Title
In order to go beyond protest it is necessary... to conceive a new vocabulary of desire...

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t32n7f2

Author
Mertes, Thomas

Publication Date
2009-01-26
In order to go beyond protest it is necessary...

to conceive a new vocabulary of desire...

ON JANUARY 20, ACTIVIST/SCHOLAR SHEILA ROWBOTHAM
WILL GIVE A TALK ABOUT HER NEW BIOGRAPHY,
EDWARD CARPENTER: A LIFE OF LIBERTY AND LOVE

by Thomas Mertes

In 1969 Sheila Rowbotham pleaded with comrades at the radical newspaper Black Dwarf for a unified left. “We can’t appoint ourselves as an all-knowing elite, ready to issue orders to the masses,” she argued. Instead Rowbotham sought to learn from Third World revolutionaries, Anarchists, Anarcho-syndicalists, and Utopian Socialists. She advocated a broad appeal to reach out to groups who were oppressed by more than just class. She had come to the conclusion that most of the men on the left were too steeped in patriarchy and failed to take into consideration that “liberation” was not just a change in the balance of class forces, but recognition of other forms of subordination. Rowbotham eventually resigned from the publication, suggesting that the editorial board “sit around imagining they had cunts for two minutes in silence so they could understand why it was hard” for them to consider her and other women as equals. The personal had become political.

Sheila Rowbotham was part of the initial groundswell of women around the world that would later be characterized as second-wave feminism. The movement sparked her interest in understanding herstory, as her research at the British Library yielded few analysis of how feminists acted politically in the past. The dearth of scholarship on the conjunction of women’s issues and politics led her early on to discover activists in the first wave of feminism, including Edward Carpenter.

On January 20, from 4 to 6 pm in 6275 Bunche at UCLA, Rowbotham will present some of her findings from her latest project, Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love (Verso, 2008). The event is cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Women and the Center for Social Theory and Comparative History.
Born a century before Rowbotham, Edward Carpenter was an intellectual and an activist from an upper-class family. He advocated for women’s suffrage and for socialism, environmental causes, wider democracy, and a deeper appreciation of and communication between the classes. He opposed animal vivisection, imperialism, and laws that imposed rigid morals. Celebrated as a socialist during his lifetime, Carpenter is now most famous for his struggle for greater rights for gays. Through much of the nineteenth century, “sodomy” was a capital crime in England. Because of the criminalization of sexual practice, Carpenter had to tread lightly in his struggle, if he wanted to make headway and remain in progressive coalitions. He was a popular writer who utilized the latest ideas and science to bolster his arguments. In particular, Carpenter was a “lumper” not a “splitter” as an activist and intellectual, seeking to build coalitions between disparate groups fighting for or against a specific cause. Moreover, he believed in dreaming the future into existence and acting on his belief system. Thus, he taught in the early years of the Cambridge Extension system that sought to spread education to adults and members of the working class. Rejecting bourgeois lifestyle and embracing a simpler and sustainable existence, Carpenter moved to the countryside. His farm became a haven for progressives and an alternative model for free association. He also

SHEILA ROWBOTHAM. At the University of Manchester since 1995, she is currently a professor of Gender and Labour History, Sociology. The university administration attempted to force her retirement earlier this year, but students organized in protest and were able to obtain an additional three-year contract for their esteemed mentor.
brought his working-class lover, George Merrill, to the farm to live with him, to the consternation of some and the condemnation of others. In her biography of Carpenter, Rowbotham reveals some of her own philosophical activist position, “The dilemma Carpenter lived so strenuously, how to imagine an alternative without being trapped in a prescriptive construct, is as relevant for rebels now as it was then. In order to go beyond protest it is necessary ... to conceive a new vocabulary of desire. ... Instead of casting ideals in stone, Carpenter kept utopia in his mind’s eye in the immediate changes he proposed” (p. 8).

Rowbotham’s own career as an intellectual began with three path-breaking historical-philosophical monographs: Women, Resistance and Revolution (Allen Lane, 1972), Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World (Penguin, 1973), and Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women’s Oppression and the Fight Against It (Pluto, 1973). These works, however, were preceded by her nuclear disarmament, socialist, and anti-war activism. The publication of Rowbotham’s “Women’s Liberation and the New Politics” pamphlet in 1969 led to the first National Women’s Liberation Conference in 1970. Her activism did not preclude her research; her many publications include A New World for Women: Stella Browne Socialist Feminist (Pluto, 1977), and with Jeffery Weeks, Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis (Pluto, 1977). Along with Jean McCrindle, she explored the lives of working-class women through interviews edited in Dutiful Daughters Women Talk about Their Lives (Viking, 1977). In 1979, along with Hillary Wainwright and Lynne Segal, Rowbotham sought to unify parts of the left especially through recognition of the role of women in grassroots organizing in a pamphlet that became Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism (Merlin Press, 1979). The authors argued forcefully that women’s ideas and experiences—including how they live their lives—ought to shape their activism. This emphasis on experience, action, and organization persists in her work. She continues to be a prolific author translating her experience as an activist and analyst into insightful works pointed to a more enlightened future.

Rowbotham also worked at the Greater London Council including organizing low-wage women in the early 1980s and went global doing research for the UN University World Institute for Development Economics Research, where she investigated the causes of poverty and how they might be addressed. As economic globalization deepened, she examined how women across the globe experienced common problems and suggested ways to organize and meet the challenges imposed by new economic realities. In the 1990s, she edited a number of books with Swasti Mitter on poor women in the Third World (of both the Global North and South) and how they made the most of their lives. Her work has continued on this front with Women Resist Globalization: Mobilizing for Livelihood and Rights, a volume edited with Sheila Linkogle (Zed, 2001).

Sheila Rowbotham has been at the University of Manchester since 1995. She is currently a professor of Gender and Labour History, Sociology. The university administration attempted to force her retirement earlier this year, but students organized in protest and were able to obtain an additional three-year contract for their esteemed mentor.

Thomas Mertes is an administrator at the Center for Social Theory and Comparative History, UCLA. He is on the editorial board of the New Left Review and he has taught U.S. political history and other classes at UCLA Extension.