

**THEY  
DIDN'T  
SEE US  
COMING**

**Also by Lisa Levenstein**

*A Movement Without Marches: African American Women  
and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia (2009)*

**THEY  
DIDN'T  
SEE US  
COMING**

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF  
FEMINISM IN THE NINETIES

**LISA LEVENSTEIN**

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*For Anna, Owen, and Jason*



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# INTRODUCTION

On November 9, 2016, the night after Donald Trump’s election as the forty-fifth president of the United States, a retired attorney living in Hawaii created a Facebook event page calling for a march on Washington. Before she went to bed, she had received around forty positive responses. By the time she woke up the next morning, more than ten thousand people had replied. After others began to post similar suggestions, four national organizers took charge and consolidated the effort. This Black, white, Muslim, and Latina leadership team announced a “Women’s March on Washington.” The massive DC demonstration they helped create, along with “sister marches” held in more than six hundred US cities, drew over 3.3 million people. In a rousing speech delivered from a platform on Independence Avenue, the legendary Angela Davis described the surging crowd representing “the promise of feminism” and called on people from all walks of life “to join the resistance.” Television cameras rushed to cover the largest single-day protest in American history.<sup>1</sup>

How did a lone message on social media inspire the eruption of such passion? Some pundits pointed to Donald Trump. Before his

election, women had been complacent, the story went. Now, suddenly, they had woken up.<sup>2</sup>

Trump certainly frightened those who valued gender equality and bodily autonomy. But millions did not take to the streets just because of him. What enabled such sudden and massive mobilizing was an unsung movement, one that had slipped out of the headlines but never ceased to organize and to evolve. The insistence of the marchers on the dignity of all people and their aspirations for a just world had been encouraged by a critical turn in one of the most influential and least understood social movements in history.

The feminism that helped shape the consciousness of millions in 2017 had distinct roots in the 1990s, a period in which the ideas and strategies of US women of color and activists from the Global South garnered increasing attention.<sup>3</sup> Driving their activism was their steadfast belief that every social justice issue was a feminist issue and that the movement must focus on improving the lives of those most oppressed in order to make any meaningful progress. People had made these claims for decades. By the 1990s, growing numbers of activists of all backgrounds shared this worldview and had access to powerful virtual and institutional platforms. Many embraced the internet as a new tool for communicating and networking with people throughout the country and the world. More and more people turned social change-making into careers, embedding feminist thought and practices into the nation's culture and institutions. Some remade other progressive social movements into hotbeds of feminist activity by infusing their ideas into transnational campaigns for labor rights and environmental justice. Involvement with these multiracial and global forms of feminism stretched people's minds and nourished their souls.

Paradoxically, as feminist activism became ever more diverse and ubiquitous, much of the movement became almost wholly invisible to the public.<sup>4</sup> In 1998, the front of *Time* magazine asked, "Is feminism dead?" and its cover story concluded that the movement had become "divorced from matters of public purpose," obsessed

with fashion, celebrity, and “mindless sex talk.”<sup>5</sup> Many people still expected activism to look like the iconic black-and-white photographs from the 1960s of young white women, wearing sandals and blue jeans, holding consciousness-raising meetings in their living rooms and protesting the Miss America Pageant. Even in the sixties, these images had not captured the full range of feminist activity.<sup>6</sup> But the stereotypes persisted. Very few people in the 1990s understood who most feminists were or what they were doing.

The lack of a single well-known organizing model and definition of feminism made it particularly difficult to appreciate the movement’s scope. Feminists were honing a broad range of approaches, with many women of color—and growing numbers of white women—following the lead of the Black lesbian-feminist Combahee River Collective, which in 1977 had argued that liberating Black women would result in freedom for all people because Black women’s liberation required the destruction of all systems of oppression.<sup>7</sup> Some helped shape the labor and environmental justice organizing that was being spearheaded by immigrants and people of color. Many were inspired by the feminist theories of economic justice developed by Global South activists and promoted grassroots education and research projects in the United States. Others integrated analyses of racial inequality and poverty into campaigns surrounding abortion, gay rights, and violence against women. Activists of all kinds were drawn to visions of international solidarity and sought opportunities to work in partnership with people overseas.<sup>8</sup>

