

'Hijacking the Movement:'

The Saxe-Alpert Controversy, Media Politics and the Making of Radical
Feminism in the U.S., 1974-1976.

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Introduction

Bra burning and Gloria Steinem, for better or worse, are among the most culturally recognizable symbols of second wave feminism. But what turns one reporter and one simple act of protest (which most likely never happened) into icons for a mass movement? The answer is inextricably tied to the mass media.

On September 7th, 1968 radical feminists gathered in Atlantic City to protest the Miss America Pageant. To oppose the oppressive standard of beauty celebrated by the pageant, the hundred protesters threw “girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, cosmetics of all kinds, wigs, issues of both *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, and, yes, bras” into “freedom trash cans,” planning to set the cans on fire. However, they ultimately decided to obey the laws banning fire on Atlantic City’s wooden boardwalks.

Yet, the myth that feminists burnt their bras as an act of protest spread throughout the media. A quick study of *The New York Times* shows that right after the demonstration the paper “correctly reported that no fires had been lit that day,” but just three weeks later the reporters “referred to ‘bra-

burnings' as if they had actually happened."¹ The stories' factual inaccuracies were no accident. The eroticized image of burning bras helped reporters trivialize feminism by conflating it with the sexual revolution. Most importantly, bra-burning stories sold papers.

Similarly, at a time when many movement women remembered Gloria Steinem simply as the reporter who wrote an exposé on Playboy bunnies, members of the mass media were repeatedly invoking her name as *the* preeminent voice of feminism. Many radical feminists argued that Steinem's good looks, charm, famous friends (and access to *New York* magazine's in-house publicist), had contributed more to her status in the media than her theories or actual power within the movement.² Additionally, compared to many of her peers, Steinem struck a relatively unthreatening tone with the press. Carefully avoiding the angry feminist stereotype and speaking largely in generalities, she argued for an equitable society "where men and women progress together, or not at all."³ By focusing on Steinem over feminists who were perhaps more influential within the movement but less marketable to the mainstream audience, the mass media forever altered the direction of feminism.

Unlike many stories founded on sex and lies, Steinem and bra-burning did not disappear after their initial fifteen minutes of fame. From her original

¹ Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books), 160.

² Bradley, Patricia. *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism 1963-1975* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 153.

³ Bradley, 152.

position as “media darling and invented leader,” Steinem over time, developed institutionalized power through the success of her *Ms.* Magazine and other organizations. Furthermore she continues to represent feminists in influential mass media forums such as the Oprah show, Barbara Walters’ interviews and Tom Brokaw specials. At the same time, while few feminists today are called “bra-burners,” the term is still used to dismissively characterize feminist history, and by extension, demean modern women.

These well known instances of media sensationalism could lead to a simplistic understanding that, in order to sell product, the mass media consistently added allegations of sex and conflict in order to spice up stories about a movement that was, in reality, quite tame. However, this representation does an injustice to feminists, not only because is entirely untrue, but also because it ignores the fact that feminists, too, were invested in the production of their image. Radical feminists devised mechanisms to combat media sensationalism, which, while not uniformly successful in keeping stories out of the mass media, did alter the course of the movement. In their own papers and magazines, radical feminists tried specifically to resist the misleading sensationalism that they feared would encourage the creation of further ‘Steinems’ and the bra burning myths. However, unsurprisingly, their resistance created its own narratives. In order to study this phenomenon, my thesis focuses on one of the most sensationalist true stories feminist history rarely reveals.

Susan Saxe and Jane Alpert

On November 3rd 1969, Jane Alpert was arrested on charges of “conspiring to bomb federal property.” Alpert along with her boyfriend, Sam Melville, and friends, Pat Swinton and John D. Hughley III, formed an independent collective that bombed eight sites in New York City, including the United Fruit Co. pier, Chase Manhattan Bank headquarters, the RCA building, the General Motors Corp offices and the Criminal Courts building, before they were infiltrated by an FBI informant. In their press releases the group expressed their desire to strike the “giant corporations” that “run the system from behind the scenes.”⁴ Swinton avoided arrest, however Alpert and Hughley plead guilty to the conspiracy charges, in order to reduce Melville’s sentence. Facing up to five years in prison, Alpert decided to forfeit her bail and go underground. Two years later Melville was killed in the Attica Prison riots. Lonely and paranoid, Alpert turned herself in to the FBI in November of 1974.⁵

On September 23rd, 1970, Susan Saxe robbed a bank in Brighton, Massachusetts with her college roommate Kathy Power, and four other men. They stole twenty-seven thousand dollars, planning to give the money to anti-war and black power groups. However, as they exited the bank one of the men shot and killed Walter Schroeder Sr., a Boston police officer and father of nine. According to Massachusetts’ law when a person is murdered during a robbery, everyone involved in the crime is charged with first-degree murder.

⁴ *Time*, “They Bombed In New York” Friday 21, 1969.

⁵ *Time*, “Underground Odyssey,” January 27, 1975.

Facing possible life in prison, the group parted ways and tried to hide. When police searched Kathy Power's apartment they found four hundred pounds of ammunition and information stolen from the Newburyport Armory. The information detailed a counterinsurgency plan against the citizens of Boston in the case of a riot. ⁶

The four men were captured within days. However, Saxe was not found for another four and a half years. Kathy Power eventually turned herself in twenty-three years later. Saxe spent her time underground in lesbian communities across the country and was finally caught in Philadelphia walking down the street with her girlfriend.

Both Saxe and Alpert 'came out' as feminists. Alpert claimed she participated in bombings because she was afraid Melville would end their relationship if she did not prove her commitment to radical politics. Once she developed a feminist consciousness, Alpert deeply resented how the sexual politics of her relationship had "forced" her to participate in crimes that were against her better judgment.⁷ However Saxe maintained a different outlook on her past actions. She announced that her "feminism doesn't make [her] regret the destruction of a single National Guard Armory; it only makes me wish to see every last vestige of patriarch militarism permanently blotted from the face of the earth." Articulating entirely opposite viewpoints in the name of

⁶ Robert Reinhold, "Student's Hunted in Police Killing: Four Sought in Boston Case Are Linked to Radicalism." *The New York Times*, September 26, 1970. Historic Newspaper Database, via Proquest. <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁷ Jane Alpert. Profile of Sam Melville" In *Letters From Attica*. (New York: William Morrow & Company).

radical feminist, Saxe and Alpert provoked a series of bitter debates about feminism's relationship to the Left, violent protest and ultimately the meaning of radical feminism.

The Argument

The controversy surrounding Jane Alpert and Susan Saxe implicated the feminist movement in a plot filled with bombs, murder, robbery, fugitives, lesbianism, FBI-oppression and free-love culture. With a plot fit for a thrilling B-movie, the Saxe-Alpert controversy was far more sensational than any burning bras or sexy feminists. Yet thirty-two years from the end of the controversy, it is clear that Saxe and Alpert were in no way as formative to the movement as Steinem or a completely fabricated bra burning. In fact, Susan Saxe and Jane Alpert are almost entirely forgotten. I argue this historical amnesia is, in large part, the result of a successful campaign, launched by radical feminists, designed explicitly to trivialize the controversy, and ultimately delete it from feminist history.

Because radical feminists were so successful in labeling the controversy as trivial, I spend my first chapter exploring the many ways that the controversy was related to the major radical feminist debates of the day, including the proper relationship between feminism and the Left, the possibility of inherent gender difference, and the position of lesbians in the feminist movement. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that the Saxe and Alpert controversy was not uniquely trivial, but rather labeled and treated

as such as a defense against the sensationalist tendencies of the mass media. In the second chapter, I will present the radical feminists' method for avoiding media sensationalism and the creation of movement spokeswomen, such as Steinem. I will demonstrate how their methods originally failed to prevent the sensationalized coverage of Saxe and Alpert in the mass media. However, in my third chapter I will analyze the contemporaneous feminist and lesbian media of the day in order to demonstrate how, within the movement, the issue was successfully trivialized.

Historiography

This thesis follows a long line of scholarship aiming to deconstruct the monolithic conceptions of second wave feminism, in general, as the realm of white, middle and upper class women who viewed “sexism as the ultimate oppression” and “deemphasize[d] or ignore[d] a class and race analysis.” Feminist historians have recently been exploring how reexamining the narratives of often ignored groups, such as anti-racist feminists and working class feminist, alters our most basic assumptions about second wave feminism.⁸ Many of these groups have, in the past, been dismissed as Leftists, socialists and socialist-feminists. Thus to incorporate their stories into the

⁸ For antiracist feminists see Thompson, Becky. “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism.” *Feminist Studies*, 28 (2) June, 2002.

For working class feminism see, Dorothy Sue Cobble. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

narrative of radical feminism requires another look at how we define feminists movements and categorize feminists themselves. Despite myths of a monolithic movement, many self-identified radical feminists held directly opposite beliefs.

Radical feminism of the late 1960s up until roughly 1975 has not received the same attention as liberal feminist of the period or radical feminists of the later part of the decade. Many of the central texts have been out of print since the mid- 1970s, while many of the newsletters and manifestos which formed the backbone of the movement have been lost in the attics and basements of women's community centers and private homes.⁹ In part, this disappearance has to do with the nature of the movement. The all-important manifesto was often written anonymously or collectively, and then published hastily in small batches. The manifesto was not written for posterity, but was the invocation of a "collective and decidedly temporary subjectivity formed for the purpose of immediate and radical rhetorical action."¹⁰ The second reason for the lack of scholarship was a distinct lack of interest on the part of later 1970s and early 1980s era feminists.

Alice Echols' 1989 tome, "*Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*" was really the first to directly address this period and attempt to clarify the contested definition of radical feminism. Echols' main objective is to break down the loosely defined identity of radical feminist into

⁹ Rhodes, Jacqueline. *Radical Feminism, Writing and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modem* (Albany, NY: State University of New York), 25-6.

¹⁰ Rhodes, 28.

two subsections: true radical feminism and cultural feminism. Echols' argues that true radical feminism, while rejecting the leftist tenant that socialist revolution would end sexist oppression, was still committed to radical social upheaval and an end to race and class based oppression. By 1975, Echols argues, radical feminism was almost completely supplanted by cultural feminism, which focused on the creation of a female counterculture. While cultural feminism's separatism made it distinct from liberal feminism, both moved towards a focus on "personal rather than social transformation."¹¹ However, the line between Echols' definition of radical feminism and cultural feminism is not completely clear-cut. Echols, herself designates some individuals and groups "proto-cultural" to indicate their in-between status. Confusion arises from two sources. First, because both groups could be intensely anti-leftist it is hard to definitively determine when feminists cross the line from critiquing the sexism of leftists, to arguing that feminism and the fundamental leftist agenda are incompatible. Furthermore, because both groups saw sexism as the "primary contradiction" it is hard to determine when cultural feminists start using this rationale to argue (conveniently) that once sexism is eradicated racism and classism would also disappear.

Although Echols' claim that the zeitgeist of feminism had changed by the end of the 1970s is generally supported, Echols' conclusions are controversial. Echols is redefining self-identified radical feminists as cultural feminists, which remains a loaded term. As one feminist wrote in a letter to

¹¹ Echols, Alice. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press),5.

off our backs “nobody calls herself a ‘cultural feminist.’ The term does not necessarily refer to those who write books or songs, but is an insult meaning ‘not really political.’”¹² Echols’s strict definitions lead her to deny radical feminist status to women such as Ti-Grace Atkinson who are generally considered foundational to the movement and who most certainly were very political. In my own thesis, I find myself more interested in self-definition than in imposing categories onto the past. Thus while Echols clearly refers to Alpert as a cultural feminist and Saxe as a radical, I am more interested in the fact that both women identified themselves as radical feminist and were frequently denied this identity and denounced, not necessarily as cultural feminists, but as liberal or leftist.

As a final note, Echols, and many scholars of radical feminism focus largely on feminist in East Coast cities. As Echols argues that “with few exceptions” Northeastern feminist groups were the ones that “made significant theoretical contributions.” Echols argues that this phenomenon is in part explained because East Coast radical feminists “benefited enormously from the presence of eager media. Their easy access to the media not only helped them to get their ideas out, but also gave them a special consciousness about themselves.”¹³ This so-called special consciousness, which developed out of East Coast feminists’ close and complicated relationship with the press, is central to my thesis. Thus while geographic differences within radical

¹² Carol Anne Douglas, Review of *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, by Alice Echols. *off our backs*, April 30, 1990, final edition. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

¹³ Echols, 20.

feminism deserve further study, for now it should be assumed this thesis focuses on a primarily Eastern phenomenon. L.A.'s *Lesbian Tide* represents the only West Coast paper featured prominently in this thesis. However, Saxe and Alpert columns were usually written by the *Tide's* "East Coast correspondent" and thus it remains primarily an East Coast controversy seen through a West Coast lens.

Methodology

While recognizing the influence of television appearances, radio programs and, especial later on, documentary film, I chose to focus my research on print media because of its primary role in movement communication. There were roughly two hundred feminist papers in print during the decade, in addition to journals and countless newsletters. There were also an estimated two hundred and fifty gay and lesbian papers and countless mainstream papers. Thus in researching this topic I chose to focus on one mainstream paper, one radical feminist paper, one queer paper and one specifically lesbian-feminist paper in the hope that they could stand as representations of larger segments of society involved in the Saxe-Alpert controversy. I focus on *The New York Times*, a mainstream paper, due to its broad circulation and frequent reports on the controversy. Additionally, as we'll see, radical feminists particularly those writing for *off our backs*, were quick to respond to *Times* articles on the controversy.

