

## Moving Mountains?: Bernardine Dohrn and the Women of the Weather Underground

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In June 1969, Bernardine Dohrn stepped onto the stage at the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) National Convention in Chicago and expelled their rival faction, the Progressive Labor movement, from their ranks. Dohrn would become the Inter-organizational secretary of the new SDS, at that time known as the Radical Youth Movement (RYM), and soon to be known as the Weathermen. The Weathermen, or Weather Underground Organization (WUO), was a radical, militant antiwar and anti-racism group made up of mostly middle-class white Americans. Their mission was to “overthrow the imperialist American government by any means necessary.” Dohrn made sure this message got across to the country when she announced “the first communiqué of the Weathermen Underground,” known as “A Declaration of a State of War.”<sup>607</sup> Dohrn’s place in the WUO was a high ranking officer, if not the leader and figurehead of the movement; in fact, she was placed on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List for many years because of her involvement.

While she was an important leader in this radical, liberal organization, Dohrn, and the other women of SDS and WUO, did not experience the freedom one may expect from such a group. In fact, though they had their own “Women’s Brigade” and the media loved to vilify them as the group’s masterminds in many cases, they endured sexism and misogyny when they attempted to bring the feminist movement into the realm of issues that the WUO would take on. In the end, the “weatherwomen” did not successfully represent the feminist movement, though they tried. Even Dohrn recalls, “I wish that I had bridged the feminist movement and the anti-war movement better than I did.”<sup>608</sup> This was, in part, because of the WUO’s belief that the feminist movement was “selfish,” as “the concerns for women were petty compared to the imperative of the [anti-imperialist] Revolution.”<sup>609</sup> It was also the misogyny in the organization (and society) that forced the women of the WUO to imitate or submit to men in order to be heard, and weakened and belittled their efforts to include the women’s movement in their radical efforts.

In the 1960s and 70s, America was in turmoil internationally and domestically due, in large part, to the Vietnam War. It was not just the antiwar movement that made the 1960s and 70s so tumultuous, however. The Civil Rights movement was (and had been) in full swing alongside the antiwar protests, and in fact, influenced many antiwar organizations.<sup>610</sup> Alongside these movements was a third, which had its start in the 1950s women’s movements: Women’s Liberation.<sup>611</sup> These movements dominated this era of American history, and when change was slow, newer radical groups replaced the old. This is how the radical New Left came to be, as Todd Gitlin explains in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, “growing militancy, growing isolation, growing commitment to the Revolution, growing hatred among the competing factions

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<sup>607</sup> Sam Green and Bill Siegel, *The Weather Underground*, DVD, directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel (Berkeley, CA: The Free History Project, 2003).

<sup>608</sup> “Exclusive Interview: Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers,” Independent Lens: The Weather Underground, <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/weatherunderground/interview.html> (accessed March 24, 2014).

<sup>609</sup> Cathy Wilkerson in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Revised ed. (New York: Bantam, 1993), 364.

<sup>610</sup> Groups like SDS followed the lead of the civil rights groups before them in their creation, structure and approach to protests.

<sup>611</sup> Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1.

with their competing imaginations” led to “cannibal factions.<sup>612</sup>” Within this new radical phase, in 1969, SDS was split and reborn as the Weathermen, later called the Weather Underground, which lasted until around 1975.<sup>613</sup> This radical group, known for their bombings of major landmarks and liberal free love ideas, was led by a select few people, including Dohrn. Though she was a female leader, their group focused mainly on “anti-imperialism” and anti-racism, rather than the women’s movement, against many of the women’s wishes.

