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From Sympathizers to Organizers

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From Sympathizers to Organizers

Jennifer J. Stetzer

The April 1969 Harvard-Radcliffe Student Strike marked a turning point in Radcliffe women's involvement in student activism on campus. Radcliffe women had participated in student politics throughout the 1960s, often playing important but unheralded roles in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the center of the radical student movement.

The strike drew scores of students, many of whom had not been involved before, into radical politics. This participation in student activism was a source of empowerment and education, especially for many of the women, in that they gained experience organizing social movements and acquired intellectual frameworks for defining and critiquing oppression; women would later apply those skills and ideology in the independent women's movement.¹

The 1969 student strike at Harvard-Radcliffe mirrored trends nationwide, as more than 300 colleges and universities erupted in student demonstrations in the spring of 1969. Nonetheless, protest, violence, and bloodshed at "fair Harvard" were unsettling, given the popular belief that "it couldn't happen here." As a result, the 1969 strike received widespread media attention and analysis in secondary sources. Reporters covered the 1969 Strike extensively, students wrote memoirs reflecting on the event, and historians have studied it repeatedly, but in all of these sources women's contributions to the movement have gone unnoticed and the gender dynamics of that movement have

gone unexplored.² Scholarship of radical politics on a national level parallels this trend; as the editors of an anthology on women in social protest explain, “interested readers are hard-pressed to find the *mention* of women, let alone comparative analysis of men and women’s roles, attitudes, and feelings as social protesters.”³ Only by asking new questions of the traditional sources and by looking to new sources such as interviews with participants can these formerly untold stories now come to the forefront.

SDS came to Harvard-Radcliffe in 1964 as a liberal reform organization focused on community organizing and political activism. Within two years it had become the largest chapter in the country, with over 200 members.⁴ Widely publicized demonstrations, such as a confrontation with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1966, a sit-in prompted by Dow Chemical’s recruiting efforts on campus in 1967, and a demonstration against the presence of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) in 1968, drew more and more students into the ranks of SDS. Although the leadership of SDS tended to be mostly male during this period, SDS members did elect several women into top positions in the organization, such as Amy Delson (treasurer, 1964), Barbara Easton (secretary, 1965), Ellen Klein (steering committee, 1967), and Beth Harvey (steering committee, 1969).⁵

When Radcliffe students joined forces with their Harvard peers, men stood out as the leaders and decision makers. When fighting for their own interests at Radcliffe, however, women organized themselves very effectively, and the women themselves were vocal and visible. For example, the 1968 demonstration against ROTC (known as the Paine Hall demonstration for its location) comprised both men and women, and Harvard

and Radcliffe punished the participants separately, with each institution deciding on the consequences for its students. This opened the door for Radcliffe students, who had not previously targeted their college for protest, to mobilize against the administration.⁶ The 26 Radcliffe students who had been involved refused to meet individually with their deans, announcing that they would instead go as a group, since “we acted as a group and we have decided to confront the Administration in the same way.”⁷ The students accepted full responsibility for their actions, but stood behind their political principles, saying, “we are participating in the fight to abolish ROTC at Harvard because we protest the American policy of counter-revolution in Vietnam and elsewhere in the world.”⁸ After student-administration negotiations on appropriate punishments failed, several dozen women stormed Radcliffe president Mary Bunting’s office, demanding amnesty for the demonstrators. Led by student Naomi Schapiro, this activism by and for women provided important experience for those involved.

Though the factions within SDS differed on tactics, by April 1969 the group was eager to launch a massive campaign against university policy, especially the presence of ROTC on campus and Harvard’s expansion into low-income Boston and Cambridge neighborhoods. Early in the morning of April 9 the more militant faction decided to take over University Hall, the main administration building, that day.⁹ By noon several hundred male and female students had gathered in front of University Hall. Many were SDS members or supporters, while others had heard rumors of a possible building takeover and were curious onlookers. SDS co-chairman Norm Daniels climbed to the top of the stairs and proclaimed, “there is only one enemy here, the Harvard Corporation. It’s

time for us to tell the Corporation now by action what we've been telling them all fall by words." Once inside, SDSers rounded up the deans and workers in the building and escorted them out. The students met resistance from several deans, whose refusal to leave prompted the students to use physical force.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Lowry Hemphill and Ellen Messing, two long-time SDS members, stood together inside the building debating whether it was ladylike to throw out the deans.¹¹ This conversation indicated the opposing forces pulling women activists in dual directions; in their minds, traditional femininity and political activism did not mix.

