



## **Looking Back: ‘1968’, Women’s Liberation and the Family**

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### ***Introduction***

Looking back at how things used to be is never straight forward, as anyone attempting life writing or historical and social research knows well. Memories and evidence are always inflected by intervening years and the cultural politics of the present as well as by our psychic histories. The accounts produced by historians are always interpretations, always contextual, never ‘objective’. Nonetheless, despite this unreliability, personal narratives and memoirs can provide meaningful and sometimes unexpected insight into political events and broader cultural trajectories, just as fiction can. Autobiographical versions of the past can also tell us something about maturation, about how people change, or not, with the passage of time, as well as about shifts in wider sociopolitical and intellectual spheres.

This article attempts to explore these different levels. The focus will be on the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and particularly on what it meant for me, as a young, radical, married woman with three children under five. Some of my sources about feminism and the family will be, in addition to memory and historical record, my own utopian polemical article written at the time (Nava 1972) and a more analytical piece written a dozen years later (Nava 1983/1992).

### **1968 – Political Context**

The year 1968 is remembered and celebrated by the left for the astonishing eruption of political insurgency around the world, in USA, France, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, UK and beyond, which was mobilised both by students and workers. ‘1968’ however refers to more than just a year. Some historians have more recently called the period between about 1965 and 1975 ‘the long 68’ to indicate a historical conjuncture, that is to say a wider spectrum of political events and social context. Stuart Hall, whose writing about conjunctures has influenced several decades of cultural analysis (Gilbert 2019), argued moreover that the most radical, profound and enduring legacy of ‘1968’ was feminism, not revolutionary socialism (Hall 1992).

This may come as a surprise to activists of that moment because, during the actual year of 1968, the women’s movement in UK was barely visible. Those of us who became passionately committed feminists over the following years were, at that point, still politically marginal and marginalised, despite being close to the left and the alternative culture of the period, to liberation and student politics. We were confined to watching, to being watched, and to helping out. We were not yet taken seriously. We had not mobilised.

For example, at the important two-week-long Dialectics of Liberation Congress organised by ‘radical existential psychiatrists’ held at the Round House in London in 1967, there was not a single woman speaker, although women activists – including Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham, both seminal contributors over the following years to second wave feminism (see e.g. Mitchell 1966 and 1971 and Rowbotham 1969 and 1972) – were among the attendees. Moreover, the programme and ensuing publications made no references to women as a potential political force at all. Yet the stated aim of the congress was, to quote the back cover of the book chronicling the event, ‘to create a genuine revolutionary consciousness by fusing ideology and action on the levels of the individual and mass society’ (Cooper 1968). This exclusion of women as participants in the debate, or even as a topic worth discussing, was typical at the time. In contrast, racism and discrimination against blacks *was* taken very seriously. Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidadian-African American, was there to talk about Black Power and the strategic importance of excluding white people, however sympathetic, from the growing social movement.

The Dialectics of Liberation congress is a relevant forum in the context of this article because it exemplified the overlap between the revolutionary new left, particularly in the US and Britain, and what was known at the time as the counterculture. The incubating women’s liberation movement was rooted in both and constituted a revolt against the limitations of both.

There was no clear demarcation between the cultural and political revolutions of that time. The counterculture was rooted in the beat culture of late 1950s in the US as well as the bohemian culture of 1950s British art schools. It went on to encompass experimental arts, psychedelic drugs, alternative therapies, sexual liberation and an explosion of new underground publications (despite the limitations of publishing at the time). The new left had a more orthodox political formation which included, *inter alia*, opposition to the Soviet suppression of Hungary and British colonial involvement in Suez (both in 1956), support for the Cuban revolution, the founding of CND and, in the 1960s, student activism. It was both of and against Marxism. One of its flagship publications was *New Left Review*, whose first editorial was written by Stuart Hall in 1960 (Hall 2010) but, as with the counterculture, there were multiple standpoints and published writings. The goal of creating alternative living arrangements, like communes, to which I will return, was an element in both. Although there were rumbling critiques in the US, UK, France and Germany, the women’s movement did not erupt until 1969.

### **Before 1968 -- Personal Context**

My own history is located at the heart of these events. My mother (from Amsterdam) was a rebellious modern young woman of the interwar twentieth century from an eccentric theosophist family whom I took after in some ways and rebelled against in others. I travelled abroad, like her, and married someone from ‘elsewhere’, like her. I created a large inclusive domestic haven, like her. But in other ways, which became relevant to my involvement in the emergent women’s movement, I was unlike her.

As a modern (and fairly privileged) young woman she refused to learn to cook or sew because these were marks of the subjugation of women, and of her own mother in particular. After travelling and studying in different parts of Europe, she married my

Jewish father from Vienna, had three children by caesarean section and did not breast feed. Although she was loving and a good organiser, there were helpers to do the back-up work. As a refugee from Hitler in Britain, an immigrant, and a non-native English speaker, she tried to assimilate, so was simultaneously anxious about me being too political and ‘bohemian’ and at the same time mindful of her own socially and politically radical youth, so was sympathetic to mine. She was a believer in progressive education and my brothers and I were all sent to co-educational progressive schools. She wanted me very much to go to university so that I could find a good job ‘once my children were at school’.