As my representations of the feminist movement I chose to use Washington, D.C's *off our backs* it was (and is) nationally distributed and widely respected.¹⁴ As one of the first feminists papers, *off our backs* was intended for a 'movement' audience, and was perceived by the mainstream media as alienating to a mass audience.¹⁵ It was circulated to approximately ten thousand readers and within the Women's Movement it was usually considered "accurate, well researched and fair, despite its obvious partisanship."¹⁶ Exemplifying many of the trends of radical feminist media, the paper was "militant, internationalist, nonprofit, collectively operated, and written almost entirely by nonprofessionals."¹⁷ Finally, I rely on Los Angeles' *Lesbian Tide* to provide the perspective of a lesbian-oriented paper, as it is one of few specifically lesbian-feminist papers to be published throughout the controversy (1971-1980).¹⁸

Because this thesis focuses on debate between feminists and media sources, when a related article was mentioned in one the papers listed above, yet printed in another paper, I included it in my analysis. Thus while my research focused on the papers previously mentioned, this thesis analyzes articles from sources such as New York's *The Village Voice* , Colorado's *Big Mama Rag*, and Michigan's *Her-self*. For further insight into the media

¹⁴ Armstrong, David, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America*. (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, Inc.), 225-226.

¹⁵ Linda Charlton. "Feminists vs. the Media: Signs of Change" *The New York Times*, March 14, 1972. Historical Newspapers Database via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

¹⁶ Armstrong, 230.

¹⁷ Ibid, 225.

¹⁸ Ibid, 231.

debates, whenever possible, I consulted personal letters, such as those written by Alpert, Saxe, Susan Sherman, Barbara Deming, and Leah Fritz. Finally, it should be noted that, unfortunately, both Susan Saxe and Jane Alpert no longer submit to interviews about their experiences in the 1970s.

1. Saxe, Alpert and Division in the Movement.

News stories in the mainstream press often pitted feminist against feminist. The frequent stories on internal rifts made for “lively copy” filled with tension and conflict, and were used repeatedly by cynics to predict the Movement’s impending death.¹⁹ However, unlike the myth of the burning bra, the mass media only played a role in publicizing feminist factionalism, it did not create it. Already in opposition to the politics of liberal feminists, from the start, radical feminists themselves, were deeply divided on a wide range of issues. The Saxe-Alpert Controversy was intertwined with nearly all of the most hotly debated conflicts of the early and mid-seventies.²⁰ There were few conflicts more divisive than the politico-feminist divide, debates over female culture and the role of lesbians within the Feminist Movement.

Politico-Leftist Divide

To understand the Politico-Feminist divide, and contextualize the Saxe-Alpert controversy requires a brief introduction to the creation of the

¹⁹ Bradley, 84.

²⁰ Debates over marriage, ageism and Black Feminism come to mind as important conflicts not related to Saxe and Alpert.

New Left and its complex relationship with Radical Feminism. The New Left, which emerged in America in the late 1950s and early 1960's, differed from the "old" Left in both influence and ideology. Soviet Communism had heavily influenced the American Left for decades. Due in part to the intense repression it faced during the McCarthy era, the Communist left was perceived as overly intellectual rather than action-oriented, and young activists chafed at its rigid centralized hierarchical organization. Additionally after Nikita Khrushchev disclosed the true extent of Stalin's brutal regime in 1956, the USSR became a less appealing model for rising politicians; instead, the New Left was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful protests in India, the decolonization of Africa, Marxist revolution in Central and South America (particularly Cuba) and especially the burgeoning Civil Rights movement in the United States.²¹ The organizational ideals of the New Left were based largely in "American pragmatism, existential humanism and ... participatory democracy."²² New Leftists were critical of fixed ideologies and privileged "hands-on experience" over "abstract theorizing."²³ This emphasis on democratic leadership, and action over discussion, present from the birth of the movement was very influential for early radical feminists.

Although the New Left was comprised of many groups, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was its most famous organization. Although the group was started in 1960 and worked on interracial community organizing in

²¹ Rosen, 95-96.

²² Varon, Jeremy. *Bringing the War Home*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 22.

²³ Ibid.

northern urban ghettos, it was not until 1965, when the group's focus turned to the escalating war in Vietnam, that its membership began to explode (at its height, in 1968, SDS had approximately one hundred thousand official members). By the mid-sixties the groups increasing frustration with liberals' "unwillingness to move decisively to end civil-rights abuses in the South and their apparent eagerness to expand the war in Vietnam" lead SDS to abandon their ties to liberal government, and become the face of American radicalism.²⁴

SDS leadership factionalized, and then collapsed completely in 1969, breaking off into smaller, more radical, and in the case of the Weather Underground, much more violent groups. Former SDS members turned historians, such as Todd Gitlin, and others prone to privileging the white, male, student-driven Left, have created a historical narrative which uses the dissolution of SDS, combined with the assassinations of MLK Jr. and RFK and the violence of Altamont (compared to the supposed glory of Woodstock) as a divide between the good "years of hope" sixties and the bad "Days of Rage" sixties."²⁵ Within this ideological framework SDS represents the politically successful, universal, populist and ultimately patriotic social movement, while on the other hand, the Black Power, Gay Liberation and, of course, Feminist movements all of which continued well after 1969, were trapped in the much dreaded realm of "identity politics." By 'selfishly' desiring their own

²⁴ Echols, 25.

²⁵ Winifred Breines. "Whose New Left? The Journal of American History 75, no. 2 (September 1988). JStor <http://www.jstor.org>

liberation, these groups alienated the populist base of the Democratic Party, spent all their time fighting amongst themselves, and as the logic follows – destroyed the Left. While there are elements of truth to this historical framework, it obviously ignores the many important achievements made after 1969, and of course glosses over the abuses of the (white, male) Left.

Women’s relationship to the New Left was always complicated. Vaguely referred to as the “women question,” Female leftists repeatedly expressed concern over the sexism displayed by men supposedly committed to social justice. As early as 1964, women participating in SNCC’s Freedom Summer anonymously wrote a position paper called “Women in the Movement” which included eleven specific examples of sexism within the group and compared the position of women in SNCC to Blacks working in token corporate jobs.²⁶ The paper was mockingly dismissed, starting a pattern that continued for roughly three years. There were sporadic feminist position papers and women’s caucuses at SDS conventions. These papers generally used the language and analysis popular on the Left, specifically comparing women to Blacks and colonized nations.²⁷ The goal was to get men to “deal with their chauvinism ‘in their personal, social and political relationships.’” While separatism was becoming a popular position for other oppressed groups, a separate women’s movement was not yet desired.²⁸ The consolatory tone of the closing statement of the “Women’s Liberation Workshop” at the SDS

²⁶ Evans, Sara, *Personal Politics*. (New York: Vintage Books), 86-88.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 190.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 189-191.

Convention in the summer of 1967 epitomizes the proto-feminists hope for unity. They wrote:

We seek the liberation of all human beings. The struggle for liberation of women must be part of the larger fight for human freedom. We recognize the difficulty our brother will have in dealing with male chauvinism and we will assume our full responsibility in helping to resolve the contradiction. freedom now! we love you!²⁹

The rude dismissal the authors received at convention enraged many SDS women, especially when word got out that after the reading, Shulamith Firestone had been pat on the head and told, not so subtly, to “move along little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women’s liberation.”³⁰ The controversy only spread when the women’s statement was printed in the June 1967 issue of *New Left Notes*.³¹ Next to the statement editors placed next to copy a juvenile cartoon of a girl “with earrings, polkadot minidress [sic], and matching...panties—holding a sign [which read] ‘We Want Our Rights And We Want Them Now.’”³² The infantilizing cartoon came to symbolize women’s frustration with the Left.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these condescending responses women began to perceive the subtle ways they were silenced during meetings, or assigned the boring, grunt work of the organization, as a collective, rather than personal, problem. By November of 1967, a group of Chicago women

²⁹ Ibid, 191.

³⁰ Ibid, 199.

³¹ Ibid, 192.

³² Echols, 45.

formed the first specifically radical feminist group, and had written a piece entitled “To The Women on the Left”:

Women must not make the same mistake the blacks did at first of allowing others (whites in their case, men in ours) to define our issues, methods and goals. Only we can and must define the terms of our struggle.³³

By the end of 1968, most major cities had at least one women’s liberation group. However, it was not uncommon for members to also belong to leftist groups; “once a week they went to their women’s group where their understanding of their lives and the world around them kept shifting,” yet they continued to go home to leftist partners and work in leftist organizations.³⁴ Women describe feeling like two different people, one feminist, one leftist, For many this “schizophrenic life” could not last.”³⁵ So began the struggle between the “politicos” and the “feminists”.³⁶

Both groups agreed that sexism was a problem both on the left and in society at large. The difference between the groups was one of priority. Feminists believed that sexism had to be fought first. Tired of being dismissed by male leftists and forced to take secretarial roles in their organizations, feminists wanted no part in leftist groups or their politics. Politicos believed that feminism was part of a broader social commitment, and remained dedicated to ending racism, classism and the war. Politicos

³³ “To The Women on the Left” *New Left Notes*. November 13, 1967. *Public Women, Public Words*. Ed. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew. 17.

³⁴ Rosen, 133.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Both the term “politico” and “feminist” were originally derogatory.

also saw the benefit of continuing to use leftist infrastructure (contacts, free universities, underground presses etc.) to disseminate feminist ideas.³⁷

While feminists were initially in the minority in these debates, continued clashes between feminism and Left made it increasingly difficult for women belong to both Movements. Many times, women politically on the fence became feminists in the wake of some particularly troubling example of misogyny. In one famous instance Marilyn Webb and Shulamith Firestone were invited to speak to a large counter-inauguration demonstration about women's liberation. Although Marilyn Webb was invited to give the politico side of the debate, recommending cooperation with Leftists (to balance out Firestone's more separatist feminist vision), the men in the audience began loudly chanting "take her off the stage and fuck her" over her address.³⁸

Similarly, in what was probably the most egregious example of Leftist condescension and misogyny in print, the infamous January 1968 issue of *Ramparts* offered a "sexy" take on feminism in its cover story entitled, "A History of the Rise of the Unusual Movement for Women Power in the United States: 1961-1968."³⁹ The cover portrayed a woman's voluptuous, leotard-clad torso with a campaign button reading "Jeanette Rankin for President."⁴⁰ Inside, the article devoted significant attention to "miniskirts [and] high boots" and concluded its reporting with a discussion of "the prettiest girls' of

³⁷ Freeman, Jo. *The Politics of Women's Liberation*. (New York: David McKay Company, Inc.), 61.

³⁸ Echols, 119.

³⁹ Freeman, 60.

⁴⁰ The button referred to Rankin, a pacifist congresswoman who voted against both world wars.

the Brigade.”⁴¹ Enraged feminists denounced the story as “a movement fashion report” however, by “falling back on the cliché ...that women would be liberated after the revolution” the article espoused not only the widespread sexual objectification of women within the movement but also the sexism underlying the Left’s ideology.⁴² While this article showed the Leftist media at its worst, even balanced, or unrelated reporting in leftist magazines was tainted in the eyes of many feminists by objectifying ads and the not-uncommon “special issues” such as the “sex-and-porn” edition of New York’s *Rat*, which inspired an all-female takeover of the paper.⁴³

However, feminists also did their part to alienate and insult women who wished to remain loyal to leftist causes and feminism. After taking over *Rat*, the women published Robin Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That” which epitomized all the most scathing, and separatist sentiments to come out of the radical feminist movement. In the article, Morgan suggested that all women on the left ignored their own feminist impulses for one “last grab at male approval,” while dramatically declaring farewell to “the dream that being in the leadership collective will get you anything but gonorrhoea.”⁴⁴

Violence

⁴¹ Echols, 108.

⁴² Rosen, 131.

⁴³ Brownmiller, Susan. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. (New York: Random House), 76.

⁴⁴ Robin Morgan. “Goodbye to All That” In *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*. (New York: Random House), 124-125.

It is important to note that while feminists were beginning to break away from the Left, the Left was going through its own changes. As mentioned earlier, leftist groups were becoming increasingly violent. For some women this was an exciting development, while other saw the Left's turn towards violence as the antithesis of a feminist revolution.

The trend toward violent protest among white, middle-class radicals became obvious during the planning of protests for the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Even staunchly anti-violent activists had become frustrated with the "passive' style of civil disobedience" proposed by Mobe.⁴⁵ Many activists wanted to plan an event what would break down the growing sense of "business-as-usual" at mass protests and "raise official fears of uncontrollable social disorder."⁴⁶

Adding to the mounting frustration, the events of the summer contributed to a growing sense that the August protest would result in a "bloodbath."⁴⁷ Following the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., the murder of Robert Kennedy, hours after his victory in the California primary, radicalized many reform-minded protestors. Pronouncements from radical groups like the Yippies⁴⁸ promised violent spectacle. At the annual meeting of SDS in June talk of "'revolution' dominated conversation."⁴⁹ To make matters worse

⁴⁶ Wells, Tom. *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 237.

⁴⁷ Wells, 276.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 273.

Chicago Mayor Richard Daley refused to issue demonstration permits and publicized his plan to “protect” the convention from protesters with force.⁵⁰ Many activists chose to avoid the protests, but of the approximately five thousand protestors that did come, many went “expecting death, expecting the worst.”⁵¹ These activists were met with fortified Jeeps, brutal beatings and “tear gas ‘freely dispensed’ from converted flame throwers.”⁵² The mostly unarmed protesters fought back by throwing “bricks, eggs, chunks of concrete [and] balloons filled with urine.”⁵³

Although the number of protesters was low, all of America was able to watch the events unfold on live TV.⁵⁴ What they saw shocked the nation. The images horrified social conservatives who abandoned the Democratic Party in droves, while the liberals and moderates who dominated Mobe were terrified future demonstrations would descend into counterproductive chaos. However for some the sight of “waves of helmeted cops” shouting “Kill, Kill, Kill” as they tear-gased and clubbed the protesters was instantly radicalizing. For the white, middleclass budding-activists watching on television it was clear that the war was no longer just taking place in Southeast Asia. They agreed with Abbie Hoffman’s pronouncement that America was in the midst of a Civil War. All over the country, these young people joined SDS in mass

⁵⁰ Ibid, 276-277.

⁵¹ SDS founder, Tom Hayden, qtd. in Wells, 277.

