Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: We Thought We Were Going To Change The World by Margaret Elphinstone

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**Laura Dolan:**

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**Margaret Elphinstone**

Well, I’d like to introduce myself my name is Margaret Elphinstone and I wrote a piece inspired by the collection in Glasgow Women's Library about my own recollections of the early days of second wave feminism in the 1960s to 1980s.

I spent some time in the library just looking around looking through the archive it was a strange experience because it was looking at material that had been so familiar to me at one time, I mean it was the culture in which I existed both the magazine archive, especially the spare rib archive, I took spare rib for years and other magazines like Trouble and Strife and also the books. Um books that we read and re-read at the time and I hadn't actually looked at for probably 30 years since. Well I had because I taught the subject but that are no longer part of public consciousness in the same way.

In the archive of Glasgow Women's Library there is a box of badges from the late 1960s to mid-1980s. They say things like 'I’m a Sister', 'You Can't Beat a Woman', 'CND', 'It's time to upset the order of things', 'Women for Peace Faslane 1983', 'Fight the Criminal Justice Bill', 'Stop the War', 'So Many Women So Little Time', 'Give Peace a Chance', 'Peace Truth Justice Freedom', 'Extremist'.... There are home-made badges for local events, and badges with internationally known symbols, there are badges proclaiming sexuality and personal power, support for local groups and allegiance to international feminist civil rights and peace movements.

I used to have a drawer full of such badges myself, which I wore as fancy or circumstance suggested. Why didn't I keep any? Where have they gone?

Those badges belong to a particular aesthetic that is now history. Feminists now seldom use their bodies as message boards proclaiming personal taste, ideology, or allegiance. Feminism is no longer highly salient in public spaces, in the form of notices, cafes, theatre, book shops, libraries, printing presses, art and literature. The bookshop/cafe Reading Lasses in Wigtown recently had, in its bathroom a collage of postcards of the 70s and 80s, featuring women's banners which were used on rallies and protests. Seeing those postcards in the 2000s was like looking backwards through the wrong end of a telescope. When I marched behind banners like those I didn't perceive them as a particular aesthetic response to a definite historical moment, The generic antecedents of the women's banners of second wave feminism were traditional women's crafts such as quilting and embroidery, ethnic designs inspired by the colour and vivacity of Mexican and South American textile arts, and naïve painting in 20th century art. The banners seem exuberantly cheerful in their protest against depression and annihilation. They suggest a possible alternative, offering hope for the future through exaltation of a female and ethnic aesthetic, in apparent opposition to grey-faced patriarchy.

Women's art wasn't simply folk art, although the feminist home-grown aesthetic was everywhere. It was fuelled by high art, theatre and literature. In 1980 I went to London to see the exhibition of The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago, in which 39 well-known women, some historical, some mythical, are represented by place settings around a triangular dinner table. I walked round and round the dinner table, looking at the settings over and over again. It was one of those experiences which tweaked my perspective on the world, altering it just a little, but forever. It represented something about being a woman which I had not internalised before, because nothing in my background or education had taught me to understand my gender in quite that way. It continued a process that began consciously when I read Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex when I was fourteen. Beauvoir’s book astonished me. It said things about being female that I’d thought were unmentionable, but, now that I read them in plain print, I knew from my own experience to be true. But until I read the book, I had no idea what my own experience was. Encountering second wave feminism, in popular culture and high art, in early adulthood, it seemed as if these new images, this new aesthetic, reflected something hitherto unknown inside myself. They confirmed what I already almost knew, by apparently expressing for the first time who and what I was.

In order to understand fully the impact of feminism in the late 1960s, one has to remember what our world was like before. I was typical of those early feminists in being white, middle-class, well-educated, and English. As a matter of historical fact there were many oppressions I did not experience. I came to the civil rights movement through the music of Joan Baez and Dylan, but it was only when I encountered early feminism that I truly felt that the struggle spoke to my own condition. When I look now at the seven demands of the Women's Liberation Charter of the early 1970s it amazes me that I grew up in a society where a demand for equal pay for equal work, equal education, and equal opportunities, free contraception, and abortion on demand, legal and financial independence for women, and an end to discrimination against lesbians, was regarded as radical (and often ridiculous) left-wing nonsense. The first six demands are now mostly accepted by mainstream society. The expectation is that they will be met, and most people are justly indignant when they are not.

Economically and politically we have come a long way in the UK. The seventh demand makes more uncomfortable reading: "Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status; and an end to all laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women." It strikes me now that the more unequal the society we live in, the more women will continue to suffer intimidation and aggression. While many of the demands of the Women's Liberation Movement have been met, such victory is undermined by economic disparities within a society that grows increasingly inequitable as the years pass.