Perhaps because of that – to assert my independence -- at 18, in 1958, instead of taking up an offer to study philosophy at UCL, I took off for New York where I became a painter and crash-landed into the heart of the downtown *avant-garde* art scene. It was also there, in New York’s beat scene, that I first encountered the ideas of Wilhelm Reich (more on him below), and the emerging civil rights movement. A few years later I travelled on my own to Mexico where, after six months on the road, I met and married a fisherman-artist of Afro-Mexican descent. I stayed away for nearly five years.<sup>1</sup>

My parents paid for our return from Mexico to UK. And then, during the 1960s, unlike my mother, I had three straightforward drug-free home births. I had to fight to have the first one at home which I did because hospital births were notoriously regimented: babies were taken from their mothers immediately after being born and men were not allowed to be with their wives during labour. Each of my children was breast fed for a year or more. This style suited my temperament (and distinguished me from my mother) but also placed me in the vanguard of the countercultural climate of the time which increasingly celebrated being ‘natural’ and ‘liberated’, being an ‘earth mother’. I colluded with this. I loved the image of myself with child on hip and at the breast and a trail of lively kids with long hair.

*But* I also wanted to be a writer and an artist. I wanted to be able to participate in the political activism of the decade. I wanted to be mobile and adventurous, not isolated in the domestic sphere. I wanted to earn some money, which I did as a translator and part-time teacher of English as a foreign language (and which enabled me to have an au pair who provided invaluable support). But, despite the paid work, the prime responsibility for childcare and housekeeping was unquestionably mine. I don’t remember really challenging that arrangement. Although my then-husband did more than most fathers of young children in my network, it was by no means half. In 1968 he was involved in more exciting and important things, like going to Paris with other comrades during the May events and supporting the six-week occupation at the Hornsey School of Art.<sup>2</sup> At the time, though, I had no language for the unease I felt in being the one who stayed at home with the children - even though I loved them passionately - while he participated in the exhilarating political dramas of the moment.

These contradictions were, more than anything else, what propelled me into the women’s movement the following year.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the story of my background see chapter 8 in Nava 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Pat Holland’s 1970 film.

### **Bowlby, Spock and Reich in the 1950s and 1960s**

John Bowlby and Benjamin Spock were the key architects of the childcare regimes that became dominant in the postwar period and virtually all young parents in the English-speaking world were influenced by them from the 1950s onwards. I first came across John Bowlby's influential book *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953) on my mother's bookshelf when I was about 16 and remember carrying it around when I was in the sixth form. I thought it was rather cool to be interested in psychoanalytical texts and was certainly aware of the central argument.

Bowlby was, as readers of *Free Associations* will be aware, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose best-known observations were based largely on the damage to children separated from their mothers during the Second World War as a result of evacuation or death. He noted that babies brought up in hygienic hospital environments but without physical contact with mothers (or nurses) did not thrive and even died. His more general theories about the negative psychic and emotional consequences of what he identified as 'maternal deprivation' or 'maternal separation' during early childhood were relatively new in the world of child psychoanalysis and paediatrics in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although his thesis was progressive in its attention to the emotional and developmental needs of young children, its focus on potential harm, which included mental illness and retardation, made mothers feel fearful about even short separations and was increasingly used to discourage women from going out to work as well as to justify the closure of nurseries after the war. It has been speculated that Bowlby's own experience of being looked after by a series of nannies and being sent to boarding school at the age of seven, a common experience for men of his class and generation, will also have played a part in the formulation of his conclusions. This may have been the case. But what is relevant in this context is the extensive nature of his influence on theories and practices of childcare in the decades following World War Two, and therefore on a whole generation of women.

The most important and best-known populariser of Bowlby's broad thesis was the best-selling childcare guru Dr Benjamin Spock whose *Baby and Child Care* manual, first published in 1946, famously sold more copies in its various editions than any other book except the bible. The advice of Spock, who was a paediatrician and, like Bowlby, a trained psychoanalyst, constituted a revolt against the rigid and punitive rules-based feeding, sleeping and toilet-training practices promoted by Truby King and other childcare 'experts' of the interwar period who warned against what they perceived as the dangers of spoiling and too many cuddles. Spock, in contrast, famously advised mothers to trust their instinct and common sense.<sup>3</sup> Be flexible, he urged, and do what *feels* best. Permissive and reassuring, his ideas blended with those of progressive educationalists, though, like Bowlby and others of their generation, he adhered to the idea of a 'natural' order of gender difference. In the early editions of the handbook he refers to all babies and children as 'he' and all parents as 'she'. So, despite a generally enlightened world

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p00jkt7p>

view, his position, before he was challenged by feminists, was that men and women were simply *different*, and therefore should adopt different roles in the upbringing of children. But in 1973 he revised sections of the book in response to feminist criticism (Hagan 1973). During those years he was also an anti-Vietnam war and new-left activist which incurred the opposition of conservatives. In fact, the permissive parenting style he advocated was even held responsible by some for what they considered the excesses of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. So, he was a radical figure with an extensive and contested influence. But during the 1960s, before the emergence of the women's movement, he was still deeply committed to a notion of natural difference between men and women.