⁵² Ibid, 279.

⁵³ Ibid, 278.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 279.

and popularized new militant programs that alienated older members.⁵⁵ Nixon's secret invasion of Cambodia, and the shooting of students by the National Guard at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970, as well as the police assassination of Fred Hampton and other Black Panthers, were repeatedly invoked as further evidence of an out of control and violent government, and therefore as justification for guerilla warfare.

Leftist groups increasingly protested with violence. Frequent sites of bombings and acts of arson were ROTC recruitment centers and university campuses, which students opposed due to their financial support of the war. In the first six months of 1969 there were eighty-four campus bombings, attempted bombings and acts of arson committed across the country – double the number of bombings in the previous six months. In the week following the shootings at Kent State four ROTC were bombed or burned each day. From June 1969 to June 1970, two hundred and eighty-one ROTC buildings were attacked.⁵⁶ The violence was particularly concentrated in certain cities, for example, from January 1969 to April 1970 a bomb blew in New York at a rate of one every other day. Yet, during that same sixteen-month period the country as a whole experienced 4,330 bombings, 1,175 attempted bombings, and 35,129 bomb threats.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid, 284.

⁵⁶ Varon, 178.

⁵⁷ Wade Greene, "The Militants Who Play With Dynamite" *The New York Times*. October 25, 1970. Newspapers Database via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>.

In general, the majority of violence on the left was directed at property not people. It was not until June, 1970 that leftist violence proved fatal when the bombing of an Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin at Madison accidentally resulted in the death of a postdoctoral student.⁵⁸ Besides bombing, popular violent protests included burning draft cards, stopping troop trains, and “trashing” property during demonstrations.⁵⁹ Feminists groups never orchestrated acts of violence like the Weather Underground. Yet, leftist violence profoundly affected radical feminism.

The New Left emerged out of the desire to deconstruct both the ideology of old Left Communist and the American mainstream, and create a new system of meaning that would be somehow more “real.”⁶⁰ A system that privileged violence and militancy was an attractive answer to this vacuum of meaning for many radicals:

Much more than a tactical orientation or style of protest, militancy was a defining ethos of the movement. Young radicals invested militant action with special power to enlighten, inspire, and mobilize. It provided a way for them to establish the authenticity of their commitments, to assert their dissident or “revolutionary” identities, and to live what they considered meaningful and engaged lives.⁶¹

Violence as a symbol for authenticity spread throughout the left reaching far beyond those who belonged to pro-violence groups like the Weathermen.

Guns and bombs became standard graphics of radical newspapers and violent

⁵⁸ Ibid, 178.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 121.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 104-105.

⁶¹ Ibid, 75.

imagery and metaphors dominated discourse on the Left.⁶² Many activists would denounce acts of violence like those that occurred during the Days of Rage while still maintaining the possibility of violence as moral act.⁶³

Both the Left's belief that the country was on the brink of Civil War and their use of violence as a symbol of authenticity influenced the early Radical Feminist Movement. While feminist Ruth Rosen argues that because "[t]he 'movement,' which had begun to romanticize violence and to believe a revolution was imminent, [it] no longer appealed to many women," there is also ample evidence of feminists who agreed with the left. Though not always taken seriously the famous *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas echoed the increasing militancy of the Left. Solanas wrote, "[i]f SCUM ever marches, it will be over LBJ's stupid, sickening face; if SCUM ever strikes, it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade."⁶⁴ Ti-Grace Atkinson, a prominent New York feminist and author of *Amazon Odyssey*, controversially proclaimed, "I care less about whom you sleep with than with who you are prepared to die."⁶⁵ Robin Morgan, the feminist poet and friend to Jane Alpert, outlined a "basic training camp" for feminists, including required courses in "Fire Arms," "Self-Defense" and "Basic Bivouac and Survival Techniques (wooded areas/urban

⁶² Ibid, 88.

⁶³ Ibid, 98.

⁶⁴ Valerie Solanas, "Excerpts from the SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto" In *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement*, edited by Robin Morgan. (New York: Random House), 518.

⁶⁵ Margaret Devoe, Fran Moira, and Madeliene Janover. "Shoshana (Pat Swinton): 'what you do matters.' *off our backs*, July 31, 1975, final edition. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>.

areas).⁶⁶ Many radical feminists believed that once women had tapped into the emancipatory power of rage would be the ones to “bring Western society toppling.”⁶⁷ Activist Barbara Epstein notes that when looking back on this mode of thinking it seems “a little crazed.”⁶⁸ And indeed, for women who did not have their first political experiences in leftist politics, it was hard to understand the early radical feminists’ sense of revolutionary urgency and fear of state repression.

For feminists in 1970s, the possibility of feminist violence, prompted discussion of the value of femininity. Traditionally men had committed most of the violence. Did this mean that as women threw off the bonds of oppression they too would become more violent? Or would equality bring a new appreciation for women’s commitment to nonviolence.

Many feminists were drawn to understanding of womanhood that were specifically nonviolent. Jane Alpert wrote in her essay, “Mother Right” that because of their biological role as mothers, women are naturally possessed with the qualities of “empathy, intuitiveness, adaptability, awareness of growth as a process rather than as goal-ended, inventiveness, protective feelings toward others, and a capacity to respond emotionally as well as

⁶⁶ Robin Morgan. “On Violence and Feminist Basic Training” In *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*. (New York: Random House), 137-138.

⁶⁷ Amanda Third “'Shooting From the Hip': Valerie Solanas, SCUM and the Apocalyptic Politics of Radical Feminism.” *Hecate* 32, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 104-132,199. <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁶⁸ Bradley, 76.

rationality.”⁶⁹ Leah Fritz, a fervent supporter of Alpert, avoided biological rationale, yet the conclusion is the same. She believed that violence, specifically terrorism, was inherently patriarchal.⁷⁰ Recognizing that the spear of ancient humans resembled the erect penis, she claims that over many years violence and male sexuality became conflated, and ultimately came to define manhood in general.⁷¹ Thus men commit acts of violence to “prove their existence by brandishing symbolic erections, and for the incomparable pleasure of frightening people.”⁷² Women, on the other hand, commit violence because they get caught up men’s dangerous schemes. Fritz argues that a group of women would never commit a violent act because, “a group made up exclusively of women rarely acts without considering the risks, the alternatives, and the consequences.”⁷³ While Fritz was certainly not a respected anthropologist, nor was she a particularly well-respected feminist, she is certainly not alone in her essentializing conclusions, or her condescension towards women who, “thinking to become free, are forced to look to the martial arts.”⁷⁴

On the other side of the debate were women, such as Shulamith Firestone, who denounced significant biological differences. Once sexist oppression was eradicated, these women believed, a relatively androgynous

⁶⁹ Jane Alpert, “Mother Right,” *Ms.* 2, no. 2 (1973).

⁷⁰ Fritz, Leah. *Dreamers & Dealers: An Intimate Appraisal of the Women’s Movement.* (Boston: Beacon Press), 117.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 122-4.

⁷² *Ibid*, 125.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 130-1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 131.

society would form. These women often encouraged self-defense classes and even gun ownership as methods of empowerment and protection from sexual violence. Perhaps the most famous example of this ideology was Boston's Cell 16 who committed themselves to the practice of karate (and celibacy). Other groups went further. The Women's Gun Pamphlet taught women to use guns, and suggested that guns were necessary protection against a corrupt government.⁷⁵

Lesbians

Finally, the FBI's pursuit of Saxe and harassment of lesbian communities, sparked questions about the relationship between lesbianism and violence, and the differences between straight and lesbian feminists. At the time lesbianism was a somewhat controversial topic. Some radical feminists opposed the connection between lesbianism and feminism.⁷⁶ Simultaneously, feminist such as Jill Johnston and Ti-Grace Atkinson were arguing that "feminist was the theory, lesbianism was the practice;" and living with men was collaboration with the enemy.⁷⁷ Some lesbians agreed while others felt this concept trivialized their sexuality by positing lesbianism as a choice. Saxe's story strained divisions within the lesbian community between supporters who believed that as lesbians, they were already living outside the

⁷⁵ Browler, Laura. *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns In America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 168.

⁷⁶ Echols, 210-11.

⁷⁷ Dulaney, Maedell. "Jill Johnston," *off our backs*, August 31, 1973, final edition. Genderwatch via Proquest. <http://www.proquest.com>.

law –and were thus supportive of Saxe’s actions, and those who feared that her crimes may lead to a revival of age-old stereotypes about violent, and dangerous lesbians.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ On supporters see Pam E. Goldman, “I Am Kathy Power”: Expressions of Radicalism in a Counterculture Community” In *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, edited by Kathleen M. Blee, (New York: New York University Press), 19-37.

For fears of criminal stereotype see Jill Johnston, “The Myth of Bonnies Without Clydes: Lesbian Feminism and the Male Left.” *The Village Voice*, April 28, 1975

2) Media Politics and Threat of the Media Star

I will argue in this chapter that the Saxe-Alpert controversy occurred just before the death of a media-relations system, which had been developed among the very first radical feminists. This system, based on complete egalitarianism and a fear of mass media control, and a media-produced spokesperson, so permeated the Alpert-Saxe controversy that many of the conflicts discussed in the last chapter were hidden behind the rhetoric. This chapter will focus the rise and fall of this media system, while the next chapter will address directly how this system altered the dialogue surrounding Alpert and Saxe.

The radical feminists' desire to control their representation in the press was a direct response to the media's early mistreatment. Compared to other social movements, radical feminists received media attention quickly. By the end of 1969 almost all the prominent news magazines (Time, Life, Newsweek etc.) had done a major feature on feminism.⁷⁹ Feminism was also the subject of many televised reports.

⁷⁹ Freeman, 114.

These early reports “treat[ed] early women’s liberation activities with a mixture of humor, ridicule and disbelief.”⁸⁰ The media quickly established a stereotype of radical feminists as “nothing more than child-hating, white middle-class lesbians, who are mainly interested in burning their bras and being called ‘Ms.’”⁸¹ Editors demanded that stories on feminism were paired with unflattering pictures of the activists and the analysis of “an authority” to say feminism is “all a crock.”⁸² For example, ABC’s 1970 coverage of the Women’s Strike for Equality inexplicably ended with West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph’s declaration that feminists were merely “a small brand of bra-less bubble heads.”⁸³

When not blatantly insulting feminists, the language of the reports still revealed their bias. Terms such as women’s oppression and male chauvinism were placed in quotation marks to indicate the reporter’s skepticism and words such as “strident” and “militant” received frequent usage.⁸⁴ A few adjectives about a feminists “femininity, marital status, or style of dress” could also easily be used to discount her politics.⁸⁵ Feminist frustration over these constant attacks lead to the creation of their media system, however the treatment in the press of feminist, Kate Millett was what truly reinforced for the feminists the need to control their image in the media. Beyond the relatively explicit sexism, feminists learned the full destructive power of the

⁸⁰ Ibid, 111.

⁸¹ Florynce Kennedy qtd. in Bradley, 50-51

⁸² Freeman, 113.

⁸³ Rosen, 296

⁸⁴ Rosen, 297; Bradley, 96.

⁸⁵ Freeman, 113.

media in 1970 when Kate Millet published *Sexual Politics*. The book was a huge commercial success and Millett was declared “the principal theoretician and new high priestess of the feminist wave” in Time Magazine.⁸⁶ The new high priestess primarily thought of herself as an avant-garde sculptor and academic, not a leader, and Millett was certainly not endorsed by any radical feminist governing body; chiefly due to the fact that such a thing did not exist. In fact, many feminists were angered that Millett was profiting from movement ideas (one complaint noted that her book cost \$7.95 “which few women [could] afford,”) while others were confused and offended by many of her comments on lesbianism.⁸⁷ For a few months Millett’s life was a whirlwind of speaking engagements and interviews. However it ended abruptly when Millett admitted her bisexuality to mass media. Her disclosure was used by a profoundly homophobic press to disgrace both her and the movement. Just four months after the high priestess article Time Magazine wrote that her sexuality was “bound to discredit her as a spokeswoman for her cause” despite the fact that no radical feminist had ever bestowed (or revoked) that title.⁸⁸ The rapid rise and fall of Kate Millett was the ultimate cautionary tale for radical feminists. They believed that when one “star” came to represent the movement, the media could easily discredit the whole movement by exploiting the star’s personal flaws and scandals.⁸⁹ In general radical feminists became increasingly cynical about the women chosen to represent the

⁸⁶ Brownmiller, 148.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 149.

⁸⁸ Brownmiller, 150.

⁸⁹ Bradley, 75.

Movement in the media. Imagining the “high priests of publishing,” debating who should be the next “big femme lib superstar,” one feminist satirically discussed each potential candidates pros and cons, Shulamith Firestone was “strikingly attractive; but alas, anti-love, perhaps even anti-men,” Ti-Grace Atkinson was “too far out for a whirl through the major networks.” Finally the publishers import Germaine Greer after deciding “American feminists, with their dogged determination to be themselves, were a publicity man’s nightmare.”⁹⁰

However, even as feminists recognized the destructive abilities of the media, they did not underestimate its power. The political impact of the brutal images taken at Civil Rights protests clearly influenced the development of radical feminists.⁹¹ They, too, wanted to reach out across America so that all women could hear their message. Women, spread across “barriers of race, class, economics, age and sexual preference,” and isolated by the “nuclear family structure,” were perceived to be particularly difficult group to reach.⁹² As Robin Morgan famously commented in *The New York Times*, “[l]eafleting on New York’s Lower East Side for ten years could not reach the housewife in Escanaba, Michigan, but thirty seconds on the six o’clock news would.”⁹³ Feminists hoped that if they regulated their interaction

⁹⁰ Claudia Dreifus, “The Selling of a Feminist” In *Radical Feminism*, edited by Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone. (New York: Quadrangle Books), 358.

⁹¹ Bradley, 52.

⁹² Robin Morgan “The Media and the Man” ” In *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*, (New York: Random House), 92.