The focus on anti-imperialism in the Weather Underground was born out of the anti-war movement. According to Mark Rudd, when they released “You Don’t Need a Weather Man to Know Which Way the Wind Blows<sup>614</sup>” to the public, they were arguing that Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement were products of imperialism:

The main struggle going on in the world today is between U.S. imperialism and the national liberation struggles against it. Basically, we argued the following: The United States is rich because of a world empire that channels wealth to this country. The revolt now taking place against the empire (e.g., Vietnam) will cause the overextension of U.S. military forces. Internally, the country is undergoing social crisis, including the revolt of black people, who have been an internal colony for hundreds of years. Since black revolutionaries are already engaging in armed struggle, whites should support them (“Share the cost”).<sup>615</sup>

According to this paper, the Weathermen believed that most white Americans had privileges from this imperialist system and the youths of the nation had a duty to fight for others and to reject this imperialist system. In the eyes of the WUO overall, this was the only goal worth fighting for; by fighting against the evil American imperialism, they were fighting against racism and the war in Vietnam all at once. Following this paper, numerous communiqués and other papers were released outlining the political ideologies and plans of the WUO. None of these really included women, even though the women’s liberation movement considered them to be oppressed as well.

The Weather Underground was, along with anti-imperialism, concerned with anti-racism and civil rights as a sort of sub-ideology. To them, the nature of America was the reason that African Americans were not given their due rights. According to the WUO, American bourgeoisie thought African Americans were a group to be exploited and marginalized--not to be given rights. The WUO would fight this imperialistic idea.<sup>616</sup> In this anti-imperialist environment, it would make sense to argue that the plight of women is similar to the plight of African Americans in that they too do not have all the rights of white men and are, to some degree, “an internal colony” of sorts, but it did not work out this way. In the WUO, because of these specific frameworks at the center of their dogma, men labeled feminist movements and their goals “reactionary<sup>617</sup>” and as secondary, if not third-place, objectives.<sup>618</sup> The group, even with Dohrn in the leadership chair, focused on the Days of Rage, their bombings, and other militant actions in order to fuel the

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<sup>612</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 381. The New Left was the 1960s’ “new” far leftist faction that was more concerned with social change and civil rights rather than unions and labor movements.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>614</sup> A paper circulated by the WUO underlining “what needs to be done” to build a revolution in America.

<sup>615</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground: My Life with Sds and the Weathermen* (New York: William Morrow, 2009), 147.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>617</sup> Hilarious considering their entire mission statement, I think.

<sup>618</sup> Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 198.

Revolution against imperialist powers that held African Americans in check and kept the war going. The only time the Weather Underground dealt directly with any part of the feminist movement was when it served their other objectives, hence the designation as a “secondary objective.”<sup>619</sup>”

Despite the anti-imperialist and anti-racist focus of the Weather Underground, women in the movement experienced misogyny. Men in both the antiwar and the Civil Rights movement saw the feminist movement as a distraction, or as silly. Stokley Carmichael is often quoted as saying “the only position for women in the movement is prone,” and men in the New Left were quoted calling feminists “frustrated bitches,” underlining just what many of the men in other movements thought.<sup>620</sup> This misogynistic attitude towards women in the movements caused more fractures and changes. In order to be taken seriously, the women in the Weather Underground dressed similarly to men, thus in one way helping them, but also hurting their feminist goals by forcing them to change.<sup>621</sup>

This is not to say that these women did not have an impact in the Weather Underground movement. In their writings and Women’s Brigade, they made their mark. Beginning in 1973 with the Mountain Moving Day document, they circulated their ideas about women in the movement during a hiatus in the war in Vietnam.<sup>622</sup> According to Dan Berger, this was “a fascinating and timely document that attempts to untangle the organization’s inconsistent politics regarding women’s liberation and to determine a new direction in light of the January 1973 cease-fire between the United States and Vietnam.”<sup>623</sup> Berger continues to describe what they set out to do, “‘Mountain Moving Day’ resulted in a feminist initiative within WUO, which centered upon three goals: (1) ‘To encourage solidarity among women, to make work among women a priority (geographically, structurally, programmatically), (2) To develop a women’s program for and about women; to actively participate in building the women’s movement, (3) To recognize the need for solidarity among men.”<sup>624</sup>”

In their writings following Mountain Moving Day, the women of WUO tried to make a case for feminism within the larger movement in order to effect change. Naomi Jaffe (another member of the Women’s Brigade and WUO) and Bernardine Dohrn wrote “The Look is You: Two Tits and No Head” for the New Left Notes that was then published in Ramparts magazine, which, in a way, marked the beginning of the women’s movement influence on the WUO. This article was an attempt by Jaffe and Dohrn to relate the women’s cause specifically to the pro-communist and anti-capitalist notions of the WUO by explaining how women could be freed through WUO ideals:

A strategy for the liberation of women, then, does not demand equal jobs (exploitation), but meaningful creative activity for all; not a larger share of power

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<sup>619</sup> Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 198.