Spock's emphasis on permissiveness and the natural was not inconsistent with the far more radical and marginal ideas of Wilhelm Reich. Reich was a controversial Austrian psychoanalyst (initially a respected colleague of Freud's in Vienna but later excluded from the International Psychoanalytic Association) who in the 1920s and 1930s explored the relationship between sexual repression in the family and the increasingly authoritarian regimes of the period. His books, which included *The Sexual Revolution* (1928) and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) continued to be contentious for many years and in the 1950s in the USA were even publicly burned. He moved to America as a refugee in the early 1940s. In New York he had loyal followers among artists and intellectuals, such as Norman Mailer, Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg, who considered him a valuable original thinker, as I discovered when I lived there in the late 1950s. Reich's ideas were also to be taken up in a big way by the countercultures of 1960s and 1970s.

In 1968, student revolutionaries [in Paris] graffitied Reichian slogans, and in Berlin copies of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* were hurled at police. At the University of Frankfurt, '68ers were advised: 'Read Reich and Act Accordingly!' (Turner 2011).

In Britain his work was reprinted by people associated with the commune movement, and republished by people linked to the underground Angry Brigade libertarian group during the early 1970s.

So, Reich was situated at the interface between the counterculture and radical left movements -- between the psychic and the political -- and was a foundational figure of what became known as the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s. He believed that the free expression of sexuality and 'orgastic potency' could undermine the bourgeois repressive family and even political systems. Despite this focus, he took little account of the specificity of women's condition, either socially or anatomically. Overall however, despite this significant absence, his ideas continued to be influential among alternative thinkers.

For instance, the anti-psychiatrist David Cooper, a colleague of R. D. Laing's and one of the coordinators, with Laing, of the Dialectics of Liberation conference held at the Round House in 1967 referred to above, includes the Reichian exhortation, written in capital letters, in his book *The Death of the Family*:

MAKING LOVE IS GOOD IN ITSELF AND THE MORE IT HAPPENS IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE OR CONCEIVABLE BETWEEN AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE MORE AND MORE OF THE TIME, SO MUCH THE BETTER. (Cooper 1971: 47-8)

So sexual liberation was tied theoretically and polemically to the abolition of the institution of the family, something that Cooper strongly advocated. He shared with the far more socially moderate Spock and Bowlby, and particularly with Reich, a profound belief in the natural, in the need to set free hitherto repressed bodily expressions of connection and desire. However, although Cooper's *The Death of the Family* was published a couple of years after the first stirrings of the women's movement in Britain, it includes absolutely no reference to feminist issues, as was all too commonplace among radicals on the left. Cooper's urge to abolish the family was fuelled by the determination to disrupt what he termed the dyadic 'two-person' relationship of marriage and the neurosis inflicted by the form on children. He ignored the oppression of women and the sexual division of labour in the domestic sphere.

### **Women's Liberation, Consciousness Raising and the Personal is Political**

Before 1968, many of us on the new left, men and women, were mobilised politically by issues outside our immediate everyday circumstances: by the civil rights movement in USA, apartheid in South Africa and by revolutionary struggles in Cuba and Vietnam; in sum, for justice and against racism, imperialism and capitalism. In contrast, the unprecedented struggle of what became the women's liberation movement was on behalf of *ourselves* -- against the discrimination *we* experienced *as women*. In order to accomplish this our strategy was to organise independently of the broader male left, in women-only groups. Our autonomous structure was partially inspired by separatist black power struggles, but it was also generated as a solution to the often jaw-dropping sexism of men in the radical and counterculture movements. Juliet Mitchell refers to an incident in the US at an anti-Vietnam war protest where a woman is trying to speak and men are yelling 'take her off the stage and fuck her' (Mitchell 1971: 85).

Small groups of women-only protesters had begun to form in the US in 1968. The first women's groups sprang up in the UK during the following year. In the summer of 1969, heavily pregnant and with two small children, I met one of the (north American) male activists of the London School of Economics (LSE) student occupation who told me about a small group of women, many of them (including his wife) from the US and active in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) who were meeting independently on a weekly basis in north London, and that among the issues discussed was how to set up collective child care. The idea of spending more time looking after children was the last thing I wanted to entertain, so my initial reaction was to back off. But over the next weeks I learned more about the group's aims, about its links to the new left and VSC and about the idea of 'consciousness raising', so, in September 1969, with my brand-new baby in a carry cot, I attended my first meeting of the Tufnell Park group. It transformed my life.