⁹³ Ibid.

with the press they could make use of the benefits mass media coverage presented.

In order to harness the power of the mass media radical feminists created guidelines to regulate feminist's interactions with reporters, publishing houses and even their own printing presses. Their primary goal was to prevent media produced stars, such as Millett from becoming movement spokeswomen. The Redstockings, an early New York radical group, produced a code requiring feminists to speak only to female reporters. This demand became an almost universal unwritten rule throughout movement groups. The mandate roused curiosity among members of the press, encouraged the media to hire more female reporters and most importantly resulted in many positive news features, oftentimes detailing the reporter's eventual conversion to a feminist viewpoint.⁹⁴ The Redstockings' code further required all women in the group to take turns interacting with reporters.⁹⁵ The intention was to prevent any women from becoming a recognizable spokesperson but also meshed with the radical feminist ideal to encourage all women to write and speak out rather than relying on "experts."

Finally, feminist groups created rules for women's interactions with feminist and leftist media. Redstockings were forbidden from "speaking or writing about the movement for livelihood".⁹⁶ This quite obviously limited radical feminist publication. In the early 1970s feminist groups across the

⁹⁴ Freeman, 113-114.

⁹⁵ Bradley, 57

⁹⁶ Bradley, 57.

country produced an outpouring of collaborative and uncredited manifestos.⁹⁷ Many of the one hundred feminist journals and newspapers published in 1971 were written, typeset and printed by a collaborative group.⁹⁸ In these collectives asking for a byline was seen as elitist. Robin Morgan even recalls being asked to disguise her easily recognizable writing style so that she would not stand out from the rest of the group.

If a radical feminist spoke to the media without the consensus of the groups, if she published her work, or more vaguely, if she seemed to be promoting her own talents to the detriment of the collective, she would be accused of trying to “make it off the oppression of their sisters.”⁹⁹ Because the movement purposely avoided a hierarchical structure, “name calling and personal attacks,” known as “trashing,” were the only tools available to police feminists into complying with the rules.¹⁰⁰ However, these simple methods were successful at driving many women out of the movement. Susan Brownmiller is not the only one to compare this time period to the purges of Soviet leadership under Lenin and Stalin,¹⁰¹ as the use of personal “trashing” spread from attacks of true media stars to anyone who had “painfully managed any degree of achievement”¹⁰²

While the media relations method originally forged by the Redstockings was incidentally successful in removing many women from

⁹⁷ Rhodes, 44

⁹⁸ Ibid, 40, 42.

⁹⁹ Freeman, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 121.

¹⁰¹ Brownmiller, 99.

¹⁰² Freeman, 121.

feminist politics, it was not ultimately successful at controlling the media's depiction of feminism. One major result of the practice was that women who were long-time, committed members in the more formalized groups (such as Cell 16 of Boston, who were directed not to speak to the media at all) felt particularly pressured to remain silent, while women who lingered on the fringe of radical feminism felt less beholden to its rules.¹⁰³ For example when Susan Brownmiller, a member of New York Radical Women appeared in a televised debate against Germaine Greer, it was Brownmiller that the movement audience booed. Because Brownmiller was an active member of radical feminist groups at the time, she was accused of stealing the spotlight from her sisters. At the same time, confrontation with Greer had to be avoided because, as an already appointed media star, attacks against her would be perceived in the press as yet another example of movement cannibalism.¹⁰⁴

Thus, like Millett, many of the prominent names to emerge from radical feminism in the early 1970s were not meeting-attending, radical activists, but rather best-selling authors from all vocations and creeds. Greer had been an Australian anarchist. Gloria Steinem was a journalist who had been involved with such antithetical institutions as the C.I.A. and Norman Mailer. Even Shulamith Firestone did not publish *The Dialectic of Sex* until quitting all of the many radical feminist organizations she helped create.

It does not seem surprising that the media found others to talk when the radical feminists groups refused. Indeed, from a critical distance the

¹⁰³ Ibid, 120.

¹⁰⁴ Brownmiller, 160.

media guidelines proposed by early radical feminists seemed doomed to fail. Reporters in the mass media relied on ‘craft traditions’ in order to write the saleable stories. They wanted conflict and recognizable characters (ie. celebrities) in order to build a gripping narrative.¹⁰⁵

However, the radical feminist media strategy was deeply tied to their ideology and it should be recognized that, at least for a while, radical feminist groups knowingly sacrificed the efficiency and clarity that comes from hierarchical models in an effort to avoid recreating a social system of dominance, which they blamed for the “gross inequality of the races and sexes, an alien, inhuman, technological society, destruction of the environment, and [a] never ending war.”¹⁰⁶

Radical feminists’ commitment to a horizontal organizational structure based on direct-participation was central to their ideology. Early radical feminist’s experience in the Civil Rights Movement and the new left taught them that even hierarchies in progressive institutions can breed oppression. In seeking to tie in feminism into their anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist beliefs these radical feminists wanted to avoid all domination. To build institutions with clear-cut roles, dues, and/or elections would be to violate fundamental values. However, as a result of the lack of clear leadership, the media was able to focus its attention on whoever would give them the best quote or make the best human-interest story. Without a centralized power to disavow the media’s claims, a woman with little

¹⁰⁵ Bradley, 77.

¹⁰⁶ Freeman, 106.

experience or power could believably be endorsed as a radical feminist leader,¹⁰⁷

Radical feminists' ideology, as it influenced their activism, further hindered their control of their media image. Unlike early liberal feminists who generally protested to achieve an easily explained goal, such as a legislative reform, radical feminist often aimed their protests towards symbols they felt represented the sexism entrenched in every aspect of society.¹⁰⁸ This symbolic approach lead to dramatic displays, such as the crowning of a sheep as Miss America, or the hexing of the New York Stock Exchange by W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy From Hell).¹⁰⁹ These actions were very successful at drawing attention, however they were often misunderstood or mocked.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, it is important that these symbolic displays usually required only a few dozen participants. They drew attention due to their flamboyance and audacity, not their size. The days when a movement leader was expected to draw tens, if not hundreds for thousands of people to their marches and rallies were long gone by the time radical feminists began planning major protests. This progress was inevitable due to the media's tendency to only report on events that are newer, bigger or more dramatic than what has come before. All of the social movements of the Left, faced with

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 120.

¹⁰⁸ Bradley, 48.

¹⁰⁹ Freedman, 112. In addition to drawing extensive media attention, the hex was followed by a five point drop in the stock market.

¹¹⁰ Bradley, 75.

the media's demand for ever bigger turnouts, eventually sought attention through different means.¹¹¹ The result was, of course an increase in violence, but also guerilla-theater and other forms of agit-prop. The key effect of this style of protest was the diffusion and localization of leadership:

[A]ctivists found they could be media recognized leaders on the basis of their ability...to come up with product. While news organizations gave these activists the media leadership of the moment, it was a leadership that was not contingent on the usual requirements—that is political office, organizational office, or the consensus of a particular constituency such as that represented by Cesar Chavez or Martin Luther King Jr.¹¹²

Agit-prop made it possible for small groups to be heard, while the constant consensus required by radical feminist ideology made small groups a necessity.¹¹³ The result of these trends in both ideology and protest practice was a loosely connected “friendship network” of small groups across the country. Using other feminists' beliefs as starting points many groups independently created their own feminist analysis. Thus even if a large and influential group, such as the Redstockings, had chosen one woman to be the single representative to present their collective opinion to the press, she would in no way represent a consensus of all radical feminists. Thus the division between media crowned “outsiders” and the meeting-going, self-styled true feminists was not necessarily a simple ideological division, but rather about power. Many feminists who agreed with the theories written by

¹¹¹ Bradley, 53.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Freeman, 124.

Steinem, Greer and/or Millett still resented their allegedly undeserved, individual power.

Saxe and Alpert had the potential to be feminist media stars for two simple reasons: they were already in the public eye and they were not afraid to exploit their fame. Caught up in a cultural obsession with violence, particularly female violence, Saxe and Alpert were reoccurring characters in both the popular and alternative presses throughout the early and mid- 1970s. However, the Saxe and Alpert controversy was not the first time that the feminist movement was connected to a violent radical. Most notably, when Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol in June of 1968 some feminists, such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and Flo Kennedy, turned her into their cause celebre, although her SCUM Manifesto, the revolutionary plan for her one women Society for Cutting Up Men, was not widely read by radical feminists until an abridged version was included in Morgan's 1970 anthology.¹¹⁴ However what separates Solanas' story from those of Saxe and Alpert was her confinement in various mental institutions throughout the seventies, not only because she could be dismissed as merely an insane person, but also because she was denied the opportunity for continued interactions with the press.¹¹⁵ Thus Solanas did not have the chance to become an important media star. As a symbol, she represented the most radical end of the feminist spectrum, however that symbol could be used or dismissed by feminists at will.

¹¹⁴ Rhodes, 47.

¹¹⁵ Amanda Third, "Shooting From the Hip': Valerie Solanas, SCUM and the Apocalyptic Politics of Radical Feminism.

Conversely, Saxe and Alpert were both completely unconcerned with the radical feminist's norms of media interaction, and more often available to talk to media to benefit their cause.

As mentioned earlier, leftist groups were increasingly turning towards violence by the late 1960s and early 1970s. This increase in violence garnered significant media attention in newspapers throughout the country. However the theme that runs through the many articles detailing this trend is not a focus on hard facts but rather on a more general sense of threat to the nation. Writing after the bombings performed by Alpert and her collective one reporter writes, "if there exists in streets a virus clothed in rationality that insists on the bomb as a legitimate expression of dissent, the country is in for trouble it never have to deal with – at least not in recent memory."¹¹⁶ There is a sense of disbelief that here, in America, bombing could achieve the same "numbing habituality as bombings in Vietnam."¹¹⁷

This sense that revolutionary violence couldn't, and shouldn't happen here lead to an intense probing for a cause. Are bombers crazy, or the result of a decline in religious or parental authority? It seems it is the normal, everyday details of these violent protesters' lives that seem to evoke alarm. Banal personal details about childhood homes and pick up basketball games are treated as potential revelations. As one author writes of Alpert's boyfriend: "glimpses of Melville suggest as much as anything how perilously close today's

¹¹⁶ Zion, Sidney. "Bombs: To Topple Establishment" New York Times 16 November 1969.

¹¹⁷ Wade Greene, "The Militants Who Play With Dynamite."

political bomber may be to the solid citizen, which may say more about our society than it does about individual idiosyncrasies.”¹¹⁸ The intense quest to psychologically understand these individuals was only magnified by the novelty of female criminals.

Starting around 1970, news about women committing acts of violence became something of a cultural obsession. Susan Saxe and Kathy Power were added to the FBI’s Most Wanted list just three days after Bernadine Dohrn, a powerful Weatherwoman. Only one woman had ever appeared on the list before and now there were three (with Angela Davis soon to follow).¹¹⁹ Reporters loved to remark on the incongruous sight of the women’s “pleasant, young faces” on a Most Wanted circular.¹²⁰ Furthermore, while most criminals placed on the Most Wanted list were captured, on average, within 145 days, the three women eluded the FBI for years. News stories arguing that these new, well-educated, well-connected female criminals were easily able to baffle the FBI only increased their notoriety.¹²¹

The media often connected stories of the three most wanted to studies reporting that female arrests grew almost three times faster than male’s between 1960 and 1970.¹²² This phenomenon was largely attributed to the

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ The very first women to appear on the FBI’s Most Wanted List was Ruth Eisemann-Schier who was charged with kidnapping in 1968.

¹²⁰ Wade Greene, “The Militants Who Play With Dynamite.”

¹²¹ Associated Press, “Most Wanted’ Women Baffle FBI” Los Angeles Times. 9 November 1973.

¹²² Lynn Sherr, “More Women Turning to Crime and Violence: Mushrooming Use of Narcotics, Changing Role of Female, Radical Activities Blamed

Women's Movement. Social experts were called on to explain how women's changing roles put them in more frequent contact with crime, while psychologists argued feminist and other radical movements were changing social norms so that violence was no longer considered an unfeminine behavior. Many women protested this explanation as part of an antifeminist backlash and noted serious flaws in the studies conclusions. In fact, they pointed out, while female arrests had risen, the incidence of violent crimes such as manslaughter and assault had remained steady. If the Women's Movement did have an effect on this trend it was not in encouraging women to commit more crime, but rather in altering the biases of the police and the courts, and thus ending the tradition of leniency towards female criminals. The sentiment from law enforcement personnel was, "if it is equality these women want, we'll see that's what they get."¹²³ However, despite the flawed analysis behind the claims, some feminists celebrated the purported rise in female criminality. Feminist Robin Morgan described the rise in female crime as a "heartening sign" to the Associated Press, explaining that it "bespeaks the fact that the rage women feel is getting translated into some kind of action."¹²⁴

Morgan's attitude reflects the approval and attention paid to female violence within the alternative culture of New Left. Leftist publications fetishized violence in their newspapers and magazines, with scarcely-clad gun

WOMEN'S CRIME." *Los Angeles Times* September 22, 1971, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

¹²³ Simon, Rita James. *Women and Crime*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books), 18.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

welding woman making frequent appearances in both political and pornographic literature.¹²⁵ Images of so-called third world women (Vietnamese women, Puerto Rican nationalists, and peasant rioters in India) as armed mothers were also ubiquitous, “one of the most popular posters in the early women’s liberation movement, regularly seen on the walls of bedrooms and makeshift offices, featured a Vietnamese woman with a baby on her back and a gun in her hand.”¹²⁶ As the war in Vietnam came to a close and feminist strategy turned towards the creation of a feminine culture these images became less common, however even in 1976 feminist media would still, on occasion, produce images of sexy, gun-welding women.¹²⁷

Popular culture, while deeply concerned about the violence of female radicals, was not above its own glamorized depictions of violent female criminals. With the 1967 film “Bonnie and Clyde” mainstream media joined in on the action. Faye Dunaway’s charismatic, “nihilistic outlaw” became such a cultural touch point that even *Women’s Wear Daily* declared “the ‘gun-barrel gray of Bonnie’s pistol’ to be the new color for spring.”¹²⁸

Alpert, the sexy bomber and Saxe, the dangerous, lesbian cop-killer were perfectly poised to become cultural phenomena. It all began on December 1st, 1969 when a large picture of Jane Alpert adorned the front page of *The New York Times*. From the time she was arrested until she went underground, every detail of Alpert’s life and trial was profiled. After robbing

¹²⁵ Browder, 13.

