past two decades? We talk a lot today of women's liberation's limitations; yet many of the movement's most basic demands – for equal pay, equal rights, and an end to what we once confidently termed 'discrimination' – have yet to be met, and remain valid.

It was this political legacy of feminism – the impetus it still gives to effective action for change – that we wanted to retrieve from accounts of the past two decades; so we asked contributors, in tracing their various histories, to document developments and raise questions that might point a way to the future. The work presented here is by no means comprehensive; indeed there are significant absences. Aspects of the cultural work of feminists – the emergence of women's studies and its widespread impact in education, the flowering of feminist cultural analysis, or the success story of feminist publishing in Britain – are, to our regret, barely touched upon. Contributions to this issue do, however, range over a diversity of terrains, from equal opportunities and local activism to motherhood and women's writing; and in all the areas touched upon, it becomes clear that feminism has been profoundly transformative. The movement of 1969 demanded (in its more euphoric moments) nothing less than wholesale social transformation. These articles, perhaps by way of contrast, paint a picture of the reality of a diversity of transformations: of feminism as a 'revolution' that takes place first on the level of the particular, and only gradually, ambiguously and unevenly roots itself in the generalities of the social world.

The title of this issue, *The Past Before Us*, says something, finally, of the future hopes we invest in feminism. (We share that title, coincidentally, with Sheila Rowbotham, whose article on motherhood in this collection will be a chapter in her forthcoming book, *The Past is Before Us*.) Though *Feminist Review* 31 does feature contributions from Europe and the US, its focus is primarily on the British situation; and it is published in the context of a decade of political retrenchment in this country. Thatcherism, very broadly, has adopted a dual strategy in relation to feminism; while incorporating its individualist elements, it has mounted devastating onslaughts on the collective socio-economic and political projects of women's liberation. The Tory government's progressive dismantling of public sector institutions, for example – its attacks on educational and health provision and the welfare state – flies in the face of feminism's early demands for social provision, from childcare facilities to equal opportunities legislation, to guarantee women's equalities and freedoms. It is essential to reassert those demands again and again; but in revisiting feminism's history, we need also to identify more precisely the strategies and practices which have made feminism an effective force

for social change, and make those insights work as lessons for the future. We need to recognize that a politics formulated at the end of the 1960s – a decade that celebrated British affluence and the consumer dream – will not, in unchanged form, provide a blueprint for the late 1980s. Britain's changing position internationally – the final loss of empire, the collapse of British manufacturing, the shift to a service economy providing for the needs of international finance capital – has made us aware (not before time) of the limitations of a parochial and ethnocentric feminism. We need to find a politics that builds on the phenomenal advances of women's liberation, yet remains open to reassessment and change in negotiation with those with whom we forge our closest alliances. In our own practice as a socialist-feminist editorial collective – our engagement and debate with the black and lesbian women's movements, the Left, the peace movement, gay and anti-racist activists, and other feminists internationally – we have maintained a commitment to a politics of both autonomy and alliance. Such a politics has always been a central project of socialist-feminism; perhaps for us, it is the most important legacy we inherit from 20 years of feminism.

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