There were about four groups in London at the time. They formed a loose network connected through what became the Women's Liberation Workshop which had a tiny office and functioned as a resource and distribution centre. In the language of

cultural theory today, the rapid proliferation of women's groups that ensued was rhizomatic. In contrast to some of the other groupings on the left (including the Labour Party) there was no central organisation or hierarchy or constitution; we operated as autonomous but increasingly linked collectives and were determined always to achieve consensus and to give space to all members of the group to speak.

By the end of 1969 there were dozens of such loosely affiliated groups around the country and in March of 1970 a number of women organised the first – now celebrated – women's liberation conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, attended by about 600 women and a few men, some of whom who ran the creche.<sup>4</sup>



Fig 1: Sue Crockford (left) and me with our babies at the Oxford Conference 1970. Photo courtesy Sally Fraser.

<sup>4</sup> For more about the 1970 conference and the first women's march in 1971 see the film *A Woman's Place*, co-directed by Sue Crockford, who was in the Belsize Lane women's group.





Fig 2: *Henry Wortis (left) and Stuart Hall manning the creche at the Oxford Conference 1970. Photo courtesy Sally Fraser.*

The consciousness raising groups that made up the women's liberation movement provided a space to explore our own 'oppression'-- at the time a new and distinctive term -- in the domestic as well as the public sphere, to examine what had hitherto seemed too trivial to discuss in political terms, namely the minutiae of daily life and social interaction.<sup>5</sup> This was a very different kind of politics. Unlike the first wave of feminists, the suffragettes, our aim was not simply to acquire parity in the public domain, but also to change the way we thought and lived.<sup>6</sup> Hence the most compelling and iconic slogan of the early movement, 'the personal is political', became not only its key maxim but also generated a wider radical reframing and expansion of what constituted the political. It was this that was so pivotal and pathbreaking at the time. It would also go on to seed today's centre-staging of the politics of identity, with all its contradictions (Nava 2018).

However, during those early days recognising and understanding our personal lives as oppressed, and masculinity and femininity as a product of the sociopolitical and

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<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary film about conscious raising (which includes a couple of short clips of me talking) see *BBC People for Tomorrow* (1971). For a recent audio discussion about consciousness raising in the 1970s (which includes an interview with me) see [Novara Media](#) (2019).

<sup>6</sup> This is an oversimplification about the suffrage movement but is how we perceived it at the time.



cultural sphere, as *constructed* rather than natural and therefore open to change, was neither obvious nor easy. As Sheila Rowbotham put it so evocatively at the time:

Women have been lying low for so long most of us cannot imagine how to get up. We have apparently acquiesced always in the imperial game and are so perfectly colonised that we are unable to consult ourselves. Because the assumption does not occur to us, it does not occur to anyone else either. (Rowbotham 1972: 5, first published in 1969).

### **Key Mobilising Events**

Bea Campbell and Anna Coote, looking back in 1982, suggested that the two key events responsible for the recruitment of women to the women's liberation movement in Britain were the women's equal pay strike at Fords factory in 1968 and the Anna Koedt article 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm' in 1969. There were others of course as well. For me, the mobilising event of the early movement was Rochelle (Sheli) Wortis's relatively uncelebrated but ground-breaking article 'Child-rearing and Women's Liberation' (1972) first given as a paper at the Oxford conference in 1970.<sup>7</sup>

Sheli Wortis was one of the organisers of the Oxford conference and one of the founders of the Tufnell Park group. She was a bit older and more qualified than the rest of us, with a PhD in Psychology, and more experienced politically. From a left-wing US background – a red diaper baby – she and her husband Henry Wortis (see Fig 2) were VSC and local activists in Camden. They were among the many people interviewed a few years ago by Celia Hughes (2015) for her valuable book *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self*.<sup>8</sup>

In her influential paper Wortis critiqued John Bowlby's thesis about maternal attachment and the harm caused to children separated from their mothers, arguing instead that multiple attachments - to fathers and other adults as well as mothers - were the norm in some cultures and that who did the childcare was a sociocultural matter, and not a consequence of biology or nature.<sup>9</sup> She pointed out that the relationship of infants with their fathers was simply not addressed in the psychological literature: 'How can one assume the natural superiority of women as socialisers of children when we do not know the effects ... of more male interaction...?' (Wortis 1972: 127) and she added polemically: 'Men can and should take a more active part in the affective and cognitive interaction with infants' (1970: 129). She concluded by arguing in favour of setting up communal nurseries, not only in the locality of homes but also in the workplace, to be staffed by men as well as women.

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<sup>7</sup> She is filmed giving the paper in *A Woman's Place* (1971).

<sup>8</sup> Sue Crockford and I were also interviewed for Hughes' 2015 book. See too the activism section of the British Library's *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*.