I feel nostalgic when I look now at the artistic representations of second wave feminism. I’m wary of nostalgia. It's necessarily retrospective, and ahistorical in so far as it's sentimental about the past. But what if the past I’m remembering was more positive than the present? Can that be true? It certainly seems to be now that it was a freer and happier time to be young. Growing up in Somerset I watched the first hippies arriving at Glastonbury long before I’d heard of feminism. My friend Peter and I sat on our bicycles and watched the long-haired (men), long-skirted (women), sandalled exotic-smelling strangers arriving in our small town. I thought, I want to be free like that when I grow up. Before he was 16, Peter had crossed the street and joined them. I didn't drop out, but when I encountered the Civil Rights Movement and then Feminism, I thought I was becoming radicalised. Our post-war generation had missed the terror of real conflict, and were now living through an economic upturn. It is easy to rebel when you can always find a job if you have to. Decades later, I’m still asking the same question: was our revolution real? Many of the things I hoped for, and indeed expected, have not happened, so what difference did it make?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, I taught feminist theory in the university. Seen through the lens of post-modern theory, the feminist aesthetic of the 1960s to 1980s may seem shockingly essentialist, if not pathetically hopeful of some kind of unified alternative, celebratory solution to the conundrums of patriarchy. In the BBC series on feminism in 2010 Marilyn French looked back at those times and said, 'We really thought we were going to change the world.' Then she added, 'It was wonderful'. I cried (most unlike me) because what she said was true. We really thought we were going to change the world.

I should have known better, because I studied history and literature at university. The world does change, but nobody changes it. Ideologies come and go. Empires and economies rise and fall. The Golden Age is an aesthetic conceit which, in historical terms neither was nor will be. What was real was the present that we inhabited. It felt like a revolution. It was heady and exciting. Sisterhood existed, and seemed like a new discovery. Sometimes I couldn't help saying to my 1990s students, as they ploughed through the denser texts and the student anthology of feminist theory, 'But it was exciting. It wasn't a theory. It was about our lives it changed everything.'

Leafing through old copies of Spare Rib in Glasgow Women's Library - (why didn't I keep mine? Where did they go?) - I’m struck by the continuing juxtaposition of the personal and the political. In 1973 betty Friedan writes:

"Feminism meant that I and every other woman I knew had been living a lie, and all the doctors who treated us and the experts who studied us were perpetuating that lie, and our homes and schools and churches were built around that lie. If women were really people no more, no less - then all the things that kept them from being full people in our society would have to be changed."

'The personal is political' became our watchword, because for the first time we were seeing our personal experience of gender as a political issue. Now, looking backwards through my telescope I would say the personal is historical. As a historical novelist I try to interpret historical situations, and events through the lens of individual experience, to address the question of what it was like to be a particular person, in a particular moment in space and time. Individuals are constructed by history not only do they speak and act according to their context, but they can only think and feel within that context. For women to change what it means to be a woman has to be an internal as well as an external struggle. That is what the Consciousness Raising groups were all about, and that is why I maintain to this day that they were essentially political. I was in Consciousness Raising groups from the early seventies to the late eighties, when I abandoned Consciousness Raising for a women's writing group. From the basis of Consciousness Raising we argued, and wrote, we took practical action, we went on demonstrations, but it was the attempt to reconfigure the internalized ideology of gender that drove us. It probably changed us less than we realised, because the insidious thing about ideology is that it's invisible from within. What we have learned from our earliest days to perceive as the natural order of things cannot be entirely wiped out by any effort of will. To begin with, what can we replace it with, if we have no other experience? Hence I believe the bitter arguments about what feminism was or ought to be.

For there was a shadow side to second wave feminism. I was horrified by SCUM (The Society for Cutting Up Men). The rejection of men, even small boys, by extreme separatists made me think of Orwell’s Animal Farm: male chauvinist pigs there certainly were, but I didn't want to look through the farmhouse window and see a world dominated by their female counterparts. To regard any human being as sub-human on account of any genetic characteristic is as we used to say back then, 'Not all right.' I was also upset by the savage conflicts within the Women's Liberation Movement itself. I sometimes felt defensive of my motherhood, my sexuality, class and race. Apparently, sometimes I ought not to be who I was. A neo-puritan element implicitly decreed that true feminists always dressed as if they were camping. (Justifiable of course at Greenham because we were). I remember when Hélène Cixous came to Edinburgh in about 1985: she looked like a true Parisienne, elegant to the bone, as she expounded her radical feminist position. She had a silk scarf which she kept rearranging as she spoke, each time in more decorative folds. At least one member of her dungareed and jerseyed audience was enraptured. Was it then possible to be aesthetically pleasing without enslaving oneself to the tyranny of the male gaze? Later on I was swept into the conflict between hard-line feminism and the Women's Peace Movement. There are possible parallels with Christabel Pankhurst’s defection from the suffragettes to supporting the war effort in 1914. And in her case the vote, albeit limited came in 1919, as a recognition of women's war work, not because of the suffragettes.

Cruise missiles left Greenham Common not because of the Women's Peace camp, but because of remission in the Cold War: as in the early 20th century, direct action by women was not the overt cause of change. But the difference was that we were against war, undermining, not supporting a belligerent foreign policy. I certainly experienced Greenham Common as an extension of my feminist involvement. I’ve mentioned how the Women's Liberation Movement posited an idealised, peaceful, colourful world through its consciously naïve art forms. Surely peace was the obvious outcome to terminating patriarchal wars? But the Women's Peace Movement was far from peaceful in the conflicts it engendered within the movement itself. Should we not have been surprised? Was there ever a revolution that didn't splinter into dissonant shards as soon as it began to take effect? 13 years in single sex education had not shown me a world of constant peace and harmony among sisters. What evidence was there that a matriarchy would manage any better?