¹²⁶ Rosen, 137.

¹²⁷ Browder, 164-165.

¹²⁸ Browder, 164.

the band the next summer, Saxe received similar attention. By the time of her arrest in 1975, ninety-one percent of the citizens of Boston knew Saxe's story.¹²⁹

The many news stories about Saxe and Alpert did not simply summarize their crime. Following the pattern of the time, the stories dug into their personal lives in order to understand how this could happen. In their efforts to understand ideological bombers from a psychological, rather than political, perspective reporters provided the sort of complex profiles of Saxe and Alpert usually reserved for those much more famous. Readers could learn about Alpert's two dogs, her interior décor, or digging deeper, her rocky relationship with her parents.¹³⁰ From articles about Saxe, readers heard about creative writing written in grade school and a similarly troubled parental relationship.¹³¹ While these humanizing details did not stop the general demonizing of Saxe and Alpert, it is easy to imagine some young women noting with interest the similarities between their lives and those of Saxe and Alpert.

¹²⁹ Drake Bennett. "The Doltish Dozen." *The Boston Globe*, February 5, 2006. The famous statistic follows that of the 91% who knew of Saxe, 70 percent thought they could still be impartial if placed on her jury however 75 percent of those respondents believed her to be guilty.

¹³⁰ Linda Charlton, "Girl Next Door' Turns Radical." *The New York Times*, December 1, 1969. Historical Newspapers Database via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

¹³¹ Dee Wedemeyer and John Barbour. "How Did It Happen?: Honor Girl Student Now on FBI's List." *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1970, final edition. Historical Newspapers Database via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>.

Additionally reporters seemed obsessed with Alpert and Saxe's supposed good-girl identities, many times privileging this narrative over the truth. A Time Magazine piece went so far as to attribute "pretty Jane Alpert[']s...soft voice and gentle manner" to her Quaker education at Swarthmore College, despite her New York, Jewish background.¹³² Yet Alpert's year long suspension from the same Quaker school for having a prohibited sexual relationship with a male student went universally unmentioned. What mattered was that both Saxe and Alpert had gone to prestigious colleges and had received good grades.

The papers were also filled with personal testimonials as family and friends claimed Saxe was "the last person" who would get "involved" with guns.¹³³ In a two-paragraph article in *The New York Times* entitled "A Parent's Nightmare," Saxe's mother maintained, "[s]he was not a hippie," "[s]he dressed like a human being. She went around with a buck in her pocket".¹³⁴ Alpert and Saxe, as depicted by the mass media, were truly a "Parent's Nightmare," "exemplif[ying] a process of alienation and radicalization among some young, educated men and women that ha[d] become the subject of increasing concern."¹³⁵ Their initial "goodness" only served to make their fall into the dark world of radical politics, and especially feminism, more dramatic.

¹³² "They Bombed New York" *Time Magazine*. 21 November 1969.

¹³³ "The Radical Bank Job," *Time Magazine*. 5 October 1970.

¹³⁴ "Nightmare for Parents." *New York Times*, September 26, 1970, <http://www.proquest.com/>

¹³⁵ Linda Charlton "Girl Next Door' Turns Radical: A 'Girl Next Door'"

Adding to the appeal of Saxe's story were hints of her lesbianism. The only information the public received about Saxe during her four and one half years in hiding were vague reports of hide outs in lesbian communes. By the time Saxe was apprehended in March of 1975, the media was filled with salacious stories, such as one titled, "Susan Saxe and the Secret Life of Philadelphia." These articles went so far as to describe the bed in which Saxe and her lover slept.¹³⁶ The fact that Saxe was caught while walking down the street holding her girlfriend's hand was depicted as the brazen display of a woman who was either insane or wanted to be caught.¹³⁷ In her trial Saxe's lawyers argued that due to this sexist and homophobic coverage the media had poisoned the jury pool and destroyed any chance of a fair trial.¹³⁸

The fact that Alpert and Saxe were extensively profiled in the mass media would probably not have mattered to most radical feminists where it not for the early bias towards depicting both the women as feminists. *Time* described Saxe as "involved in such activities as Women's Liberation, the New Haven Panther rally and the Brandeis Strike Information Center" which was certainly a telling ordering of her interests based on what was actually known of Saxe's activities at the time. In the same article *Time* described Saxe's partner-in-crime, Kathy Power under the heading "Braless and Barefoot," drawing obviously on current feminist stereotypes.¹³⁹ Well before Saxe made

¹³⁶ *off our backs*. "Susan Saxe Challenges Court System" June 30, 1975.

¹³⁷ Susan Saxe. "Susan Saxe Defense Committee Newsletter" Iss. #3. July 1976 pg. 2.

¹³⁸ *off our backs*. "Susan Saxe Challenges Court System."

¹³⁹ "The Radical Bank Job. *Time Magazine*. 5 October 1970.

any public declaration of feminist identity or the feminist movement became involved in her story, the Associated Press connected Saxe's revolutionary activity with Women's liberation. Utilizing the general connection made between the rise in female violence and the feminist movement, the article juxtaposes Saxe's rejection of traditional femininity with her increasing radicalism. It depicts her decision to join antiwar groups as a rejection of her role as an upper-middle class women; commenting that she tried to date and take care of her appearance but by senior year "there wasn't enough in the role of a lady to satisfy her."¹⁴⁰ More explicitly the article notes:

One woman teacher who used to prod her quiet female students with Women's Liberation arguments said Miss Saxe did not need any prodding. She was extremely vocal on women's rights, and their equality with men.¹⁴¹

This analysis fits into earlier article's claims that Saxe participated in "militant organizations" such as "Women's Liberation."

Despite Alpert's occasional attendance of NYRW¹⁴² meetings and developing friendship with Robin Morgan, who was then on the verge of becoming a prominent feminist, radical feminists considered Alpert's politics "very much on the politico side of the politico-feminist divide."¹⁴³ Yet, Time magazine again chose to highlight her more feminist works, describing her as a "member of the radical Women's Liberation movement," and following this

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² (New York Radical Women) Started by Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen in the fall of 1967 and dissolved in 1969.

¹⁴³ Echols, 248.

claim with a description of an article Alpert wrote for *Rat*¹⁴⁴, which described marriage as a “corrupt institution,” despite the fact that this view on marriage was certainly not unique to feminists at the time.

Not only did the media position Saxe and Alpert as feminists, perhaps before they had developed a feminist platform, (this debate will be covered in the next chapter), but after their arrests Saxe and Alpert were also more than willing to speak to the press as radical feminists, which, of course, violated the guidelines of media interaction.

Due to Saxe’s legal constrictions, and mostly likely, personality differences, Alpert was more often in direct contact with press than Saxe. Like Steinem, and many other feminists who broke ranks to speak to the press, Alpert had experience as a reporter. During her time in Melville’s collective she had written many articles for the radical paper, *Rat*. Immediately after her release from prison on bail, Alpert wrote “inside the house of D,” her first personal account of her experiences for the paper. The article significantly bolstered her personal fame within the Leftist movements.¹⁴⁵ In the piece Alpert expresses the common revolutionary spirit and unity Alpert felt with her jail mates despite their differences in racial and class backgrounds. Addressing herself to the left, Alpert writes: “the movement moved outside the law some years ago, but we’re still hung up out our middle-classness and we’ve got plenty to learn from the people who’ve been outside the system far

¹⁴⁴ Before the all-women takeover when *Rat* was still a Leftist publication.

¹⁴⁵ Jane Alpert “inside the house of D” qtd. in. Echols, 249.

longer than us.”¹⁴⁶ Alpert followed this article with a profile of her boyfriend, Sam Melville after his death in Attica in 1971. The tone of the profile was mixed, as Alpert, inspired by Robin Morgan, had a last minute change of heart and decided to add a critique of Melville’s sexist behavior to an otherwise positive tribute. Thus in the essay, Sam is described simultaneously as a person whose “whole drive was a cry against the objectification of human beings, of the alienation of people from each other and themselves,” and one who could “see as it all the same whether he dreamed of shooting police, bombing buildings, or playing Rene¹⁴⁷ in *The Story of O*.”¹⁴⁸ The readers of the article had no way of knowing about the final-hour rewrite. Still, the public response to the piece was moderate. Her intimate confessions about Melville’s sex life struck some on the Left as inappropriate.¹⁴⁹ However, because Alpert focused her criticism on Melville without critiquing the goals of the Movement there was no strong outcry among Leftist radicals and many feminists applauded her honesty. Given the essay’s bittersweet farewell in the final

¹⁴⁶ Jane Alpert quoted in, Echols, 250.

¹⁴⁷ *The Story of O* is an erotic novel about sadomasochism published in 1956 under the pen name Pauline Réage. Rene submits his lover, O to ever increasing physical and sexual torture. According to Jane Alpert’s 1981 memoir, “*The Story of O* was a favorite book of Sam’s and the basis for his sexual fantasy life” (309).

¹⁴⁸ Jane Alpert “Profile of Sam Melville” In *Letters From Attica* (William Morrow & Company, 1972), 36, 23.

¹⁴⁹ Echols, 249.

paragraph, there was no reason to believe Alpert would ever again write publicly about her relationship with Melville.¹⁵⁰

However soon after, Alpert began writing her most controversial work, called “Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory.” This essay, really two essays combined, was both a personal “tirade against the left” and an “ambitious attempt to fashion ‘a new feminist theory.’”¹⁵¹ The intended effect of article was to both provoke the Left and change the course of the feminist movement. From the essay’s very beginning, which described the Weather Underground as a “tiny band of forgotten leftists” Alpert used the piece, by her own admission, to intentionally and systematically “alienate [her] former associates as [she] had once set out to alienate the establishment world of [her] parents.”¹⁵² In the first section, Alpert describes the many instances of chauvinism she encountered during her relationship with Sam Melville and in her interaction underground with Weathermen leader, Mark Rudd. However it was her declaration that she would “mourn the loss of 42 male supremacists no longer¹⁵³” that was most provoking. By Alpert’s own admission she had written the “most violent, offensive words [she] could invent,” Alpert

¹⁵⁰ Alpert concluded her essay by quoting an Edna St. Vincent Millay sonnet, “Say what you will, kings in a tumbrel rarely went to their deaths more proud than this one went.” The poem, somewhat ironically in this case, ends with the lines, “Should I outlive this anguish-and men do- I shall have only good to say of you”

¹⁵¹ Echols, 250.

¹⁵² Jane Alpert “Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory. *Ms.* 2, no. 2 (1973). And Alpert, Jane. *Growing Up Underground*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 288.

¹⁵³ Referring to the men, included Sam Melville, who were killed during the Attica Prison riots.

believably maintains that she merely wanted to be seen as her own person rather than as Sam Melville's girlfriend, (and after his death, as something like the Leftist version of a gold star widow¹⁵⁴). However, a majority of readers interpreted her statement as approving of Rockefeller's decision to send in troops to Attica.¹⁵⁵ Thus the first section was seen as equating a transition to feminism with the acceptance, or approval of, one of more brutal government actions against the left – an association many feminists deeply resented.

The second section in which Alpert re-imagines the feminist movement, as defined by mother right, was less melodramatic but equally controversial. It is important to note that in general the ideas contained in "Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory" were not really new. As Alice Echols notes, Alpert's ideas borrow heavily from the universalism and anti-Leftism already popularized by feminists such as Robin Morgan and Barbara Burris. Her evidence of ancient gynocracies is taken almost exclusively from Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex*, while her conclusion that a feminist revolution would be more akin to a "spiritual movement" than the communist upheavals of the past, mirrors the work of Mary Daly.¹⁵⁶

A central reason Alpert's work was published, and proved influential, was due to her personal story. It is surprising and dramatic when a woman who had expected to die for a leftist revolution (and had participated in eight famous bombings), now wrote that, if she had to "sum up in a few words what

¹⁵⁴ Underground Odyssey. Time. January 27, 1975.

¹⁵⁵ Alpert, Jane. *Growing Up Underground*, 344.

¹⁵⁶ Echols, 252-253.

[she felt] to be [her] own oppression in this society, [she] would say, "The enormous economic, social, and psychological obstacles against bearing and raising children of my own." People certainly took notice of Alpert's dramatic turnaround. Intimate knowledge of both the left and the feminist movement were central to Alpert's authorial voice. In order to position herself as an insider and an expert, Alpert prefaced her work by saying that she was exposing "hitherto unknown information about the Weather Underground." Thus her rejection of their practices and beliefs in favor of feminism was privileged over less credentialed feminists who made similar complaints.

Furthermore, Alpert sought out attention from the press by directly exploiting her position as a leftist fugitive. Alpert wrote *Mother Right* under the direction of Robin Morgan who assured her it would "outlast *Das Kapital*."¹⁵⁷ However, when Alpert first mailed out her manuscript to both feminist and the mainstream press it was completely ignored. Unwilling to except this rejection, Alpert "made ten more copies of "Mother Right" and addressed them personally to journalists who had covered [her] case in 1969 and 1970."¹⁵⁸ Perhaps out of a genuine fear of mistrust or perhaps to heighten the drama, Alpert sent along a set of her fingerprints.¹⁵⁹

The New York Times was the first to acknowledge Alpert's work. The paper ran an article entitled, "Female Fugitive Bids Women Shun Leftist Units," a week later the piece was printed in its entirety in *off our backs*, then

¹⁵⁷ Alpert, Jane. *Growing Up Underground*, 346.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 348.