<sup>9</sup> In part by drawing on the work of the anthropologist Margaret Mead and sociologist Barbara Wootton.

Although Wortis's advocacy of collective childcare was important, it was not as radical as her demand that men share responsibility. And although she referred to the kibbutzim in Israel as a form of collective living, she was critical of their failure to shift gendered practices in the adoption of productive and childcare responsibilities. So she was hesitant about advocating communes. In that sense her polemic was a long way from, for instance, that of Shulamith Firestone (one of the most radical US feminists at the time) and David Cooper who were ready to 'abolish the family' without a pragmatic sense of what might replace it. What was crucial and revolutionary was Wortis's challenge to gendered childcare.

The four formal demands of the early women's liberation movement, formulated and agreed at the Oxford Conference, were equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, and free 24-hour nurseries. Although very important, for me these more conventional social democratic demands were less urgent and less mind-blowing than transforming the structure of the family and denaturalising gender difference. As a mother, it had taken me a while to understand why non-mothers and single women would want to join the women's movement. It was mothering that, beyond anything else, had seemed to me to delimit – as well as to expand – my life in such a momentous way.

This was due in good part, as I have already argued, to the hegemony of ideas about what was natural which permeated the left as much as the right. It was this dominance that was to seed the reactive upsurge during the 1970s of anthropological and historical counter narratives – of evidence that human behaviour, particularly with respect to childcare and the domestic sphere, was not natural, but was *constructed*, was historically and geographically specific, and therefore could be transformed - that became so important during the early years of women's liberation.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Family -- My First Publication**

In December 1971 a group of staff and students at LSE organised a one-day conference entitled A Radical Critique of Sociology and invited Juliet Mitchell to speak. She couldn't make it, so I, although only at the beginning of my second year as a (mature) student on the Sociology BSc degree and very underqualified, was invited to be her replacement.

By then I had moved to the Belsize Lane group. After the Oxford conference our Tufnell Park group had grown so large that we had to split along broad geographical lines. The Belsize Lane group was not at all typical in that, out of about fourteen of us, ten (including Sheli Wortis and Sue Crockford) had children. We had nearly twenty between us. So the family and childcare were key concerns. Most other consciousness raising groups at the time were composed of younger childless women. But, as in the Tufnell Park group, not everyone was as passionate about children as I. Several felt overwhelmed and often depressed by babies and resented what some in the early women's movement identified as 'the glorification of motherhood'.

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<sup>10</sup> See Oakley 1972 for more on this.

It is not surprising therefore that this broad topic was what I chose to address. My paper 'The Family: a Critique of Certain Features' was to become my first analytical-political publication and was included in the first collection of British feminist writing (1972). It provides more substantial evidence than memory for how I and others used to think.

I opened with an interesting caveat. I said 'I want to make it clear from the start that I do not want simply to 'abolish' the family. However, I do feel that the family in our society needs to change very radically' (1972: 36). I was cautious about what was possible but also clear and prescriptive about what I wanted to change.

The 'family' in the context of my paper, and as used in the growing body of feminist theory, referred to the form and ideology of the 'bourgeois nuclear family', that is to say (as I put it at the time) the closed domestic unit composed of adult heterosexual monogamous couple and dependent children in which women are isolated from each other and responsible for childcare and housework. I focused on three key areas: the sexual division of parenting and the 'socialisation of children into stereotyped sex roles'; the ideal of permanent exclusive marriage and the political consequences of sexual repression; and how to transform our lives.

In relation to the first, I drew on Wortis's seminal thesis and, like her, argued that men should take equal responsibility for childcare and domestic labour and that there was nothing particularly instinctive about child rearing. Moreover, an inevitable consequence of gendered parenting was to perpetuate gender difference in children.

The second main theme of the 1972 article was marriage and sexual liberation. Following Engels and the feminist uptake of his ideas, I argued that the ideals of permanence and exclusivity were based on private property and the need to ensure paternity so were outdated. Reich and other libertarian thinkers of the period argued that the function of marriage was to 'repress sexuality' which in turn led to political acquiescence. Although I defended some of these anti-monogamy libertarian principles - 'Parents can love three children equally, why not three lovers?' (Nava 1972: 41) - I also pointed out that they usually disadvantaged women.

The third major theme in my article, and a major preoccupation across the new political and countercultural spectrum, was the focus on developing alternatives to the problematic family and on changing the way we live. This was a common feature of the articles in Wandor's edited collection (1972). Just about all the contributions to this important book were polemical and prescriptive as well as analytical and visionary.