Historian Premilla Nadasen has called the many different intersecting and simultaneous versions of feminism one of the most generative features of the movement.<sup>9</sup> But because no one definition ever emerged to supplant the popular imagination’s outdated version of feminism (that is, a movement primarily concerned with white women’s equality with men), it was hard to succinctly describe what was happening. With large numbers of activists promoting social change as paid professionals or organizing online or

in other social movements (all places where the media did not expect to find them), many assumed that the movement was waning or fracturing—even as it was flourishing.

Throughout the 1990s, activists fiercely debated who feminism should represent and what strategies it should employ. Such disagreements proliferated not because feminism was losing its way but because so many different people increasingly felt invested in shaping the movement. While people read feminist websites and attended women's conferences and workshops seeking communities of activists with similar goals, they also craved exposure to new ways of thinking, including those that felt unsettling. The veteran Black women's health activist Loretta Ross pointed out that differences of opinion were an essential component of social justice organizing. "A group of people moving in the same direction thinking the same thing is a cult," she observed. "A group of people moving in the same direction thinking different things is a movement."<sup>10</sup>

Activists needed an arsenal of strategies to do battle in a rapidly changing and unfriendly world. By the 1990s, conservative economics was pervasive, particularly the idea that the market was the most effective arbitrator of social and political decisions. Multinational corporations moved well-paying jobs to foreign cheap-labor sites, while Republicans and Democrats supported both a major disinvestment in social services and a drastic scaling back of financial regulations. These policies fostered a yawning gap between the ultrarich and the rest. Between 1978 and 1999, the top 0.1 percent of income earners increased their share of the national income from 2 percent to over 6 percent. The intensification of economic inequality went hand in hand with the rise in mass incarceration: between 1973 and 2004, the prison population grew from 200,000 to over 2 million, with another 4.5 million people on probation and parole.<sup>11</sup> The majority of those swept up in this dragnet were poor people of color, including growing numbers of women.<sup>12</sup>

It was happening in the rest of the world too. Despite the hopes that bloomed after the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the

dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War gave way to a “hot peace,” one human rights activist claimed, evidenced by the international rise of right-wing movements.<sup>13</sup> Others warned that nations around the world—from the new countries that emerged out of the USSR collapse, to longstanding social democracies such as New Zealand—were also promoting the idea that well-being was best achieved by maximizing entrepreneurial freedom and promoting unencumbered markets.<sup>14</sup>

This was neoliberalism, a new kind of freedom from governmental interference, and it was everywhere in the nineties; it even seeped into public discussions of feminism. Corporate elites declared the broad-based social movement to be dead, irrelevant—while they celebrated (and even sold) individualism dressed as “girl power” and women’s “empowerment.” Cultural critic and *Bitch* magazine founder Andi Zeisler has shown how women’s magazines claimed that their beauty tips would boost women’s confidence and power, while ads for goods ranging from high heels to motorcycles promised similar results. In 2003, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* summed it up: “Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does.”<sup>15</sup>

Power was operating in new ways and feminists were on the front lines, wrestling with how to respond. They analyzed how multinational corporations, wealthy donors, and international financial institutions increasingly dictated public policy and saw how the emphasis on efficiency and profits was infiltrating even fields that had traditionally prioritized human development and well-being, such as health care and education.<sup>16</sup> The election of a Democratic president in 1992 did not stem the tide; after the Republicans took control of Congress in 1994, Bill Clinton focused on passing measures that could garner bipartisan support, such as the reduction of deficits and the elimination of the entitlement to welfare support for poor single parents.<sup>17</sup> Progressive social movements’ inability to stop the continued policy assaults on those who had the least drove home the need for broad-based and

far-reaching movements that could change public conversations, ones rooted in alliances across activist communities and sometimes even across national borders.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, during the 1990s, many feminists prioritized coalition building and culture change, which they increasingly accomplished online and through organizing workshops and conferences. A history-making case in point: in 1995 more than eight thousand people traveled to China from the United States to attend the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