¹⁵⁹ "Underground Odyssey". *Time*. 27 January 1975.

It Ain't Me Babe and finally by *Ms. Magazine*.¹⁶⁰ Whether Alpert's mention in the New York Times in some way "forced" the feminist press to pay attention, or they simply operated at a slower pace, what remains clear is that Alpert was only able to find an audience when she appealed directly to her notoriety as a radical bomber.

Susan Saxe made less contact with the press due in part to a bargain with the court, which restricted her ability to speak with the media.¹⁶¹ However, her statements made at the beginning of her trial, and those of her supporters show a willingness to attract individual media attention, while also connecting herself to the radical feminist and lesbian movements. At the arraignment immediately following her arrest, Saxe presented a statement which famously proclaimed that she would keep fighting as "a lesbian, a feminist and an Amazon," and further promising movement women she would "show [them] a courage to match [their] own."¹⁶² According to her supporters, every aspect of her trial was "directed in the interest of the women's movement at large. Every statement made, every legal or political move taken, is done in the interest of all women."

The extent to which Saxe believed herself to represent a larger body of women is clear through her writing. As she sees it:

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Saxe's lawyers argued that negative press had poisoned the jury pool. Saxe received additional leverage in the jury selection process but was barred from seeking additional media attention.

¹⁶² Susan Saxe. "Statement by Susan Saxe." Somerville, MA: Susan Saxe Defense Committee, June 9th, 1975.

[Her] situation is hardly unique – just a bit more dramatic than some. Every lesbian who makes the choice to come out is taking a risk, is making a political statement with her life. It’s always scary and always dangerous, but it has to be done.¹⁶³

Saxe, herself argues that she is not extraordinary in anyway, but “only one of many women who have come through ... changes” however, “unlike many others” she had to confront these issues “in the public eye and under rather dramatic and serious circumstances.”¹⁶⁴ However, her professed normalcy does not prevent Saxe from taking it upon herself to dedicate significant time in her arraignment statement to describing in detail the “deep and significant split [which had] divided the women’s movement.”¹⁶⁵ The important split Saxe describes could essentially be summarized as the divide between Alpert supporters and Saxe supporters. In Saxe’s opinion, “women who [agree with] Jane Alpert feel that the Amerikan system can peacefully accommodate their feminist demands and that women have no obligation to support or protect any peoples’ struggle that is not explicitly feminist in ideology or even separatist in practice,” while her feminism “is a commitment to be even more radical, to strike more deeply at the roots of oppression”.¹⁶⁶ Thus while Saxe never explicitly publishes her own sweeping feminist theory, through her statements and poetry she positions herself in the center of an equally expansive feminist theory.

¹⁶³ Susan Saxe, Correspondence printed in *Susan Saxe Defense Committee Newsletter*, 4 (October, 1976).

¹⁶⁴ Susan Saxe. “Statement by Susan Saxe.”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Like Alpert, part of Saxe's appeal was undeniably her life experiences rather than her politics. One review of Saxe's book of poetry, begins by frankly stating, "Susan Saxe's *Talk Among the Womenfolk* is not good poetry, and it's even unlikely anyone will find a new or stimulating political concept here." However, seduced by Saxe's bravery, the author concludes that because Saxe had been "isolated and in hiding in her own country, been called a traitor and a fanatic, been imprisoned and on trial" it was impossible to resist the charms of her continued "idealism" and "passionate commitment."¹⁶⁷

Thus it is clear that Alpert and Saxe had both the opportunity and the inclination to speak as representatives of radical feminists. Yet, while Alpert and Saxe display the characteristics of media stars, they are not remembered as such. To understand why it is necessary to review how the trends of the 70s diminished the fear of media stars.

The height of the panic over media stars probably occurred from 1969 to 1971, but it continued to be a major concern in the mid-1970s.¹⁶⁸ Feminists' distrust of the mass media and fears of spokeswomanship never disappeared completely but for a multitude of reasons the issue became significantly less prominent by the end of the decade. This difference can be attributed to a change in the demographics and beliefs of feminists, and changes within the media itself.

¹⁶⁷ Gahan Kelly. "Saxe Talks 'Among The Womenfolk'" Review of *Talk Among the Womenfolk* by Susan Saxe. *Lesbian Tide*, September/October 1976, final edition. LGBT Life Full Text Database, via ebscohost, <http://web.ebscohost.com>

¹⁶⁸ Freeman, 121.

Throughout the 1970s the dominant narrative of feminism, as presented by the media, had experienced many changes. Originally the media jumped on the idea of feminists as angry, asexual and man-hating, favoring depictions, as one feminist described in 1973, of “the young girl shaking her fist and screaming obscenities at an abortion rally” or “castrating females” learning karate.¹⁶⁹ However, as early as the summer of 1971 an alternative narrative had developed. So ingrained was the media stereotype of the ugly militant, that the novel story was now the sexy, fun feminists like Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem. Ruth Rosen, in fact, describes the 1970s as a progression away from the “hairy, man-hating dyke” stereotype to the “superwomen” stereotype which reached its apex in the 1980s. The superwoman either flawlessly managed both a career and her family, or was cold, selfish and destroying the American family, (depending on who you asked).¹⁷⁰ Either way, the superwomen stereotype called for a completely different understanding of feminists in the media. Moving away from radical figures and dramatic pronouncements, a trend towards stories about everyday women entering the job market flourished around 1976. These women were definitely not “women’s libbers,” but just happened to be the first female stockbroker, auto-mechanic, radio disc-jockey or conductor in their city or firm.¹⁷¹ This narrative shift towards the ‘everyday’ women played a part in reducing the threat of new media-produced spokespeople.

¹⁶⁹ Bradley, 94,97,99.

¹⁷⁰ Rosen, 295-6.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 303.

It should also be acknowledged that both liberal and radical feminists were somewhat successful in changing the mass media. Women, who had previously been relegated jobs as secretaries, researchers or writers for the women's section of the paper, pushed for greater opportunities. The feminists' demand to speak only to female reporters played a large role in this development. Covering the women's movement blurred the lines between political journalism and the "women's story," not only providing some female reporters with their first experience with hard-hitting news but also inspiring many personal transformations.¹⁷² Additionally, in 1970, 102 female employees filed discrimination suits against prominent news magazines, such as Time, Fortune and Sports Illustrated.¹⁷³ Throughout the decade these companies and others quietly reformed their official hiring practices. However, there were holdouts, such as the New York Times, which did not commit to fair hiring until forced by a 1978 federal court order.¹⁷⁴ While female reporters obviously did not eradicate sexism and anti-feminist rhetoric in the media, their increased presence definitely tempered many of the most egregious abuses. While decreased media sexism and less interest in radical feminism certainly affected the decline in media-star panic, the more influential changes lay within the feminist movement itself.

¹⁷² Bradley, 198.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 198.

¹⁷⁴ Bradley, 198.

The groups that originated the radical feminist media codes disbanded before the height of the Saxe- Alpert controversy.¹⁷⁵ Although the code (in less explicit forms) had seeped into the foundation of many other radical feminist groups, by the mid-1970s the zeitgeist of the movement had changed. As mentioned previously Alice Echols, somewhat controversially, calls this change the rise of cultural feminism.¹⁷⁶ Increasingly radical feminists saw sexism, not only as an important foundational oppression, but as the only oppression they were obligated to fight. This ideological shift was the result of both former female leftists' continuing frustration with attempts to collaborate with male-dominated leftist groups, and the rapid addition of many new feminists to the movement who had never identified with leftist causes. The trend away from an intersectional approach set in motion three related causes for the change in media relations.

First, in choosing to focus solely on fighting sexism many women became separatists. They created women-only spaces, such as community centers, clinics, and communes, which offered relief from society's oppression and a place for female culture to flourish. Thus many radical feminists opted out of interaction with the mass media completely. Second, a trend toward an exclusively anti-sexist analysis led to a general decrease in anti-capitalist

¹⁷⁵ The Redstockings disbanded in the fall of 1970, while Cell 16 continued until 1973.

¹⁷⁶ The claim is controversial because the term is typically considered derogatory and because most of the feminists she describes as cultural were typically seen as (and self-identified as) radical feminists.

sentiment and a related increase in feminist-run businesses.¹⁷⁷ The taboo against making money off your feminism eased, and with it the distain for large publishing houses. Finally, the decrease in anti-capitalist sentiment moved some segments of radical feminism very close to a liberal feminist analysis. Especially as it roughly coincided with liberal feminism's move away from Friedan's strict focus on economic and legal reform to an embrace of "the personal is political."¹⁷⁸ Some radical feminist groups collaborated or were co-opted by liberal feminists who generally were more cooperative with the media.

However the anti-media star ideal did not did until 1976, soon after the Saxe-Alpert controversy. After years of personal attacks and purges, feminists were increasingly tired of "trashing." In 1976, a fear of trashing essentially supplanted the fear of media stars. This change occurred when a recreated Redstockings group tried to take down Gloria Steinem, the ultimate media star. The group was tired of Steinem's ubiquitous presence in the media and felt her *Ms. Magazine* was more liberal than radical. In 1967, it was reveled that in the early 1950s Steinem had started an organization designed to send Americans to communist dominated youth rallies around the world funded by the C.I.A..¹⁷⁹ Steinem maintained that the purpose of the organization was to foster communication between the east and west, however some radical

¹⁷⁷ Echols, 272-273.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 199.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 265.

feminists believed that agitation and spying were more likely goals.¹⁸⁰ In 1976, the new Redstockings looked into the finances of *Ms.* Magazine and noticed some suspicious irregularities. They began a trashing campaign claiming that Steinem was a C.I.A. plant hired to liberalize the radical wing of the feminist movement. The fervor over the allegations lasted throughout the summer of 1976,¹⁸¹ bitterly dividing Sagaris, the new feminist educational institute and think tank.

Steinem's initial response was to reprint Jo Freedman's article entitled "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood." Freedman expressed deep concern that the trashing would result in the self-destruction of the women's movement by airing all the movement's dirty laundry, and by discouraging any women with personal talent or original thought. According to Freeman, the article "evoked more letters from readers than any article previously published in *Ms.*, all but a few relating their own experiences of being trashed." Of course:

There was a kind of doublethink at work when Steinem, the most well known feminist in the country, with mass media practitioners virtually at her beck and call, was viewed as a victim of trashing at the hands of a small group that the media found no difficulty in marginalizing as wild-eyed fanatics.¹⁸²

And certainly readers of *Ms.* are a biased sample when polling for opinions on Steinem.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁸² Bradley, 187.

Eventually Steinem was forced to write apologetically that she had “naively believed that the ultimate money source didn’t matter, since no control or orders came with it.”¹⁸³ Nevertheless, Freeman’s essay served its purpose and feminists criticized the Redstocking’s personal attacks while public opinion slowly swung in Steinem’s favor.¹⁸⁴ After that summer Steinem’s reputation recovered while the Redstockings faded into obscurity. Even those feminists who resented and disagreed with her now had to admit that Steinem was *the* (unstoppable) media star of the feminist movement. That summer was the final battle in the war against media stars and for many marks “the final skirmish of radical feminism” and the descent into liberal or cultural feminism.¹⁸⁵ Even feminists who had formulated the approach in the early 1970s blamed the lack of leadership and the absence of “designated media spokeswomen” for the loss.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Brownmiller, 241.

¹⁸⁴ Echols, 269.

¹⁸⁵ Bradley, 187.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

3) Mapping the Controversy in the Feminist and Lesbian Press

By 1975 there was no denying that Susan Saxe and Jane Alpert were in the mass media spotlight. Yet there was significant disagreement over how best to handle the controversy within the movement. In this chapter I will provide a simplified historical timeline of the response and examine how feminists' attempts to gain control of the controversy were ultimately contributed to its trivialization.

The controversy over Jane Alpert did not begin suddenly. Instead it grew upon itself slowly. In 1970, Robin Morgan included a poem to Alpert in the introduction to *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, one of the most widely read radical feminist books. Friendly encouragement seemed to be the primary goal of the poem, written shortly after Alpert went underground. Morgan's conclusion was particularly personal; she wrote, "[i]n sisterhood, in struggle/and all that,/but mostly because/I think I love you."¹⁸⁷ However, Morgan also made the claim that Alpert knew she was "a mercenary/ in someone else's revolution—that of men—/paid with the coin of male

¹⁸⁷ Robin Morgan. "The Women's Revolution" In *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement*, edited by Robin Morgan, (New York: Random House) xiii-xli.

approval.”¹⁸⁸ Additionally she described Alpert, not as a leftist bomber, but as a women “forced to plead guilty to ...the crime of being female and daring to dislike the role.”¹⁸⁹ Although Morgan’s feminist interpretation of Alpert and her crime would later gain traction, at the time, it was easily dismissed. Similarly, in the Summer of 1973, both *off our backs* and *Ms. Magazine* published Jane Alpert’s “Mother Right” in full (other feminist newspapers across the country printed excerpts) without arousing much conflict.¹⁹⁰ While many feminists would later recount strong reactions upon reading the article, at the time of its first printing “Mother Right” did not provoke a full force controversy in the press.

In *Ms. Magazine*, Gloria Steinem prefaced the publication of “Mother Right” with a personal letter to Alpert. At the time of Alpert and Melville’s trials, Alpert approached Steinem for help raising Melville’s bail money. Three years later, Alpert sent Steinem “Mother Right” along with a personal letter recalling their meeting and asking Steinem to print the work. Although Steinem expressed discomfort with Alpert’s involvement in acts of violence, she wrote that when she met Alpert, she had “instinctively liked” her and through the years had, “thought of her more often than the two or three times I happened to see her name in the paper.”¹⁹¹ Steinem expressed her desire for women everywhere to learn about this “personal voyage of one women through and out of the patriarchal left” further adding, that she hoped with

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. In *Growing Up Underground* Alpert refutes this statement.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Alpert, Jane. “Growing Up Underground”

¹⁹¹ Gloria Steinem. Steinem, Gloria. “Letter to Jane Alpert.” *Ms.* 2, no. 2

this letter that “[t]he dialogue of exploration can begin”.¹⁹² Thus while Steinem, clearly acknowledged that Alpert’s story has the potential to provoke dialogue about feminism’s relationship to the left, at this time Alpert’s story was positioned concretely as a “personal voyage,” not a blueprint for the movement.