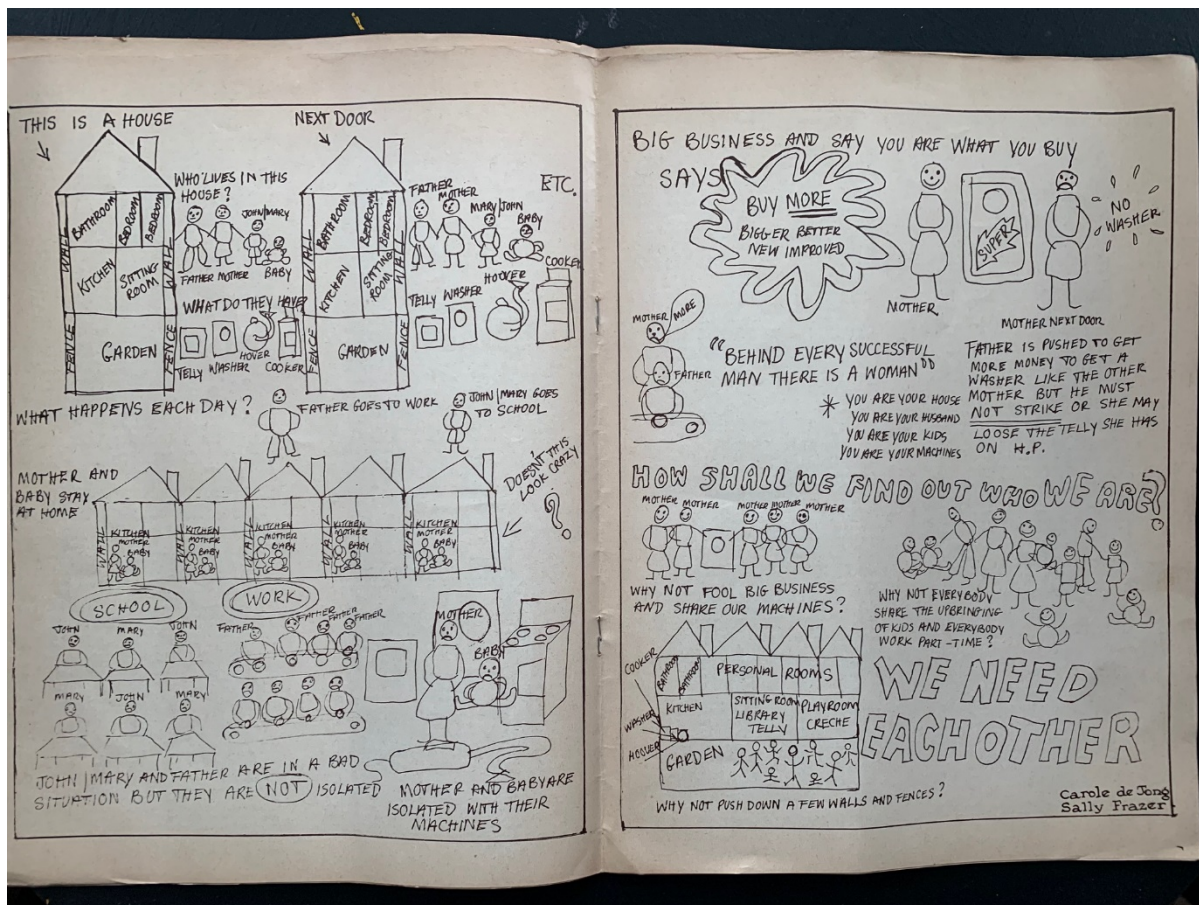


Fig 3: A visual polemic for collective living by Carole de Jong and Sally Fraser published in *Shrew* 1971. The issue was produced by the Belsize Lane group.

What I advocated (along with others at the time) was collective living to break down the isolation of the family and enable the sharing of childcare between men, women and other friendly adults. Many of us did in fact go on to do that. A visual representation of how such a proposition would work was brilliantly rendered by Carole de Jong and Sally Fraser in the women's movement magazine *Shrew* in 1971 (Fig 3). As part of the communal household aspiration I also advocated that all money and property should be shared between the group. This was probably one of the most radical as well as impractical proposals and, although it was discussed quite widely, few went that far. Also recommended as part of this programme to change the way we lived was the abolition of marriage 'which defines people by their relationship to each other'. 'We must question the romantic idealisation of love which involves concepts such as "two selves merging" and "losing oneself" in the other person' I wrote (Nava 1972: 43). (Note the influence of Cooper and Laing). Although the incidence and importance of marriage as a legal and lifelong commitment has indeed decreased hugely, the ideal of being faithful and monogamous, albeit sequentially, remains mainstream. Our challenge to the romantic idealisation of love has had no success at all.

These were not easy times in the women's movement. The utopian aspirations described by me and widely discussed in consciousness raising groups, that is to say the

reconciliation of liberation politics with ongoing relationships and the everyday care of and love for your children, seemed impossibly hard to achieve. This is where my contradictory rootedness in the counterculture and sexual revolution came into conflict with the the psychoanalytically-oriented ideas about childcare. Even then, in the heat of those early euphoric days of utopian discovery and activism, I was aware that our aspirations about different ways of living would not be easy to achieve:

What chance is there of any real change? ... the way we live lags far behind our theories. We may have new ideas, but the old responses and resistances persist. Our emotional responses are determined by our earliest childhood experiences, by our parents whose values were determined by their parents. To what extent are we capable of breaking the cycle of unquestioningly accepting these values and patterns of response? Are we capable of changing not only our ideas and environment, but also our feelings?