This story begins at that conference, where we meet activists forging relationships and acquiring new knowledge that propelled their organizing. My own interest in this event was piqued in 2010, when I came across an article on the back page of a local paper stating that more than a thousand US women of color had attended. Like most North Americans, I had heard only of a celebrated appearance by Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was First Lady then; I had no idea that over thirty thousand activists from around the world had participated. Wondering what else had happened during the twelve-day affair, I dug up firsthand accounts of the panels and demonstrations that took place at the conference's Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum. Their range and rich content surprised me, so I sought out some of the people who were there.

Captivated by their stories, I followed tantalizing evidence that led me from the conference events to the many versions of US feminist organizing in the 1990s. As I traveled around the country visiting archives and conducting interviews, activists welcomed me into their homes—from a shotgun shack in a working-class California suburb to a modest townhouse in the hills of San Francisco and an elegant condominium in Manhattan. We drank mint tea and ate chocolates as we pored over their scrapbooks and photo albums. One woman followed up on our conversation by combing through the filing cabinets in her office so she could send me the transcripts of the speeches delivered at the first national conference of INCITE!,

an organization of women of color opposing interpersonal violence and police brutality. In an archive at an elite university, I found grant proposals and newsletters documenting how an interracial group of lesbians was building coalitions and mobilizing queer people of color in the US South. Over Skype, I spoke with women with disabilities who had spent years organizing feminist leadership conferences with their colleagues overseas. And through Facebook, I connected with a technology specialist who helped invent what today we call “online feminism.” Finding these generative forms of activism convinced me that this period I lived through—and had thought I knew—deserved the kind of historical scrutiny heretofore reserved for the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

My archival research and oral history interviews have yielded lessons we can learn from, including rich stories about the human dimensions of movement building. Listening to people talk about their experiences taught me how their family histories and cherished ties with other feminists inspired and sustained their activism. Whether their organizing involved sharing confidences and insights online, or they were meeting face-to-face in conference rooms or on front porches, they were sustained by their personal and intellectual collaborations. As one veteran organizer told me, “People are brought to movements through personal relationships [and] people stay in movements because of personal relationships.”<sup>19</sup> To explore the strength of these connections helps us see our own personal ties anew.

Collectively fighting for one’s beliefs can be exhilarating, these veteran activists taught me, but it could also come at a cost. Many sacrificed creature comforts and time for leisure in order to do this work. In the face of mounting threats to their past accomplishments, sometimes even their lives, they persisted, rooting themselves in the rich history of social movements that spanned generations, with long troughs between short peaks in endless oscillation, yet demonstrably wider and deeper catchments over time. Just as that prior history proved a sustaining resource for their troubled times, I offer

this piece of the story to those invested in the social movements making change around the world today.

This is a largely forgotten history, an account of some of the people in the nineties who changed the world. Most (but not all) of them self-identified as feminists, refusing to cede that name to the white middle-class women who dominated media coverage of the movement, such as it was.<sup>20</sup> Nationally recognized organizations and groups that have been the subject of other studies, such as campus activists, union members, AIDS activists, immigrant rights activists, and those who worked through popular culture like the Riot Grrls and Guerrilla Girls, do not receive much attention.<sup>21</sup> Nor do I focus on why some people chose to leave the movement or trace the growing appropriation of feminism by mainstream institutions and corporations.<sup>22</sup> And though the scope is wide, it is not comprehensive; each group that I explore could be the subject of an entire book, and some forms of intersectional activism don't feature as prominently. We need many different accounts of feminist history and I hope to contribute to that ongoing conversation. My emphasis here is on how theory and activism intersect in our lives and on how people defy incredible odds to come together and create change.<sup>23</sup>

