

Strategic communication and notions of citizenship in the American women's movement, 1960-1980

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Why are some social movements successful while others fail? This is a question that social scientists have struggled with throughout the twentieth century, bringing an arsenal of theories, analytic tools, and empirical cases to the table in an effort to provide compelling answers. There are, as a result of this long-standing inquiry, a variety of paradigms for understanding such movements. Some of these approaches emphasize cultural factors, others stress political consciousness, and still others focus on economic variables and the effective or ineffective mobilization of resources (for a collection of approaches see Morris and Mueller, 1992).

My intention is to join this debate about social movements, but to come to it from the arena of public opinion research and communication. I am most interested in how the leaders of movements try to mobilize their publics - their rhetorical approaches and organizational strategies. More precisely, though, I am interested in conceptions of publics and public opinion among leaders: How do they think about citizenship and social action, and how do these notions get translated into political strategy? In his recent history of citizenship in America, Rogers Smith (1997) argues that no democratic polity can succeed unless its leaders convince the public they are indeed a public - a cohesive collection of people with some common purpose. I argue here that the same is true for an effective social movement: Unless leadership of the movement can convince its ultimate constituency that they are something of a monolith (e.g., hold similar values) great successes are difficult to attain.

In order to explore this issue - the way that social movement leaders conceptualize and persuade both their own publics as well as the broader one - I am studying the late twentieth century American women's movement, from the early 1960s through the late-1970s. This is a risky time for me to give a paper on this project, since my archival work is in the early stages, and hypotheses are shifting often at this point. Yet I do have a working argument about the movement, public opinion, and some suggestive empirical evidence. The women's movement is an excellent place to study public opinion mobilization because its ambitions were so great, because its activities are well-documented, and because many of the most important founders are still living and able to speak with social scientists and journalists (see bibliography for some of the many useful primary sources on the movement).

My central argument right now is this: While the rhetoric and strategy of the women's movement strongly emphasized what Smith underscores - the importance of making members of a political constituency feel bonds with each other - movement leaders simultaneously undermined this rhetoric by holding underdeveloped conceptions of publics, public opinion, and how to move the popular sentiment. In particular, I will argue, leaders were at odds with what had already become, in the mid-60s, the dominant

way to think about public opinion - as the aggregation of individual opinions across the nation. In fact, leaders focused so much on galvanizing their own public, and on particular forms of "consciousness raising" (through small groups and larger manifestos for mass distribution) that they failed to think about the relationship between their core of activists/believers and the larger American public. This project maps discourse and action of leaders, exploring the ways they failed to appeal to a broader public.

I am not arguing that the late twentieth century women's movement was a terrific failure or that consciousness raising is not a good thing. Far from it, we have evidence that the women's movement was a great success in many ways, as it has created more opportunities for women than ever before in American social life, political life, and in the market. But there have been miserable failures as well (e.g., the failure to pass the ERA, see Mansbridge, 1986), an American military establishment that has yet to recognize gender equality, and most disturbing to the typical feminist college professor, a younger generation of women who abhor the "feminist" label. Also, one might argue that change in the status of women has been slow and grudging - much slower that it might be. I do not aim to pass judgement on the overall effectiveness of the movement, which is so dispersed and hard to track, especially relative to other movement and parties I have studied (e.g., the Libertarian Party; see Herbst 1995). But it is safe to say that change has been slow and disappointments are many.

My archive is composed of published books and periodicals, widely available at most university and good public libraries. But I am also fortunate that my own university (Northwestern) houses one of the best collections of late 20th century women's movement documents, including lesser-known and rare periodicals, pamphlets, reports, speeches, internal organization memos, posters and other ephemera not available in any other archive in the nation. At this point, I am still perusing the archive, and locating the primary documents - for centrist organizations (e.g., NOW), radical women's organizations (e.g., The Feminists) and organizations with a political and social mission (e.g., Boston Women's Health Collective - activists for change in women's health care and producers of the popular *Our Bodies Ourselves*).

In a brief paper it is difficult to communicate the texture and content of the documents I am working with because of their sheer number and diversity. So let me elaborate here on the more abstract theoretical issues related to social movements and public opinion - arguments derived from my thesis above about consciousness raising. Consciousness raising and its effects are among the subjects of my book in progress (I'm also working on inter-group relations in the movement and mass media strategies). But I hope we can discuss two issues at the conference. The first is related to the content of consciousness raising discourse and the second to the communication forum or technology of consciousness raising.

- Intense emphasis on consciousness raising inevitably leads to a focus on individuals, sex, relationships, motherhood, personal finance, and other issues of everyday family life. As Evans (1979) and others have pointed out, "the personal is political" was the rallying cry of the late twentieth century women's movement. This focus, embedded in the

institutions of consciousness raising (the actual groups) and the rhetoric of the movement used to encourage formation of such groups, raises interesting questions about public opinion, in particular: How does the orientation to problems of the individual distract or undermine strategy and discourse intended to change the collective, general will? We see in some of the better collections of women's movement documents a general confusion or schizophrenia about how the personal and political are related to each other, and a resulting confusion about the sorts of rhetoric effective in organizing and persuading the public. Take, for instance, this 1969 quote from the Chicago Women's Liberation group, an organization centered at the University of Chicago: "What does women's freedom mean? It means freedom of self-determination, self-enrichment, the freedom to live one's own life, set one's own goals, the freedom to rejoice in one's own accomplishments. It means the freedom to be one's own person in an integrated life of work, love, play, motherhood: the freedoms, rights and privileges of first class citizenship, of equality in relationships of love and work: the right to choose to make decisions or not to: the right to full self-realization and to full participation in the life of the world. That is the freedom we seek in women's liberation. To achieve these rights we must struggle as all other oppressed groups must struggle: one only has the rights one fights for. We must come together, understand the common problems, despair, anger, the roots and processes of our oppression: and then together, win our rights to a creative and human life." In this quote, which is representative of much of the centrist rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s, though more tame than the radical group rhetoric, we see the mixing of personal and political concerns very clearly. I elaborate in this project that, when it comes to persuading public opinion, the constant reference to personal life detracted from the arguments about citizenship, equality under the law, and economic equality.

- Consciousness raising, as an organizing and educational strategy, is indeed political in that problems of work and political representation of women were discussed (more in some groups than in others, of course, depending on composition, leadership, location, etc.). But because these groups excluded men by their very nature and structure, as a means of communication (or technology for communication) they signaled that men were structurally not part of the movement. The signal, in fact, is that women's issues are women's business. Even though leaders were well-aware of the need to persuade men, the means of communication for women within the movement signaled just the opposite and so flew in the face of effective public opinion persuasion. Consciousness raising groups may have made pockets of the movement's female constituency feel a common bond, but what they communicated to the larger public was problematic. As Ruth Rosen (1995) has pointed out, "feminists became so engrossed with the discovery of hidden injuries, so exhilarated by the possibility of transforming society, that the history of their specific alienation quickly became lost, never fully entering public consciousness" (p. 316).

Again, I have a long way to go in terms of organizing the archival evidence - reports from the groups themselves, pamphlets about "how to do" consciousness raising, and speeches about the importance of these therapeutic and quasi-political groups. But these are some of the issues I am exploring right now as I try to understand how, and under what conditions, talk of the personal can undermine public opinion persuasion. When a social movement is as ambitious as the women's movement was - intending to change the status of women in all spheres of society - influencing the mass public is a necessity. How that

goal was undermined, or made difficult to achieve, by organizational tactics, rhetoric, and notions about the general public is one central concern of this project.

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