I concluded on a more conventional political note by invoking Marx's observation that the family contained in it all the contradictions of the wider society and speculating about whether change in the family could affect the larger social structure. What are the political implications of non-stereotyped sex roles, communality and sexual liberation? I asked rhetorically. And are these possible without a change in the economic organisation of society? (Nava 1972: 43-44).

### **A Dozen Years Later**

In 1983 I contributed a chapter to the significant collection edited by Lynne Segal, *What is to be Done about the Family?* (reprinted with a new commentary in Nava 1992). I was a part-time temporary lecturer at the time and part of the way through a PhD, living in a collective household with my by-now teenage children. Things had changed a lot in my personal life as well as in the politics of feminism, which, over the course of the intervening years, had become the term we used rather than 'women's liberation', and which indicated the increasing predominance of writing and thinking over activism. Many of us from the early women's movement were now employed in higher education and deeply immersed in the theoretical analysis of women's issues. I was a member of the *Feminist Review* editorial collective which was at the core of feminist debate.

'The family' by then had become less significant in terms of activism and prefigurative politics and lifestyle. This was partly, as I wrote at the time (1983/1992) because the focus on the political prescriptions of the early days on childcare and collective living had shifted to sexual preference and sexual identity. This new focus still implied however an unproblematic voluntarism, that is to say the ability to change our lives just because our consciousness had changed and because we *wanted* to change. This was something I challenged.

At the level of theory, however, the family remained a contentious institution insofar as it was perceived by radical feminists as the root of patriarchal control. This was in contrast to socialist feminists whose argument was that the family was primarily the site of the reproduction of labour power and that therefore women's position in it benefitted capitalism rather than men. There were vigorous and extended debates about these differences. I positioned myself somewhere in between. But although

acknowledging that the origins of male power lay in historically specific family structure and also convinced that capitalism was indifferent to the gender of its labour power (so that the link between socialism and feminism was by no means as straightforward as some on the left claimed, as we have discovered in recent times) I nevertheless belonged to the socialist feminist wing of the movement.

That was in part because I could not support the anti-men currents in the radical-feminist critiques.<sup>11</sup> As a heterosexual woman with three brothers and three sons I was relatively untroubled by men and, although I could see they benefitted from the existing state of affairs in many ways, I mostly did not hold them responsible. I believed that, like women, they could change though would find it difficult. Masculinity and fatherhood were mutable formations, as were femininity and motherhood.<sup>12</sup>

So, by the 1980s, ideologies of childcare and motherhood had lost the centrality they had previously had for me both personally and politically. But, although I remained critical of Bowlby's attachment thesis because of the primacy it allocated to women, I pointed out in that second article that the early women's liberation movement critiques, including my own, were mainly an assertion of the interests of *mothers*:

The interests of children, their dependency and vulnerability, have never really been explored in *feminist* theory. Various related explanations for this are possible: there are the political fears that too much concern about the needs of children could feed into the anti-feminist backlash; at a personal level, the issue might be too contradictory to face; finally, a satisfactory feminist theory of children's needs may not be possible (Nava 1983:88; Nava 1992:28; my italics).

This was quite a radical confession at the time and was never really developed either by me or anyone else as far as I am aware.

In the 1983 article I also pointed to the many unresolved problems of collective households and living up to the ideals of the early 1970s (see also Segal 1983):

In one celebrated commune in north London, an unwillingness to claim rights over property (rooms) or people (lovers) meant that everyone regularly fell asleep around the kitchen table. Living with several people was no guarantee of more intimacy. On the contrary, it often led to an increase in personal reserve. (Nava 1983: 76).

But not all attempts were so ambitious or totalising and many collective households survived for decades, my own more moderate version among them. More on this below.

One of the arguments I made in the 1983 article was that the new left and counterculture context of the late 1960s and early 1970s had inhibited the early women's movement from making demands of the state, from formulating proposals for welfare,

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<sup>11</sup> Boy children, and even boy babies, were excluded from some events.

<sup>12</sup> I watched the BBC 1971 programme 'Our Time is Coming Now' for the first time in 2019 and note that in one of my contributions to the discussion I defended men, even then.

legal and fiscal reform. It had been too focussed on grass-roots activism and the politicisation of the personal at the cost of changing things at a wider social level and thus recruiting more women into the movement and opening up the debate. Some feminists were critical of the watered down versions of our ideas that were being circulated by women's magazines but I supported that general initiative because I thought popularisation and dissemination a political imperative.<sup>13</sup>

I concluded (I had forgotten this) with an endorsement of those feminists who, in the early 1980s, chose to align themselves with more mainstream politics.<sup>14</sup>

Large numbers of women previously engaged in small scale local feminist campaigns have joined the Labour Party... Feminist objectives have expanded to include the formulation of *realizable* strategies for concrete reforms which can ensure a redistribution of resources and new legislation to promote and protect the interests of women... These must be achieved in order to create a base... from which to redress the issues of consciousness and ideology, and redress the balance of power and privilege (Nava 1983: 101, italics in original).