One of the biggest surprises I found in uncovering these stories was the multiple generations of people involved in feminist activism. The subset of youth who commanded public attention for embarking on what they called the "Third Wave" represents only a slice.<sup>24</sup> Those young feminists had grown up benefiting from the victories of earlier generations, and they confidently embraced gender and sexual fluidity, highlighted racial injustices, and made savvy use of new forms of communication and cultural production.<sup>25</sup> Yet I encountered many older activists who were engaged in similar endeavors, sometimes alongside their younger peers. The Southern lesbian organizer Suzanne Pharr told me that claims of persistent generational splits had never resonated with her or her women of color colleagues, who saw themselves as extending rather than departing from earlier iterations of feminism. As a



white woman engaged in antiracist activism, Pharr's role models and mentors were civil rights movement elders such as Ella Baker and Evangeline K. Brown. In turn, the youth activists that Pharr mentored sought to carry forward rather than break away from her legacy, finding it not a burden to be sloughed off but an inheritance to be treasured.<sup>26</sup>

They needed all hands on deck to address the pressing dilemmas of their day, as we do in ours. How should activists address the stark inequities fostered by the rapid growth of neoliberalism and environmental destruction? In an increasingly wired world, can electronic communications effectively augment or replace face-to-face organizing and mass protests? What does a movement gain and lose when employees of established institutions and nonprofits engage in advocacy alongside volunteers? And how can broad-based and diffuse movements working on behalf of people who are oppressed build strong local and international coalitions that will create tangible changes in people's lives? Feminists' efforts to answer these questions in the 1990s shifted consciousness and fostered relationships that shaped the future of progressive movement building.

Their innovations took root in places you might not expect.



## ONE

# A MOVEMENT WITHOUT A CENTER

Susan Sygall stared down the three flights of stone stairs leading to the customs booths at the Beijing airport. As a wheelchair rider since age eighteen and the founder of an organization that ran worldwide exchange programs for people with disabilities, she was familiar with the challenges of international travel. But she had never confronted a situation like this one.

It was August 1995, and Sygall was accompanied by fifty other women with disabilities, all headed to the Fourth World Conference on Women, a United Nations–sponsored event where governmental authorities and representatives of advocacy organizations would grapple with problems facing women around the world and propose solutions. About half of Sygall’s group were also in wheelchairs, and many of the rest were blind or deaf. After deplaning, they had made their way through the airport terminal and had

arrived at the stairs. Of the two elevators right next to the steps, only one was working, but the security guard would not let them use it. He pointed to a line on the ground between the two elevators that stretched all the way down the stairs. If you were inside the line, you were officially in China. If you were outside the line, you weren't. Since the working elevator was inside the line, anyone who had not yet cleared customs could not step inside.

For close to an hour, the security guard responded to the group's appeals by shaking his head and pointing to the stairs. Maintenance workers eventually arrived to carry the women down, but when they hoisted the chairs into the air by the wheels, several women almost tipped out.

Sygal had not spent over a year planning for the Beijing trip to have her group seriously injured in the airport. After dismissing the workers, she and her colleagues came up with a strategy. Those who could walk without assistance teamed up and carried others down the steps. The rest of them got out of their chairs and crawled down.<sup>1</sup>

Like many parties that had traveled to the Beijing conference from the United States, the women with disabilities were not a group typically associated with feminism. From welfare rights activists to environmental justice advocates, most of the US conference participants represented facets of a movement that the public knew very little about.

Even most feminists misunderstood the scope of activism. A 1991 study concluded that, "instead of 'sisterhood,'" the word that summed up the state of contemporary US feminism was "isolation."<sup>2</sup> The movement had grown so rapidly that it was impossible to keep track of all of the organizations and initiatives. From 1982 to 1995, the number of national feminist groups nearly doubled, from 75 to 140. Also, thousands of activists were working in nonprofits or had carved out feminist niches in professions such as medicine and academia. Growing numbers were turning popular