For 17 hours the 250 students inside University Hall discussed strategy and plans, they "liberated" confidential administrative documents, they sang, they slept, and they made their demands heard.¹² Nicholas Gagarin, a student who later wrote about his University Hall experience for the student newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, described the mood inside the building as one of euphoria: the students had successfully taken a building from the most prestigious university in the world. Moreover, Gagarin wrote, "for those few hours we *were* brothers and sisters. We did reach out and hold onto each other. . . . we were very beautiful in University Hall, we were very human, and we were very together."¹³ In addition to taking a political stand, many radical students discovered in their "liberated area" a sense of community and solidarity with their peers.

[See Image 16: Harvard Strike "The Bust"]

Women participated in the takeover in disproportionately large numbers. Though women constituted about 20 percent of the undergraduate student body, 32 of the 118 (or roughly 27 percent) of the students indicted for trespassing in University Hall were Radcliffe women.¹⁴ Photographs from inside the building that night show men and women with arms linked as they waited for the police bust.¹⁵ As one reporter declared,

The seizure of Harvard's University Hall this week was an imposing show of male-female solidarity. Radcliffe women were out in force, distributing leaflets, demonstrating, getting arrested, and getting injured right along with the Harvard men. It was the first major demonstration of inter-campus unity since the recently-proposed merger between administrations of the two schools.¹⁶

Although this statement glosses over some of the gender dynamics among the student activists, it does point to the significant role that Radcliffe women played in the occupation of University Hall.

A bloody police bust at dawn on April 10 evicted the student protesters by clubbing them and pushing them toward the doors. The police did not discriminate in their violence; they went after anyone in the way, men or women.¹⁷ As Radcliffe student Carol Sternhell, who covered the event for the *Crimson*, later recalled,

There were tons of police in baby-blue helmets. I was standing on the steps nearest the chapel when they came at us. The demonstrators' arms were linked, and the police charged. Up to then, it had all been pretend. Then the police grabbed people off the top

steps and threw them down. People were screaming. It was a mad-house. I saw them beat up a guy in a wheelchair. I was so terrified.

I ran and kept running.¹⁸

This violence cracked open some of the veneer of genteel hostility between men and women activists. Though the draft resistance movement, the main thrust of student activism at the time, had pushed women to the periphery--since their lives would not be on the line in the war--women in the University Hall bust put their bodies on the line and demonstrated the strength of their commitment to the movement. Perhaps seeing Radcliffe women dragged out of the building, beaten, and loaded into paddy wagons helped men and women imagine new possibilities for women's participation in the movement.

But these changes did not come without taking a toll; the bust was emotional and traumatic for many of the students involved. One woman jumped out of a window to escape arrest, found two friends and quickly left the Yard. She later wrote, "the three of us clung to each other and wept and shivered and cursed all at once. . . . I felt a fear that turned to fury and a fury that turned to sorrow and a sorrow that turned to tears, and I started to cry, and cried and cried until I thought I would never stop."¹⁹

The majority of undergraduates held moderate political views and disagreed with the militancy of SDS's action. Yet when students watched anonymous police officers violently beating their classmates, mainstream opinion shifted dramatically; suddenly the administration seemed every bit the powerful, malevolent enemy SDS had depicted, for they had brought in outsiders to do their dirty work. Within a few hours more than 2,000

moderate students squeezed into Memorial Church and overwhelmingly voted to boycott classes for at least three days.²⁰ For eleven days the students executed their strike successfully. Many professors continued to hold classes, but attendance was less than 25 percent, and those classes that did meet mainly discussed the political issues immobilizing the campus.²¹ Instead of attending classes, most students spent their time engaged in discussions, strategy sessions, or demonstrations.