## Today

Feminism in general has shifted since those early days from a minority movement rooted in liberation culture to the mainstream. It has gained more strength than we could ever have imagined. Three years ago, five million women around the world demonstrated against Trump at his inauguration. 'Patriarchy' and 'misogyny' are now widely understood and used terms. Identity politics, the legacy of the early women's movement's insistence on the personal as political, is now pervasive.

But what is the nature of this new feminism? A number of people have written about how it has been co-opted by the right (e.g. Rottenberg 2017). Broad spectrum feminism of today includes neoliberal and individual-advancement strands that would not have been acceptable to feminists in the 1970s. Even Conservative women call themselves feminists now, and women's rights have been used to justify the Iraq war and the islamophobia of far-right populists. The #MeToo movement of recent years with its focus on the predatory nature of men and sexual harassment in the workplace is different from the left-wing counterculture feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s in which the focus was on the liberating potential of sex rather than its danger (Nava 2018).

And what has happened to the family? My scepticism in the conclusion of my 1972 article about the difficulties of change was perhaps misplaced. Ideas and practices about sexuality, marriage and domestic responsibility have shifted a great deal since that stuttering libertarian moment and many of these have been positive for women. Men

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<sup>13</sup> During the mid-1970s I was in the Women's Theatre Group which toured schools and youth clubs with our agitprop plays designed to disseminate feminist ideas. For more, see Unfinished Histories website and Wandor 1980.

<sup>14</sup> I was among them and had just, with others in the Labour Party, selected Jeremy Corbyn to be our candidate in Islington North.



now do a great deal more housework and childcare, although usually not half, partnerships are more flexible, and the full spectrum of sexual identities is widely acknowledged. But communal living no longer holds the same attraction – even for self-defined feminists. As far as I know, none of the children of my contemporaries who grew up in collective households have recreated the model for themselves and their children. Although the miserable constraints of the housing market have played a part, it seems that people no longer want to commit to groups in which social lives and futures are shared. They know it's hard enough to live with one person, let alone ten. Collective households are no longer seen as the solution to the difficulties of childcare, despite the reduction in state support for nursery provision and the high costs of private childcare. Multiple generation solutions were never entertained, and still are not, despite the help that grandparents regularly contribute. The communes and alternative utopian living arrangements of the counterculture and the 'long 1968' have largely evaporated both in practice and as ideals as neoliberalism has tightened its grip.

However, despite the dilution of 1970s feminism, feminist theory and activism, particularly in academia, are still flourishing, energised not only by sexual harassment, equal pay and non-binary gender questions, but also by the wider febrile climate associated with climate and austerity politics, and, as well, as ever, by differences between feminists themselves.<sup>15</sup> Who you are, your sex and gender and skin colour and belief system, are nowadays all taken into account in public discourse and even law, as indeed we would have hoped.

Yet the politics of identity, the personal as political, imagined and promoted in the first instance by the women's movement and now pervasive in many parts of the world, has not always turned out to be progressive. Outcomes have been contradictory, especially recently. Whereas we struggled to denaturalise and de-essentialise identities, to stress the *constructed* nature of masculinity and femininity, identity politics today is paradoxically in danger of contributing to the re-constitution of the notion of the natural. This has sometimes surfaced in the #MeToo dramas in which men and women tend to be cast as *inherently* different. The natural and biological are also invoked in current debates by some feminists who will not accept trans women because they are not 'proper' women. All this is incongruously concurrent with a greater social acceptance of gender fluidity. So, contradictions persist.

I am no longer as close to these debates and real-life developments as I was in the past, when the problems of sorting out everyday living - of accommodating demands, theories, desires, principles, work, politics and other contingencies - were so urgent and troubling. In terms of the family, as a grandmother many times over, I am more of an observer, with a large extended and blended network of relations and with far more time to devote to them than in the past. My priorities are different. Transformations in the culture have inevitably impinged on me, as on all of us, but many of the changes in the way I understand the world and particularly the family, have to do with age as well as the passage of time, with strategic and unconscious forgetting as well as remembering.

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://fwsablog.org.uk/about/> for current academic initiatives.

In political terms however, I have not moved to the right. I am still a feminist and left-wing activist. I'm just a bit more pragmatic, I insist. I remember being exasperated when my mother tried to explain her shifting politics in these terms, as she grew older and became more prepared to compromise. I understand her better now.

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