<sup>620</sup> Stokley Carmichael was a leader of the civil rights movement, first with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and then the Black Panthers.

<sup>621</sup> Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 327-328.

<sup>622</sup> The Mountain Moving Day document was the outline the Women’s Brigade released leading up to their Mountain Moving Day. It essentially outlined their plan to “build a militant women’s movement that commits itself to the destruction of ‘Amerikan imperialism’ and exploit ‘the man’s chauvinism’ as a ‘strategic weakness.’” In Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: the Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 143.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 171.

but the abolition of commodity tyranny; not equally reified sexual roles but an end to sexual objectification and exploitation; not equal aggressive leadership in the Movement, but the initiation of a new style of non-dominating leadership.<sup>625</sup>

Another example of weatherwomen's pro-feminist leanings is the book, *Sing a Battle Song*, which is a compilation of poems written by weatherwomen about their experiences in both the WUO and society overall. As the foreword states, the poems include and promote much of the Weather radical ideology, "we agree wholeheartedly with the women of Vietnam: 'Revolution is our way of liberation.'" While they were using their writing as a way to connect feminism and the WUO ideas, these poems are also an example of how their efforts failed. They are their sisterhood written down, according to Dohrn, but that sisterhood was born out of the marginalization of the women's movement.<sup>626</sup> One poem from the summer of 1973 underlines this:

Many times/We have talked, laughed, shared./A flash of recognition in your eyes/Told me/Whether you smile in agreement/Or wrinkle your brow in disagreement/That you never question me, or my right/to speak up, to explore what I think./There is a warmth of sisterhood/And the keen eye of politics,/watching.<sup>627</sup>

In this poem, the power of sisterhood between the female members of the WUO is lauded as something to help them deal with the politics of everything else. Unfortunately, all three of these writings, even the Mountain Moving Day article that resulted in the "Six Sisters packet" study group,<sup>628</sup> did little to nothing to change the already discussed driving causes in the WUO, aside from officially changing the name from Weathermen to Weather Underground.

The women of the WUO also formed what was known as the Women's Brigade in order to help further the cause of the Weather Underground. The Women's Brigade bombed the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University as a symbol against the "Amerikan imperialism" in Vietnam and in solidarity with Angela Davis, a political activist who had recently been arrested.<sup>629</sup> The bombing is considered to be the first action taken by the Brigade. The women emphasized both their women's liberation support and the antiwar movement all at once by choosing a building tied to Vietnam in order to disprove feminists that said Vietnam was not a women's issue.<sup>630</sup> Another bombing took on March 6, 1974 at the San Francisco Department of Health, Education and Welfare offices (HEW). The Women's Brigade claimed this in honor of International Women's Day and in remembrance of Weatherman members Diana Oughton, Ted Gold and Terry Robbins.<sup>631</sup> The Brigade argued in its communiqué for women to take control of daycare, health

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<sup>625</sup> Loren Baritz, *The American Left: Radical Political Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 1.

<sup>626</sup> Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones, eds., *Sing a Battle Song: the Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiqués of the Weather Underground, 1970-1974* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>627</sup> Dohrn, Ayers, and Jones, eds., *Sing a Battle Song*, 99-100.

<sup>628</sup> According to Berger, the Six Sisters packet was a study group that was formed to make these changes in the WUO happen. The weatherwomen bonded over these groups, discovered issues of intersection with their other causes, and denounced separatism, but this was all for naught, as the ideas still did not translate into the larger goals of the WUO.

<sup>629</sup> Gilbert, David. *SDS/WUO: Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground Organization*. Pmplt ed. Montreal: Abraham Guillen Press/Arm the Spirit, 2002, 33.