As with the University Hall takeover, women were heavily involved in the strike. When it came to demonstrating, leafletting, and other rank-and-file activities, women at Radcliffe participated in the strike in proportionally greater numbers than Harvard men.²² Women walked the picket lines and political brigades, attended meetings, colloquia, and rallies in large numbers. While the exact numbers of Harvard and Radcliffe students participating went unrecorded, several strike participants remembered that about half the strikers were female.²³ Even women who had not previously been involved in SDS or radical campus politics joined in, arguing that a boycott of classes was the only way to pressure the administration to heed the student demands. For example, Laurent Delli-Bovi had not been an active SDS member and had never participated in a demonstration before. "I never really thought I would be in a demonstration," she told a reporter.

I hadn't really talked to anybody about going into the building when I went in. I just sort of made the decision on the spot that it was time I did something to back up what I'd been talking about. I've been anti-war and anti-ROTC all along. I'd been helping circulate petitions to put ROTC off campus. But the petitions were submitted months ago, and it finally

seemed that there were no other channels except to take an action like this.²⁴

Delli-Bovi's statement indicates how the strike broadened the base of SDS support and drew many new women into radical politics. The strike afforded women the opportunity to stand behind their objections to the war and to Harvard's role in it.

The Radcliffe Union of Students (RUS), the representative student government, had difficulty taking decisive action during the strike for fear of marginalizing certain viewpoints and sparking dissension. At an April 11 meeting the group called for a campaign to solicit a diversity of student opinions. They proposed a referendum or a questionnaire to discover what Radcliffe students thought about the issues, specifically their attitudes toward ROTC and a possible restructuring of the university. Because so many women were, in RUS members' opinion, "uninformed and confused" about the strike, the group decided to serve as a clearinghouse of information. They considered sponsoring meetings and colloquia to discuss the strike, but rather than meeting separately, they decided instead that they should include Radcliffe in Harvard colloquia by sending qualified speakers to the Harvard Houses.²⁵ This attempt to bridge the gap between the two colleges and to increase women's presence in the heart of the strike actually made it more difficult to draw new women in, since few of the meetings or debates were held in the women's dormitories. Also, because RUS wavered between endorsing the radical and the more moderate factions--offering and then withdrawing support as the tides of opinion changed--it did not take one strong position and defend it, thereby minimizing the weight of the group's decisions.

[See Image 17: Harvard strike: Woman Protester]

The Harvard strike, which began with a dramatic and definitive event, had a much more unspecified end. For African American students, the strike ended on April 22, with the endorsement by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of their black studies proposal. By then, most white students had already abandoned the strike. Many had drifted back to classes as the constant political activity began to take its toll and as final exams loomed nearer. The strike had been gradually losing support as a result of faculty responsiveness as well; the faculty toughened its stance on the status of ROTC, which satisfied many moderate students. Though SDS members vowed to maintain their boycott until all demands were met, those who continued striking were overwhelmingly in the minority, and the strike fizzled to an end.²⁶

[See Image 18: Harvard Strike: Women Confront John Harvard]

Though student activism at Harvard-Radcliffe would continue, the 1968-69 academic year witnessed the most turmoil, uprisings, and changes in university policy. The 1969 strike is widely considered a turning point in the university's history.²⁷ Together, thousands of students succeeded in shutting down the university and in making their demands heard. Aided by the faculty's efforts to resolve the crisis, the students' demands were met on almost all counts. The protesters led the way toward creating

important and enduring changes in the institution, most notably in reducing the status of ROTC, increasing Harvard's efforts to help its low-income neighbors, giving students a voice in the creation of an Afro-American Studies program, and adding students to several faculty and administrative committees. It was the only time that SDS succeeded in rallying campus-wide support to launch a mass movement.

