

Broadside

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Thirty Years Later...

by Eve Zaremba

Somebody missed an opportunity. Had a bomb dropped on Washington Square, New York on September 27, 28, or 29, 1979 it would have wiped out a fair number of outstanding Americans, a sprinkling of hot-shot French, and even a few (very few) average Canadian, feminists. What brought us all together to the NYU campus in Greenwich Village was a conference on feminist theory, held in commemoration of Simone de Beauvoir's book 'The Second Sex', first published in 1949.

There we were Thirty Years Later reading theoretical paper, listening to a formidable array of speakers, discussing, complaining, analysing, arguing, eating box lunches, sweating it out in stuffy auditoriums and taking it all quite seriously. I don't know what the very few men present thought of it all — there wasn't a peep out of them — but I am sure that for people (of either gender) not tuned in to feminist thought over the past ten years it would have been a shocking experience of major proportions. To those of us for whom feminism is more than a demand for 'equality' or 'services for women,' the calibre of minds, at the dedication and the (relative) commonality of thought evident at the Conference, was immensely stimulating. Yes, Virginia, there is such a thing as Feminist thought; the development of Feminist Theory is in Process.

Conference organization was far from perfect. Hackles rose at the overly academic, inflexible format and especially at the under-representation of black women and strange lack of any mention of lesbianism in the printed program. This probably reflected the respectable auspices under which the conference was held — The New York Institute for the Humanities — and not any lack of consciousness on the part of the organizers; good feminists all, I am sure. In any event, these familiar shortcomings were

repeatedly and vociferously aired, providing a sharp contrast to the theoretical content of the conference.

The stated goal of the conference was: "to bring together different approaches to the meaning of feminism...gentle confrontation between opposing ideas." What was presented was indeed an intellectual feast; a smorgasbord of ideas, principles, approaches, disciplines, political and personal perspectives. Unaccustomed to rigorous thought, the mind reeled under the onslaught and went on happily ticking over late into the night.

No overall synthesis was attempted since it is much too soon in the process for such an enterprise. Moreover it is doubly dangerous for women to replace one set of limiting definitions with another. Yet, the early outlines of a basis for Feminist Theory could be discerned from the papers and discussion.

Feminist Theory is a theory for social change. That alone has enormous implications. It presupposes the *social origin of social phenomena and our ability to affect change through collective action*. It follows that to be a feminist is not a static 'position.' In the words of Charlotte Bunch: "A feminist fights for women." And Linda Gordon in her paper 'Individual and Community in the History of Feminism': "A solitary lament on the status of women or even a campaign for the betterment of a particular group (of women) do not equal feminism."

Feminism declares that women are an oppressed group, that this oppression is socially determined and is therefore remediable. Not divinely ordained or biologically destined. Women's position in society varies depending on time, place, class, and numerous other social factors. Biology, no less

than other aspects of human condition is socially mediated, therefore subject to human intervention and historical change.

Stated like that, simply, it all seems terribly self-evident and not very useful. "We know all that! What does it have to do with the price of bananas?" Feminist activists tend to get very impatient with definitions, systems, abstract ideas, generally theoretical discussion. It's not due to simplistic anti-intellectualism, although suspicion of over-intellectualizing is undoubtedly a factor. It is the pressing need we all feel for an action program — *Now!* Most of us want to know what we should be doing today, tomorrow, that will make an appreciable difference. Often we fail to accept that to effect change it is first necessary to learn how things work.

There can be no short-cuts to effective strategy. And strategy in its broadest sense is a hypothesis about how things happen in society and why. Feminist theory must concern itself with how social systems work against women, both specifically and universally. From that understanding can come a strategy for changing the status quo which is more than a collection of ad hoc tactics. Tactics which lacking a well-grounded strategy can be ineffective, inefficient, conflicting or downright counter-productive.

Theory building is not a mere game for academic feminists. It is the foundation of feminism and therefore concerns us all.

My impression is that the women gathered together at this conference were fully aware of the importance of what we were sharing. Even the differences between us, some of them enormous, could not out-weigh a deep understanding of and commitment to our common purpose. The road is hard and sometimes frustrating but, to coin a phrase, 'Where would you rather be?'

It's home, but I like it

by Myrna Kostash

Aphorism: when you leave a city but leave your books behind in a friend's basement, your subconscious is telling you you're coming back.

Of course I was coming back to Toronto! This was 1975, the same year I had been writing a monthly *Women* column for *Maclean's*, teaching Women's Studies at the University of Toronto and collaborating with four other women journalists on a book, *Her Own Woman*. And it had only been a year or two before that that we had cavorted in the heady atmosphere of the Women's Film Festival and the Women's Culture Festival; and there had been a Women In Literature conference near Ottawa (O munificent Secretary of State!) and Canadian Women's Educational Press was a serious business, not to mention *The Other Woman*, Women's Place, the Women's Clinic — and you get the idea. I was leaving to research a book in Alberta and then of course I was coming back. My winter clothes were in that friend's basement too.

Upshot: I live in Edmonton. I had my books and winter clothes sent out by CNR and bought myself a parka. How, I have been asked and have asked myself, do I live so satisfied in exile from the nerve centres of the women's movement?

At first it was not with such satisfaction that I (re)made my home here. Every few months I was back in Toronto, hanging in at the edges of this or that feminist event or just spending time with my women colleagues, relishing with greedy appetite the bunch of us cooking, dancing, smoking, arguing together. (Edmonton was and is so terribly couple-oriented and resolutely heterosexual in its social formations.) Or I would visit a friend in Berkeley and in a week glut myself with women's music/books/bars/meetings to last six months.

But one cannot live forever as a hanger-on. Edmonton was where I had determined to be at home and establish community. By this time, my book *All of Baba's Children* was finished and this, as it turned out, shaped my community. It is the curse of the journalist to be the specialist of the moment: in 1975 I was known as a feminist writer; by 1977 I had become an ethnic one and I discovered with left-wing Ukrainian peers in Edmonton I had almost as engrossing, supportive and stimulating a tribe as I had had in Toronto among feminists.

There is an activist feminist community in Edmonton but I am not in it. Or, rather, I'm in and out of it: a Reclaim the Night march, a workshop on ethnic women, International Women's Day activities, a speech here, an article there.

But I was speaking of another sort of satisfaction. My women's community in Edmonton is not organizational but it is intensely comradely. It's raucous dinner parties and quiet tête-à-tête. It's working on a film together. It's keeping up with each other's work. It's taking each other to the theatre and weeding each other's gardens. It's celebrating one baby after another and taking a camping holiday together. It's being close to my grandmother and getting to know my mother all over again. It's arguing about Robin Morgan and Lina Wertmuller and Margaret Atwood. And it's extending spontaneous encouragement and help during those desolating struggles with mates, bosses and colleagues.

We're in our thirties, we're almost obsessively committed each to her own project, we're in our ones, twos and threes, paying mortgages and scouting for baby-sitters, and we're fighting very hard to infuse our particular working and domestic spaces with our politics. When we come together it's to relax and make each other laugh.

At the same time, I do not think this respite is more than a temporary consolation. I have the feeling that in the 80s the women of Edmonton, like those throughout the country and continent, are going to be

called by the force of events to bring their disparate identities together — the feminist and socialist and ethnic — to the barricades. In that scenario, Edmonton will have been as nurturing a training camp as any.