Everything changed on November 14, 1974 when Alpert turned herself in. The mass media connected feminism, and thus, many contended all feminists, to Alpert’s repudiation of the Left. This time feminists did not ignore Alpert or the surrounding media frenzy. The next month *off our backs* published an article on Alpert’s surrender asking, broadly “what does this mean for radical feminism?” By early 1975 over one hundred women had signed a petition denouncing Alpert and excluding her from the movement. This petition assumed that Alpert’s testimony led directly to the capture of other fugitives, although Alpert repeatedly denied these allegations in both the mainstream and alternative press.

In March the editorial staff of *off our backs* published a communal piece describing their publishing of “Mother Right” in 1973 as “dangerously sloppy” due to fears it may have contained information which could be useful to the state in the tracking or prosecuting of fugitives.¹⁹³ This editorial was the

¹⁹² Steinem, Gloria. “Letter to Jane Alpert” Ms.

¹⁹³ *off our backs*, “Editorial,” March 31, 1975, final edition. Genderwatch, via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

first to directly connect Alpert, not simply to collaboration with the state but also to liberal or cultural trends in the movement.¹⁹⁴ The staff asked:

What does it mean[that]:

-Ms. steadily increases its number of offensive ads and is read by increasing numbers of women, many of whom refer to themselves as feminists

-that the largest organized groups of women in the country seek more and more to participate in the present corporate and state structure

-that Jane Alpert cooperates with the state and says she did it both because she is a feminist and in order to be a feminist.¹⁹⁵

“To us,” the editors concluded “they mean danger.”¹⁹⁶

The controversy had already begun, but by late spring it reached its peak. In the letters section of its April issue, *off our backs* printed “The Crisis in Feminism: To Women on the Issue of Jane Alpert” written in collaboration by Ti-Grace Aktinson, Susan Sherman, Joan Hamilton and Florynce Kennedy.¹⁹⁷ The authors did not directly accuse Alpert of collaboration, instead they argued that “Jane Alpert is not important, what is important is that women stop playing games, dangerous games, deadly games.” Arguing that the oppressor was responsible for pitting oppressed groups against each other, the authors concluded dramatically that “[o]ur identification must be with all oppressed peoples... We do not ‘support’ or ‘not support’ the brothers

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ti-Grace Aktinson, Susan Sherman, Joan Hamilton and Florynce Kennedy. “Crisis In Feminism” In *The Color of the Heart: Writing from Struggle & Change 1959-1990*. Ed. Susan Sherman (Willimantic, CT: Crubstone Press), 94-96.

of Attica. We are Attica...This is true feminism.”¹⁹⁸ “Crisis” provoked a powerful response, in part, due to the high profile of its authors. Atkinson, a founding member of the New York branch of NOW and founder of the radical feminist splinter group The Feminists, and Kennedy, a black feminist lawyer whose clients included Valerie Solanas and Assata Skakur, in particular, were well known and divisive figures in the movement. Furthermore, when the quartet argued, “[i]t is time for us to take responsibility ...for what we support and print”; “[t]o recognize the implications and consequences of our ideas and actions.” it was widely interpreted as a call for censorship within the feminist press.¹⁹⁹

The petition written in response to “Crisis” eventually received just under one hundred signatures. The piece, entitled “Vindication of the Rights of Feminism,” described Alpert as a “woman with great integrity and strong feminist commitment” and encouraged the feminist press not to “censor, but to openly explore controversial issues such as this one.” “Vindication” was signed by prominent radical and liberal feminists such as Karen DeCrow, president of NOW, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan. With these petitions the battles were drawn.

These large petitions and early writing on the controversy embodied the desire for a collective, definitive ‘feminist’ answer to the Saxe-Alpert controversy, which could hold its weight against the more unified narrative of

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ *Lesbian Tide* “On the Issue of Jane Alpert,” May/June, 1975, final edition. LGBT Life Full Text Database, via ebscohost, <http://web.ebscohost.com>

the mass media. Yet even a hundred signatures could not represent the will of the Movement. The structurelessness of radical feminism made it impossible to objectively determining the majority's opinion. This problem was expressed in Susan Stein's overview of the controversy when she wrote that, "[m]ost important of all is whether the act of helping the government in its pursuit of political fugitives, women and men, is consistent with Feminist principles, *as defined by the majority of feminists – an unknown, to anyone, quantity...*[emphasis added]"²⁰⁰ Ti-Grace Atkinson similarly wished that the Movement had been able to "come down hard" when Alpert published "Mother Right." She argued that if the movement had come out and said, "this is shit, that person [Alpert] is not one of us," the controversy, and perhaps the history of feminism, would be radically different. However, the ability to speak as a unified movement was never a tool that radical feminism possessed, instead the mass media dismissed the flurry of petitions simply as further evidence of division within the movement.

Saxe's story was not originally presented by movement insiders like Morgan and Steinem. However, even before the local police officer arrested her on March 27th, 1975, Saxe was in the news. Weeks before Saxe's arrest, lesbians in Connecticut and Kentucky were held in concept of court for refusing to speak to Grand Juries fishing for information on Saxe, her accomplice Kathy Power and the lesbian communities. Both the lesbian and

²⁰⁰ Susan Stein. "Salt: One View." *off our backs*, April 30, 1976, final edition. Genderwatch, via Proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

'straight' feminist press was filled with personal interviews and advice for women confronted by the FBI.

However attention turned to Saxe specifically the next day after her arrest, when Saxe's partner, Byrna Aronson read for the press Saxe's infamous statement in which she promised fight on as a "Lesbian, a feminist, an Amazon."²⁰¹ Captured around the same time as Pat "Shoshana" Swinton and other fugitives, Saxe was immediately connected to Alpert as some feminists suspected she also played a role in Saxe's arrest. However, in the statement read after her hearing, Saxe also explicitly inserted herself into the controversy by positioning herself against women "like Jane Alpert." With five lesbians and one gay man behind bars, in addition to Saxe and Shoshana implicating Alpert in their arrests, feminists began to look more broadly at Alpert's actions and their impact.

Radical feminists involved in the Saxe-Alpert controversy, like most of their peers, deeply distrusted the mass media. The very first *off our backs* article written after Alpert surrendered to the FBI was a response to *The New York Times*. Noting that the *Times* is "never to be trusted really, particularly on stories about feminists" the author, Madeleine Janover, went on to rhetorically question the paper's usage of terminology such as "full collaboration," "renounced radical activities" and "conversion to the feminist movement."²⁰² In this article Janover establishes tropes subsequently seen through the Saxe-Alpert controversy. She presents radical feminists as

²⁰¹ Susan Saxe, "Statement by Susan Saxe."

²⁰² Janover, Madeleine. "Up From Under." *Off Our Backs*. December 31, 1974.

reacting specifically to the mass media's presentation of the controversy. Furthermore, when she asked what this meant for the movement it is clear the question refers both to Alpert's actions and the fact they are attributed to feminism in the mass media.

Similarly Alpert claimed her detractors suffered a "knee jerk" reaction to the language of the Times article. Her friend Robin Morgan, recalled that "[a]t first, [Alpert] didn't believe anyone could take such an accusation seriously. Morgan clarified the language of the New York Times by arguing that the reporter's definition of cooperative really "meant Jane played the 'Shirley Temple' act with them. When questioned she wore a skirt and didn't call the cops 'pigs.'"²⁰³ Conversely, in reaction to later press coverage claiming that Alpert had not collaborated against her former friends on the Left, Pat "Shoshana" Swinton articulated a commonly held view that:

The Justice Department's telling Newsweek that "information on Swinton had come from another radical fugitive, Barry Stein," just seems ... to be a neat little way of creating confusion and dissension. I think the FBI tried to plant it and it just didn't take"²⁰⁴

The distrust of the media's allegations of Alpert's collaboration helped to partially obscure the fact that *within* the Movement women disagreed on not only how "collaboration" was defined, but also how it related to their feminist ideology. Beginning with a March, 1975 interview with Michigan's *Her-self*, Alpert continuously maintained that cooperating with the government meant

²⁰³ *Lesbian Tide*. "On The Issue of Jane Alpert."

²⁰⁴ Devoe, Margaret, Moira, Fran, Janover, Madelaine. "Shoshana (Pat Swinton): 'what you do matters'" *Off Our Backs*. Washington: Jul 31, 1975. Vol. 5, Iss. 6. p. 2.

“simply supplying the Government with details of my OWN life as a fugitive.”²⁰⁵ For many feminists the debate swirled around how much information Alpert had revealed and whether it had led to the capture of other fugitives. However, a deeper debate was hidden under this fact-based disagreement. Many feminists did not care whether or not Alpert had led authorities to Swinton. They were more concerned over more general questions about the relationship between feminism and the state. On one side, women believed that any cooperation with the state no matter how trivial put fugitives in danger and was evidence of a dangerous liberalization of feminism. On the other side were women who claimed the pervasive sexism of the left meant that feminists should cooperate with state authorities if it benefited their own situation, and thus and remove themselves from the patriarchal war between fathers (the right) and sons (the left).²⁰⁶

In addition to questioning the mass media’s bias and terminology, some feminists wondered if the media’s interest in the controversy was a plot to divide and discredit the Movement. Lesbian separatist, Jill Johnston’s widely republished article for *The Village Voice* was the most influential piece to argue that the mass media not only had presented the controversy with an anti-feminist bias, but had in fact fully invented it. In reference to Saxe, Johnston writes, “the association of the “sisterhood’ with bank robberies is a telescopic deception used (by the media) to discredit [the] movement.” Johnston articulates her fear of media stardom by stating that the

²⁰⁵ On the Issue of Jane Alpert. Lesbian Tide.

²⁰⁶ Jill Johnston, “The Myth of Bonnies Without Clydes.”

structurelessness of the feminist and lesbian communities had created “the perfect vacuum” for the press to direct attention on the “radicalesbian elements” of the community. Rather than reflecting an organic conflict within the movement, Johnston dismissed the controversy as “a predictable collusion of media interests,” namely a capitalization of rising anti-feminist sentiment and widespread homophobia. Johnston argued that the stage was set such that “if it weren’t Saxe it would have been someone else.”²⁰⁷

Other feminist’s also implicated the feminist and lesbian press in invention the controversy. “Susan Saxe is to feminist newspapers what Patty Hearst is to the straight media,” Elaine Lafferty, a lesbian-feminist claimed. She further trivializes the “peculiar sense of interest” about the controversy by comparing it to reading advice columnist, “Ann Landers religiously in the 7th grade.” Describing the her perception of ‘reality’ of the controversy, the author wrote, “[m]eetings are held, more statements made, then more meetings are held, and presto! The feminist press has a hot news story.”²⁰⁸

Obviously, feminist papers were not exempt from accusations of co-optation. When the *off our backs* staff wrote an editorial which condemned Alpert’s cooperation with the state many dismissed the periodical as a whole, as corrupted by the left. Despite the magazine’s conclusion that both the “male defined left” and the state would “wield power over us if they only had a chance,” the *New Women’s Survival Sourcebook* changed its opinion of the

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Lafferty, “Burning Issues: Saxe, Grand Juries, Alpert, Gloria the Spy, Swinton and MONEY”

magazine from designating it “the New York Times of the women’s movement” to complaining that it had “switched from national news reporting with a radical feminist slant to focusing on intra-movement factionalism from what appears to be a predominately male perspective.”²⁰⁹

While many feminists were skeptical about the media’s role in linking feminism to the Saxe-Alpert controversy it is no coincidence that extreme accusations of ‘media creationism’ just mentioned, come from the pro-Alpert, anti-Saxe camps (and two of three are lesbian separatists). Although they were couched in generic radical feminist anti-media rhetoric, this rhetoric was promoting a separatist agenda very different from the goals of early radical feminists. For example, Lafferty earnestly concluded her mocking article by expressing the hope that “when we fully realize our movement as the potential new society it is, perhaps we will concentrate less on the Alperts and Saxes and more on the state of our own lives and on the state of our movement.”

²¹⁰However, many feminists, and lesbians in particular, felt that the threat of a FBI infiltration or a Grand Jury witch hunt was very real.

While there was wide agreement that the mass media played a role in connecting Saxe and Alpert to the feminist cause, there was also wide disagreement over what that meant. For Johnston and Lafferty, the best response was to dismiss the issue outright, so as to not feed into the media’s

²⁰⁹ Quoted in Carol Ann Douglas, “Ten Years of *off our backs*: 1970-1980.” *off our backs*, February 28, 1980, final edition. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

²¹⁰ Lafferty, “Burning Issues: Saxe, Grand Juries, Alpert, Gloria the Spy, Swinton and MONEY”

plot. However, others thought better of this tactical avoidance. When Ti-Grace Atkinson first saw “Mother Right” she at first, was determined to believe that it was planted by a “pig.” However, she later determines that it “was [her] escapism operating.” Worrying about the huge implications “Mother Right” could have on the relationship between the left and feminists she did not want to accept it, but ultimately determined she had no choice.²¹¹ For supporters of Saxe, the media’s involvement was further motivation to get involved. They wrote in the “Susan Saxe Defense Committee Newsletter”:

And finally, we support Susan because of who she is. *If not by our own identification, then by the actions of the FBI, the Department of Justice and the news media*, we have all become identified as “dangerous women” because of our lifestyles, our private lives, our own politics (whatever they may be).²¹² [emphasis added]

While Johnston wanted to fight media involvement by denying her connection to Saxe outright, members of the defense committee accepted this connection as a given. If the media was going to connect Saxe to the feminist and lesbian communities, women had an obligation to fight for both Saxe and themselves.