culture into a battleground, critiquing sexist and racist representations in mainstream news and culture while offering new visions of female empowerment through music and media. Specialization could be seen at all levels. Some groups focused on domestic violence, others on lesbian rights, others on labor organizing. The list seemed endless.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these activists had participated in galvanizing experiences, including supporting the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, which served as boot camp for nineties feminists in the same way that the civil rights movement had been formative for many activists in the sixties. In 1992, they had helped elect Bill Clinton to the presidency, along with record numbers of female candidates in what became known as the “Year of the Woman.” Large numbers had taken courses offered by the nation’s 621 women’s and gender studies programs, where they found inspiration in the writings of lesbians and women of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks. After the legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe how Black women’s multiple and overlapping identities shaped their experiences of discrimination, many began to describe their organizing against multiple forms of oppression as “intersectional.”<sup>4</sup>

The frameworks taught in women’s studies classrooms resonated with what was happening outside the academy’s Ivory Tower, too. This was the generation that witnessed the police beating of Rodney King and watched the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings and the O. J. Simpson murder trial unfold on national television. Some learned not to pin their hopes on electoral politics after watching a Democratic president they had helped to elect eliminate the entitlement to welfare support for poor single mothers. Many believed the problem was not just that Bill Clinton was enacting conservative policies that he dubbed the “third way” but also that he seemed to have so few tools at his disposal to effect broad-scale political and social change, even if he wanted to.<sup>5</sup> Clinton expressed support for women’s right to control their bodies. But as Operation

Rescue turned abortion clinic parking lots into war zones, he could not stop the fallout from Supreme Court decisions such as *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which allowed states to impose waiting periods and parental consent policies on a legal medical procedure. Journalist Susan Faludi described the cascade of antifeminist initiatives and sentiments as a “backlash.”<sup>6</sup>

What Faludi missed—and what one ambitious organizer saw—was that this bleak political climate was fueling diverse forms of feminism. In anticipation of the Beijing conference, Marie Wilson, head of the Ms. Foundation for Women, received a grant for nearly half a million dollars from the Ford Foundation to create and lead a new national feminist network. The Ms. Foundation, a separate entity from the magazine that bears the same name, had been established in 1972 by Gloria Steinem, Patricia Carbine, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Marlo Thomas to raise money to distribute to groups working on behalf of women and girls. It floundered in its first decades of operation, but by the 1990s, it had hit its stride under Wilson’s tenacious leadership. Earlier, in the 1960s, Wilson was a scholarship student at Vanderbilt University, where she witnessed the birth of the Black sit-in movement and protested the university’s expulsion of civil rights activist James Lawson from its Divinity School. When she was recruited to lead the foundation in 1984, she was working as the Director of Women’s Programs at Drake University, leading initiatives that had drawn national attention for their success in helping women find jobs. A specialist in women’s entrepreneurship, she arrived to discover the foundation was “broke” and immediately got to work, increasing the budget from \$400,000 to nearly \$3 million in 1990.<sup>7</sup>

To some, Wilson seemed like the perfect choice to replace Steinem as the media darling of the movement. A cheerleader in high school and homecoming queen, she was charming and photogenic. In 1992, she had cofounded “Take Our Daughters to Work Day” to encourage girls to strive for professional success. The idea of young women going to work with a family member or friend had drawn

immediate acclaim, catapulting Wilson and the Ms. Foundation to fame. After that project took off, Wilson began to look beyond the foundation to the broader feminist project. Sending a delegation to Beijing was part of an ambitious plan to revitalize the movement by connecting the thousands of feminists organizing in different parts of the country.<sup>8</sup>

Wilson's perch at Ms. gave her unique insight into the richness of feminist activity at the local level. Yet she was concerned the movement had grown in too many different and disconnected directions. She feared that it had lost its collective power and believed the solution lay in national leadership.<sup>9</sup> Some looked to the National Organization for Women (NOW), which, with seven hundred local chapters, was what one author called "the McDonald's of the women's movement; recognizable and accessible to millions."<sup>10</sup> NOW remained the media's go-to feminist voice; it conducted high-profile litigation in the courts and lobbied causes in Washington, DC—but Wilson and many others suspected the organization no longer had its finger on the feminist pulse. With women of color increasingly claiming feminist identities and pressing for change, NOW's reputation as a white organization made it seem out of touch, even as it rushed to enact an agenda that addressed racism and poverty and grappled with the unique concerns of young people. Although NOW attracted growing numbers of dues-paying members by organizing major national marches for reproductive rights, Wilson was convinced that the organization represented the past, not the future.<sup>11</sup>