<sup>630</sup> Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 143.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, 172. Robbins, Gold and Oughton were killed in an accidental explosion in New York City while creating bombs for the Weather Underground.

care, birth control and other aspects of women's lives.<sup>632</sup> By making an all-women group more devoted to the destruction of anti-imperialism than to the feminist cause, the end result was, to Naomi Jaffe, a kind of diluted feminism that seemed to fulfill that “secondary objective” designation.<sup>633</sup>

In contrast to these efforts against the misogyny and patriarchal nature of the WUO and society, when the women of the WUO promoted the “smashing of monogamy,” they may have actually hurt their own stance. The WUO required members to live in “weather collectives” in an effort to reject the bourgeois, imperialist society. According to Mark Rudd, all female members were required to have sex with all male members, and women also had sexual relations with other women, as monogamous relationships were considered “counterrevolutionary.” To some degree, this was a continuation of their communist ideals. Feminism was selfish and monogamy was looked down upon in a collective, communist society. But the major motivation was actually the liberation of women.<sup>634</sup> This idea in the collectives, vividly described by Rudd, actually broke up couples for the sake of the movement, and hurt the solidarity of the Weathermen; instead of being free from men, women fought over men’s attention. Also, because of the importance of the revolution, if they had children within their couples or outside of them, they had to give their babies to lower-ranking members if they became distracted from their goals.<sup>635</sup>

Dohrn was a big reason why feminism was even acknowledged in the WUO, though she did not fight for feminism with the same vigor as she did with the anti-imperialist cause. With all of these forces driven, Dohrn proved to be a charismatic, powerful leader. Everyone that was involved with the WUO praises her for not only her dedication and sacrifice, but also her ability to lead effectively. Most authorities, especially Larry Grathwohl of the FBI, even describe her as the actual leader of the WUO, earning a spot on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list during this time. She took trips around the world as an emissary for their cause, she also led the Women’s Brigade in their bombing efforts, and she seemingly took the brunt of the blame with the authorities.<sup>636</sup> Her work with the movement is hard to overstate, but how much did her gender impact her position? According to Dohrn, while she was a leader, she was still a woman in her leader’s chair, though she was the only woman at that high level, “Of course, women were major organizers, and we did do a lot of the work. They were leaders in the sense of being local and campus and community organizers and speakers, but it was always the men who were the officers and who held official positions and gave the big debate speeches.<sup>637</sup>” In order to fight this, Dohrn and many of the women of the WUO became more like men; they imitated their dress and bravado, in order to compete with the machismo in the organization.<sup>638</sup>

In the turmoil of the 1960s and 70s, the Weather Underground may have been a small group, but they made sure they were heard. They were boisterous and literally explosive on issues like the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. When it came to women’s liberation, however, they were fairly silent. Even with a group like the Women’s Brigade, that was willing to “smash monogamy” and blow up buildings for the cause, women’s rights were overlooked in the

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<sup>632</sup> Dohrn, Ayers, and Jones, eds., *Sing a Battle Song*, 214-215.

<sup>633</sup> Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 174.

<sup>634</sup> Rudd, *Underground*, 147.

<sup>635</sup> Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups*, Contemporary Terrorism Studies (London: Routledge, 2008), 58.

<sup>636</sup> Sam Green and Bill Siegel, *The Weather Underground*, DVD (Berkeley, CA: The Free History Project, 2003).

<sup>637</sup> Ron Chepesiuk, *Sixties Radicals, Then and Now: Candid Conversations with Those Who Shaped the Era* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1995), 233.

<sup>638</sup> Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 172.

WUO. In an organization (and society) that attempted to laugh off or belittle much of the feminist movement, these women had to imitate men in order to be taken seriously; Dohrn, for example, was famous for her leather jacket and masculine attitude.<sup>639</sup> In the collectives, these same women pushed to “smash monogamy” in order to go along with the anti-imperialist views of the movement, rather than create even more fractures in the group. In hindsight, many of the women, like Dohrn and Jaffe, wish they could have done more for the feminist movement. It is obvious, however, that even though they did not do as much as they wanted to, these women achieved something, as even Robin Morgan dedicated part of her book, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, to women like Dohrn.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Sam Green and Bill Siegel, *The Weather Underground*, DVD (Berkeley, CA: The Free History Project, 2003).

<sup>640</sup> Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), xxxvii. Robin Morgan was a key radical feminist during the ‘60s and ‘70s. She is the author of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, a book that largely influenced Second Wave feminism.