The strike is less commonly associated with changes in women's status and experiences at Harvard-Radcliffe. As a key event with profound impact on both the university and its students, the strike provided women with important political experience. Many were drawn into campus protest for the first time and discovered new possibilities for themselves as political activists. Particularly for moderate students, the 1969 strike provided a political baptism. Twenty years later, many women who had participated in the strike looked back to it as a defining moment of their lives; Marjorie Starkman called the strike the most important part of her education at Harvard-Radcliffe, commenting that the events of that spring "marked the beginning of my political awareness, and are therefore largely responsible for the person I am now."²⁸ Marcia Livingston noted, on the twentieth reunion of the strike, that political activity was "the best part" of her experience at Radcliffe; she called the Progressive Labor Party study groups and the SDS conferences, demonstrations, and protests the "classes" that really mattered to her, for they gave her "an understanding of world events and inspired me to act."²⁹ Thus, the radical student movement at Harvard-Radcliffe was an exciting and eye-opening environment for many young women. It provided women with important

political experience, knowledge, networks, connections, role models, and revolutionary ideology. In doing so, the New Left gave a hands-on course in social movements.

By providing opportunities not available to women elsewhere--to be social critics and to stand up to the power structure--radical student politics empowered many women. By espousing the goals of equality and participatory democracy, the New Left sought to provide a welcoming forum for women's activism. In the movement, these women discovered new found strength, self-respect, purpose, and ability to effect change.

Notes

- 1 The Radcliffe students who joined SDS were overwhelmingly white and upper class. As was true of the majority of Radcliffe students at the time, they generally came from cities in the eastern United States and had attended private schools.
2. The most comprehensive work on the 1969 Strike was written by four Harvard students who covered the events as reporters for the campus radio station. It provides valuable day-to-day accounts of the major events leading to the University Hall takeover, the police bust, and the subsequent strike. See Lawrence E. Eichel, et al., *The Harvard Strike* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). Several memoirs also document these events, including Steven Kelman, *Push Comes to Shove: The Escalation of Student Protest* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970); Richard Zorza, *The Right to Say We: The Adventures of a Young Englishman at Harvard and in the Youth Movement* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970); Roger Rosenblatt, *Coming Apart: A Memoir of the Harvard Wars of 1969* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997).
3. Guida West and Rhoda Lois Blumber, eds., *Women and Social Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.
4. Eichel, et al., *The Harvard Strike*, 30. "Harvard-Radcliffe SDS Chapter Registration," SDS Papers, 1958-70 (Microform Corporation of America).
5. While the exact sex ratios among SDS members are unavailable, the student group registration forms that SDS filed with the Radcliffe Government Association indicate that in both the 1964-65 and 1965-66 academic years one of the four leadership positions was held by a woman. "Harvard-Radcliffe SDS Student Group Registration," Radcliffe Government Association Records, 1962-67, Radcliffe College Archives [hereafter, RCA].

6. The smaller, more intimate environment of the women's college may have helped it escape student protest. Radcliffe president Mary Bunting took pride in her school's attention and responsiveness to student demands and the peaceful manner in which the administration and students settled most complaints. Because it offered student participation in administrative and judicial committees, Radcliffe may have provided better channels of communication with its students than did Harvard. One student leader praised Radcliffe for dealing with student activism positively and for attentively listening to student demands. In a 1968 Radcliffe newsletter, senior Deborah Batts commends the women students themselves for not "losing their heads," and called for a "quiet revolution as a continuing process which functions as a fundamental tool of progress." "A New President Speaks of the Quiet Revolution," *Radcliffe: News From the College* (Autumn 1968), 1. Another likely explanation for why students generally targeted Harvard, not Radcliffe, for their protests was Radcliffe's secondary status. The women's college was seen as an auxiliary, unconnected to the center of decision making by the Corporation and by Harvard's president, Nathan Pusey.
7. Marjorie Angell, quoted in "Anti-ROTC Demonstrators Collect Signatures for Ad," *Harvard Crimson*, Jan. 7, 1969, 1.
8. "Statement of Participants in the Faculty Meeting Demonstration to the Judicial Board of Radcliffe College," Dec. 17, 1968, Dean of Residence Office, Genevieve Austin Papers, RCA.

9. William R. Galeota, "300 Storm Pusey's House After Anti-ROTC Meeting," *Harvard Crimson*, April 9, 1969, 1. The article notes that approximately 450 students attended a meeting in Lowell Lecture Hall on April 8, where students argued over strategy and demands.