Due, at least in part, to their circumstances in the justice system, a strong connection formed between Saxe and Alpert and their supporters. In order to aid Saxe and Alpert during their trials, support groups were formed, newsletters and pamphlets were published and petitions were signed in their

²¹¹ Devoe, Margaret, Fran Moira, and Madeliene Janover. “Shoshana (Pat Swinton): ‘what you do matters.’”

²¹² Mailing from the Susan Saxe Defense Committee of Philadelphia June 11th 1975

name. Unlike most other radical feminists groups, the Susan Saxe Defense Committee and the Circle of Support for Jane Alpert were organized around, and named for, one individual.

However while the groups played a central role by raising money and support for the trials, they also participated in broader community activism and outreach. Saxe's defense committee was especially active in the drive to inform lesbian and feminist communities of their rights when confronted by the FBI. This issue was central to their writings, and was frequently discussed at their demonstrations, concerts, poetry readings and movie nights.²¹³ Because these groups served as press liaisons while Saxe and Alpert were in prison and unable to speak to the media, it was at times unclear which viewpoints belonged to Saxe and Alpert and which to the group. For example when Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad went on a speaking tour on behalf of the Circle of Support for Jane Alpert, they argued that cooperation with the FBI did not conflict with feminism, stating that, "many feminists feel the entire issue [of collaboration] is irrelevant since both the established authorities and the male left are oppressive to women."²¹⁴ However at the same time Alpert was taking the position that while she had spoken to the FBI about her own activities she had avoided giving any information which could aid in tracking down her former partners. While her actions were not in

²¹³ Joan Horan, "Susan Saxe: Talk Among Womenfolk," *off our backs*, April 30, 1976. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

²¹⁴ Echols, 261-262.

keeping with the leftist belief in total noncompliance, her position was considerably less incendiary than those of her supporters.²¹⁵

Identification with Alpert and Saxe as media-imposed leaders did not end with their support groups. Some feminists tried to ‘reclaim’ Saxe and Alpert symbolism from the mass media and the Left. Barbara Deming believed that Alpert was being presented as “scare figure” to keep feminists in line.²¹⁶ She reclaims Alpert as a symbol of the separatist desire that is buried “inside you, inside all of us.”²¹⁷ Similarly lesbian activist, Karla Jay compared Jane Alpert to Helen of Troy and argued that she became, “the symbol of the booty of sexism.”²¹⁸ “If she gets away,” Jay argued, it would mean “all women might get away, all wives might be stolen as Jane and Helen were.”²¹⁹

Other feminists argued that when a public figure identifies with a minority group, they automatically become a symbol for that group. Referencing a *Boston Globe* editorial, Johnston sites a feminist who used the example of swingers, when she argued that if Saxe had vowed to fight on as a heterosexual swinger, “I’d say to myself oh yeah heterosexual swingers were a weird bunch.” In her own comparison, Johnson wonders if Mark Rudd

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Deming, Barbara to Andrea Dworkin. June 30, 1975. Correspondence. Barbara Deming Papers, 1908-1985. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University, Boston.

²¹⁷ Barbara Deming. “To Fear Jane Alpert Is to Fear Ourselves: A Letter to Susan Sherman.” *off our backs*, June 30, 1975. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

²¹⁸ Karla Jay. “A Trojan War Rerun: Alpert Another Helen?” *Lesbian Tide*, November/December, 1975, final edition. LGBT Life Full Text Database, via ebscohost, <http://web.ebscohost.com>

²¹⁹ Ibid.

“vowed to keep on fighting as a heterosexual,” would heterosexuals wonder what they “were supposed to do to keep up the good fight”?²²⁰

Because Saxe and Alpert were positioned as leaders, symbols and ‘implicators of the movement’ many feminists tried to ignore the issues their controversy embodied by focusing on personal attack. These attacks were directed at both Alpert and Saxe, and their supporters. Susan Sherman, who signed the second denunciation of Alpert and debated Barbara Deming in the press, felt the “whole issue” quickly became “one of personalities rather than substance.”²²¹

Sherman’s private letters also provide a rare inside account of the trashing which occurred between Saxe and Alpert supporters. She writes emotionally to Sherman of the personal hurt she has endured. Sherman accuses Robin Morgan of spreading lies about herself and Flo Kennedy. Sherman claims that Morgan spread rumors accusing Kennedy of blackmailing feminist papers so that they would not print Alpert’s work. Furthermore Morgan had claimed that their “statement was a petition only three [people] would sign etc.” Despite the fact, that Sherman claims that their “statement was a statement of four women arrived at cooperatively. No

²²⁰ Jill Johnson, “Myth of Bonnies without Clydes”

²²¹ Sherman, Susan to Barbara Deming. March 4, 1970. Correspondence. Barbara Deming Papers, 1908-1985. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University, Boston.

one was called. No one was asked to sign it. It was not a petition. It was not circulated privately.”²²²

However most of the trashing was focused on Saxe and Alpert themselves. In attempting to prove that Saxe and Alpert were unqualified as spokeswomen attention was largely diverted from big-picture issues to the personal details of Saxe and Alpert’s lives. Feminists argued over Saxe’s identity at the time of the robberies and Alpert’s testimony to the FBI. While both these debates contain salient concerns for feminism the debates frequently focused on relatively unimportant minutiae.

In the Saxe debate the tendency was to focus on Saxe’s identity as ‘feminist, lesbian and Amazon’ at the time of her robberies. Saxe claimed these identities at her trial in 1975. However, Saxe wrote that she came into politics “through socialist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist causes [and] ... emerged a feminist.” While, unlike Alpert, she does not describe a dramatic conversion, she makes no claims of feminist or lesbian identity in 1970. However, for both her supporters and detractors it became necessary to determine her identity at that time. Her supporters write: “ [Susan Saxe] is a women who was a feminist then, a fact which is documented in her poetry and in newspaper accounts of her activities as a student at Brandeis.”²²³ Jill Raymond, who endured a lengthy prison stay rather than testify against Saxe, wrote a long and detailed article explaining how each of Saxe’s charges could

²²² Sherman, Susan. Letter to Barbara Deming. 4 March 1975.

²²³ “Susan Saxe Defense Committee Newsletter” Iss. #1. January 1975. Pg. 2.

be understood as a feminist action.²²⁴ In opposition to Saxe, Johnston wants to know if Saxe was sleeping with accomplice, Kathy Power, she also turns the issue into a historical debate, arguing:

I'd be very surprised to hear that two radical lesbian/feminists were out robbing a bank with three heavy straight dudes in 1970. The radicalesbians I knew in New York at that time...had already severed connections with the white male left and were seriously questioning what remained of their association with blacks and with gay males.

Considering Saxe was a recent college graduate living in a suburb of Boston, Johnson's experience with the New York radicalesbian community has no direct relevance. However, Raymond's assertions about Saxe's identity are equally unclear.

The Brandeis Strike Information Center, Saxe's primary political commitment before the robbery, was mostly focused on ending the Vietnam war and securing the release of political prisoners (mostly Black Panthers). However, there is evidence of at least some feminist awareness within the group. In a newspaper issue released while Saxe was perceived, by the FBI at least, to have some authority at the Strike Center, there is a significant degree of gender related content.²²⁵ The paper includes a long and positive description of a women's caucus at the Milwaukee Resistance Summer Conference and

²²⁴ Jill Raymond. "Susan Saxe Defense Committee Newsletter. Iss. #2. March 1976. Pg. 7.

²²⁵ FBI document to Director, FBI from SAC, Boston Subject: National Student Strike, dated 9/25/70 "Re Boston Airtel dated 9/18/70"

the definition of “shim,” a gender-neutral pronoun.²²⁶ While there is no definite evidence that Saxe wrote this article or definition, it is highly likely she shared the views expressed in the Newsletter. Furthermore Saxe’s poetry from the time of the robbery expresses a feminist awareness along with leftist ideals. . For example, Saxe writes of her motivations for participating in the robbery:

What on earth did you do that for?
What could you have been thinking of?
Some Venezuelan plantation hand, Mama,
A certain Black woman in a Chicago Slum.
And my own life
In the suburbs with 2.5
and no passion.²²⁷

However, while her poetry and political involvement demonstrate an awareness of feminist causes, they by no means confirm a radical feminist identity. Supporters of Saxe would have been far more likely to see Saxe’s combination of anti-sexist, colonialist and racist commitments as true radical feminism, while her detractors would have seen anything other than complete commitment to sexism above all other oppressions as male-identified and leftist. Thus digging into Saxe’s past resulted in few converts; supporters

²²⁶ Author Unknown, “National Strike Information Center Newsletter,” July 1st 1970. Pg. 9.

²²⁷ Dee Wedemeyer, John Barbour. “How Did It Happen? :Honor Girl Student Now on FBI's List.” *Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File)*, November 1, 1970, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 13, 2007).

remained convinced, while for many feminists the belief that “anyone accused of bank robbery is not a lesbian” remained a popular position.²²⁸

To argue that feminists were sidetracked by personal attacks is not to suggest that they were callous, ignorant or flippant about the controversy. Up against a powerful media machine putting media stars into the public sphere, feminists had to at least try to remove them as best they could. However, realizing the media capitalized on reports of feminists’ bitter divisions, the overriding sentiment across all ideologies seems to be a desire for the controversy to end. Saxe, whose initial public attack on Alpert dramatically heightened the tone of the controversy, wished, as early as December, 1975, that the issue could be “kept in the family.” She suggests, “perhaps the worst thing about this struggle is that it had to be carried out in the public forum” and that while she felt a split was inevitable “it did not have to be so bloody.”²²⁹ Even before this, in the summer of 1975 *off our backs*, the paper which published most of the influential articles about the controversy, made it clear they did not want “the exchange about Jane Alpert to go on too long.” Along with Saxe are women like Susan Sherman, who after her initial denouncement of Alpert was shocked at the “furor” it aroused, and literally begged Barbara Deming not to “reopen the controversy and focus the issue again on Jane personally, which would do a disservice both to the issues

²²⁸ Susan Stein. “Salt: One View ”.

²²⁹ Susan Saxe. To Barbara Deming. December 26, 1975. Correspondence. 1975-1976. Barbara Deming Papers, 1908-1985. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University, Boston.

involved and, ironically enough, to Jane herself.”²³⁰ However, while Barbara Deming continued to write articles in support of Jane Alpert, by the third, she could not find a publisher.

In the spring of 1976, only a year after the height of the controversy, *off our backs* published a scathing critique of the dialogue surrounding Saxe and Alpert. The author, Susan Stein, argues that the debate reflected the Movement’s growing tendency towards “a way of speaking” typified “by confusion and eventually utter abandonment of the issue at hand.”²³¹ Within the controversy Stein sees the possibility for an important dialogue about feminism’s relationship to the left and to the state. Stein tries to catalogue the various positions held by supporters and detractors of Alpert and Saxe on feminism, violence and the left. However, she maintains that women hardly ever make these positions clear, preferring instead to resort to personal attacks, destroying her opponent’s credibility, so “[she] need not bother, or lower [herself], to respond to whatever grain of content there was to her [opponent’s] criticism.” Stein’s piece functioned as a pessimistic postscript to controversy.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, by the end of the decade Alpert and Saxe were almost forgotten. Alpert’s memoir, carefully timed to coincide with the expiration of many statutes of limitations, was published in 1981. The book merited only a three hundred word review in *off our backs*. The response was tepid. Reviewer Margaret Krouskoff finishes her

²³⁰ Susan Sherman, 96.

²³¹ Stein, Susan. “Salt: One View.”

review by describing Alpert as a woman “who [started] and ended as a middle class New Yorker” with only a “slight 10-year detour through the underground” Many Leftists continued to criticize Alpert for breaking the code of silence, while most feminists seemed intent on ignoring her.

In her summary of the first ten years of *off our backs* Carol Ann Douglas describes the Saxe-Alpert controversy as one of the two central concerns of 1975 (along with the Steinem-CIA controversy). She notes the huge number of articles, letters and agonizing editorial meetings devoted to the issue.²³² Yet, when Douglas reviewed Alice Echols’ history of radical feminism a few years later she expressed surprise that the issue even merits a mention. She argued that while the controversy “gained wide publicity in the feminist press” she doubts its importance to the history of the movement.²³³ Ironically, it seems that it was exactly because the controversy was so emotionally-fraught, and frequently discussed, all feminists could do was to silence it.

²³² Carol Ann Douglas, “Ten Years off our backs: 1970-1980” *off our backs*. Washington: February 28, 1980, final edition. Genderwatch, via proquest, <http://www.proquest.com>

²³³ Douglas, Carol Anne. “Review of: Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975.”

Conclusion

It is often helpful to remember that history generally favors the victor over the loser, the haves over the have-nots, the powerful over the weak. However, these simple dichotomies fail to represent the complexity found in our society and in our historical narratives. As the fame of Gloria Steinem and prevalence of the bra-burning myth demonstrate, the mass media has played a powerful role in shaping the history of modern feminism. However, while we should never forget to analyze media influence, by looking back on our history and describing various moments as the ‘result’ of mass media intervention, we run the risk of seeing only winners and losers, or history-makers and their subjects. We might overlook the fact that the production of second wave history was always contested. Moreover within these contests that even the “losing’ voice alters the debate.

The controversy over Saxe and Alpert perfectly demonstrates the complexity of these negotiations. One could argue that due to the ‘craft traditions’ of mass media, particularly a rather blatantly anti-feminist interest in sensationalism, feminist were ‘forced’ to deal with Saxe and Alpert against their will. This characterization would not be wholly inaccurate. The mass

media clearly helped forge the connection between Saxe and Alpert and the Feminist Movement. Thus the mass media altered the dialogue by forcing all feminists, whether they agreed or not, to at least contend with the possibility that Saxe and Alpert had an effect on Radical Feminism. However, even if some feminists were inhibited by the mass media's assumption of Saxe and Alpert's feminist importance, it is apparent that even within these constraints, feminist had enough power at their disposal to stop the dialogue from defining their movement.

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