Some activists identified the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) as the NOW of the nineties. This "all-issue" women's organization emerged from the grass roots in New York City and spread to places like Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle. Known for its creative, direct actions, WAC used street theater, rallies, posterings, and picket lines to draw public attention to issues such as abortion access and the injustices in rape trials. Like NOW's, however, WAC's membership remained largely white. Those committed to fostering a diverse

movement believed that it was an ineffective mouthpiece for the country's varied feminist initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

As Wilson's star continued to rise, she saw a real opening for her foundation. Ms. had developed relationships with feminist organizations across the country by awarding them grants. Many of these groups were multiracial and led by women of color, and they worked on issues ranging from women's economic security to reproductive freedom. In addition to providing activists with funding, Ms. frequently organized workshops that offered peer training and networking opportunities. With the foundation's coffers growing, it was carving out new niches for itself and developing a reputation among activists as an important sponsor of grassroots organizing.

When major philanthropic foundations began to express interest in the Beijing conference, Wilson seized the moment. In a series of funding proposals to Ford, she laid out how the Ms. Foundation could become a "lightning rod" of the US women's movement.<sup>13</sup> According to Wilson, the movement was not living up to its potential because there was no structure to help connect and coordinate the different initiatives. Her plan addressed that: Ms. could fill this role by convening a network of women's groups to prepare for the conference and developing a media strategy to help the organizations find a public voice. With Ford's support, several well-connected organizers received grants from Ms. to participate in a "Beijing and Beyond Advisory Committee" intended to help coordinate the activism happening in different parts of the country. The foundation also raised money to recruit and fund a delegation of grassroots activists to travel to China. "Fragmentation . . . hampers all of our efforts," Ms. asserted. Serving as the "organizer of organizers," Ms. planned to use Beijing as a springboard for creating a "comprehensive and permanent" nationwide network that would lead the women's movement into the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> Enacting those plans would turn out to be far more challenging than Wilson and her staff envisioned.



Ms. introduced itself as the coordinator of the movement in a major press conference held prior to the conference. The foundation convinced other feminist groups to participate by presenting the press conference as an opportunity to showcase their goals for Beijing and gain greater exposure for their causes. Several of the organizations demanded “that the speakers at the press conference not be the standard line-up of women’s movement speakers, that the group be diverse, and that the speakers should be representative—that is, from both grassroots and national organizations.” Ms. heeded their call, selecting participants who represented different facets of feminist activism, over half of whom were women of color.<sup>15</sup>

Yet when the press conference aired live on C-SPAN, no one doubted who was in charge. Ms. brought out its biggest celebrity—founder Gloria Steinem—to introduce the event and serve as master of ceremonies. When Steinem stepped aside, Wilson took over to facilitate the Q&A. A handout prepared by Ms. and given to the participants in advance instructed everyone to present a “united front,” demonstrating their “strength and solidarity in numbers.”<sup>16</sup> What the handout did not say was that Ms. planned to present itself as the leader of the cause.

With the TV cameras rolling, the participants followed the Ms. Foundation’s directives. The delegation of grassroots activists invited to Beijing, however, would not fall so easily in line.

Though committed to fostering a racially diverse feminist movement, Marie Wilson, like most other white activists of her day who had led national organizations, often worked in ways that placed women who were not white or middle class on the margins. In 1970 the radical feminist Jo Freeman had condemned the “tyranny of structurelessness” in women’s organizing. Feminists’ commitment to nonhierarchical leadership, she believed, often prevented them from accomplishing specific goals or remedying the social inequities among them.<sup>17</sup> Many feminists of the 1990s worked in