And yet, when I consider Greenham now, it confirmed that there was such a thing as sisterhood. With other women whom I had not chosen as friends and whom often I hardly knew, I made and implemented plans that seemed to me both frightening and dangerous. The historical context of my existence had blessed me with an extraordinarily sheltered life by the standards of world history. It still does. How many people have inhabited this planet for over 60 years and had no first-hand experience of war, famine, plague or natural disaster? perhaps this is why I belong to a first world generation which seems unable to accept historical cause and effect over issues such as climate change or economic profligacy we have not fully experienced how the world changes.

We were of course reading a genre of feminist utopias by authors ranging from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland, in 1915, to Susie McKee Charna’s peculiar book Motherlines, in 1978. I was cynical about this rather pallid genre, feeling that a world without men would lack a certain je ne sais quoi. (Vide Motherlines, I was never that keen on horses) I greatly preferred satire such as Gerd Brantenberg's crazy role reversals in Egalia's Daughters (1977), grim dystopias such as Zoë Fairbairns' Benefits (1979), or best of all, the overwhelming psychological insight and social realism of The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing (1973) or The Colour Purple, Alice walker (1983). I wanted literature to represent the human condition as it was, not to entice me into escapist fantasy which all too soon became slightly dreary. The problem about Paradise, as Milton categorically demonstrated 300 years earlier, is that the characters have nowhere to develop and without evil there is necessarily no plot.

Maybe I shouldn't quote Freud in the context of feminist history, but in retrospect perhaps the issue really was, 'What do women want?' It would be hard to argue against total gender equality, an end to every related oppression, plus world peace. But perhaps too many of us hoped for historically impossible outcomes. I’m not suggesting that the Women's Liberation Movement was not politicised; the Spare Rib archive gives ample testimony to highly aware involvement with the wider political and economic context, and related liberation movements on a global scale. Articles of self-development, (everything from spiritual growth to how to be your own plumber) rub shoulders with first-hand analyses of the situation of women in Iran, South Africa, Eastern Europe, and so on in the context of rapidly changing political agendas and social conditions. As I’ve mentioned the Women's Liberation Movement could, and did have its impact on strengthening resistance to oppressive regimes and supporting women in lobbying for change, or simply surviving.

Over time one's perspectives change. In 1973, Schumacher published Small is Beautiful. I read it avidly then, but the succeeding decades have I think taught me to read it better. It is the small scale changes that alter people's lives. Individuals can help themselves, and other individuals and many small changes amount to what we used to call 'revolution by change of consciousness'. For example, in War and Peace, Tolstoy shows us that a Napoleon is an even greater prisoner of his ideology than the most obscure of his subjects. Some people in power were, and are, appalling in their record of human rights abuse. Others do their poor best. But they are all in thrall to the times they live in. The more private the individual, paradoxically, the more freedom they often have to make changes. I remember being involved in a bitter argument with fellow university students following a demonstration in Durham marketplace. My opponent said it was ridiculous and naïve to demand sweeping changes to the established order. He'd spent the summer in an Indian village.

"All those people needed, living with drought, was a well. We could raise enough money in this room, now, to give them their well. You would have done more good to more people then, than by having a demonstration every week for the next three years."

I can't say who was right and who was wrong. Every grassroots movement begins by challenging oppression on the grand scale and demanding change. We did that in the Women's Liberation Movement, and at the time I thought great change would necessarily follow. I’m saddened by the decline in feminist awareness and the apparent backlash of post-feminism. There are countries like Iran and Afghanistan where women have been forced to regress to medieval status. The scandal of sex slavery is rife in our own cities. Consciousness of internalized gender constructions seems to have slumped. And yet many of our initial demands in the UK were met.

All I know for certain is that the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s to 1980s changed the lives of those who participated in it. This is not always demonstrated by great worldly acclaim in the same BBC program from which I quoted Marilyn French, we saw Kate Millett. She lives alone and earns her living by selling Christmas trees, her great-niece had just brought her some new sandals. A retired domestic life in the New England countryside, I couldn't help being reminded of Emily Dickinson, and of Robin Morgan’s famous essay, in which she searches for her foremother, the real woman, Emily Dickinson behind the great poet. She finds an empty chair in an empty study in an empty house near Concorde. But the poems are still with us, and still relevant to our condition in their revolutionary form and subversive content:

Opinion is a flitting thing,

But truth outlasts the sun -

If then we cannot own them both -

Possess the oldest one –

It's been a very inspiring experience being involved in the whole 20th anniversary project, some of the inspiring things are realising that the Glasgow Women's Library has weathered all the ups and downs of the years in between and it's been very inspiring to see women of all ages participating in the project because, I’m content to think, that was then, when we - my generation were young, well of course that's over now and now there's another generation. But to realise that these things are still relevant and carrying on, and hearing and reading some of the other submissions and seeing some of the art has been very inspiring.

**Laura Dolan**

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