10. Eichel, et al., *The Harvard Strike*, 85-86.

11. Carl Offner, interview with author, Cambridge, Oct. 23, 1998.

12. E. J. Kahn, *Harvard Through Change and Through Storm* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), 21. The "Eight Demands" were the rallying cry of the student protesters. When SDS took over University Hall, they made only the first three demands, but the number later grew to the eight: 1) Abolition of ROTC; 2) Replace ROTC scholarships with the equivalent Harvard scholarships; 3) Restore scholarships to Paine Hall demonstrators; 4) Rent rises in University-owned apartments be rolled back to the level of January 1, 1968; 5) University Road apartments not be torn down to make way for the Kennedy complex; 6) One hundred and eighty-two black workers' homes in Roxbury not be torn down to make room for Harvard Medical School expansion; 7) No punishment of any kind for those who sat in at University Hall. No legal or academic action. 8) Establish a meaningful black studies program with curriculum and requirements for tenure to be determined by the Chairman of the Department and by the students. "A Reply to Pusey," SDS position paper, April 11, 1969, SDS General Folder, Harvard-Radcliffe Chapter, 1965-73, Harvard University Archives [hereafter, HUA].

13. Nicholas Gagarin, "Non-Politics on the Battlefield," *Harvard Crimson*, April 12, 1969, 3.

14. Scott W. Jacobs, "Who Are Those Kids in University Hall?" *Harvard Crimson Commencement Issue*, June 1970. This data comes from a *Crimson* survey of 118 undergraduates who were indicted. Of these 118, the majority lived in the eastern part of the country and had attended private school. Illustrating the class component of student protest, the survey found that only 24 percent of the Harvard students and 19 percent of the Radcliffe students held scholarships. The most popular majors among those arrested were English and Social Relations. Only one of the 118 students polled was black.
15. "Photographs of the Harvard Strike," Materials Related to Eichel, et al., *The Harvard Strike*, HUA.
16. Janet Riddell, "Fourth of Demonstrators Radcliffe, B.U., MIT Women," *Boston Globe*, April 11, 1969, 25.
17. Marianne DeKoven, correspondence with the author, Oct. 13, 1998.
18. Quoted in Rosenblatt, *Coming Apart*, 38.
- 19 Jody Adams, "Inside, With Arms Linked, the Kids Awaited the End," *Harvard Crimson*, April 12, 1969, 4.
20. Samuel Goldhaber, "Moderates Set Up Mass Meeting, Issue Statement on Police Action," *Harvard Crimson*, April 10, 1969, 1.
21. Kahn, *Harvard Through Change*, 27.
22. Naomi Schapiro, correspondence with author, Dec. 8, 1997.
23. "To All Sisters," *Old Mole Strike Special: The Sixth Day*, April 15, 1969; Naomi Schapiro, correspondence with author, Dec. 8, 1997; Deborah Hurst, interview with author, Oct. 11, 1998, Cambridge, Mass.; Marianne DeKoven, correspondence with author, Oct. 13, 1998; Henry Sommer, interview with author, Nov. 29, 1997, Philadelphia, Pa.

24. Quoted in Janet Riddell, "Fourth of Demonstrators Radcliffe, B.U., MIT Women."
25. "Minutes of Radcliffe Union of Students Meeting," April 11, 1969; "Minutes of the Meeting of the Radcliffe Union of Students Legislature," April 14, 1969, RUS President's File, Dean of Residence Office Records, RCA.
26. Eichel et al., *The Harvard Strike*, "Chronology of the Harvard Strike," *Boston Globe*, April 20, 1969, 17.
27. See, for example, Eichel, et al., *The Harvard Strike*, 346; Rosenblatt, *Coming Apart*, 215.
28. Marjorie Starkman, "Personal Statement," *The Twentieth Reunion of the Harvard-Radcliffe Strike*, 98; Susan Neiman Offner, "Personal Statement," *ibid.*, 88.
29. Marcia Livingston, "Personal Statement," *ibid.*, 79.