LINDA GORDON INTERVIEW
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
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Linda Gordon
Historian
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Interviewed by Katie Davison
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Gordon's background

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LINDA GORDON:

I'm a historian of the United States 20th Century. And I have looked particularly at a series of different social movements in the 20th Century. I am of the generation that what we call "second-wave feminism." Just pick me up and bore me along on a wave. I was actually trained to be a Russian historian and my dissertation was about the 16th century, so this was a very radical change. But that women's movement came along at just the right time for me, just when I was really ready for a change and getting sick of trying to do research in Russia.

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Writing the book "The Second Coming of the KKK"

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LINDA GORDON:

I am interested in social movements, and in the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan was far and away the largest social movement. It claimed to have somewhere between three and six million members. I don't believe those numbers, I think they always exaggerated. But, it was something I felt like I really had to come to terms with. I had never before written about anything right wing, or racist, or demagogic. It was a real change for me, but it was a very interesting one, and then books take a long time to do. So, when I started it, I didn't realize how relevant it would become to what's going on in the United States today.

Not all social movements are positive and progressive

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LINDA GORDON:

I too, had often associated social movements with progressive ideas. But, it did occur to me that this is a mistake, that we have to remember that there have been really destructive social movements. The Nazi Party in Germany was a social movement at the beginning. India today, we have these very intolerant Hindu movements attacking Muslims. So, I think it is important to understand that people can be revved up into a participatory movement that has very, very, very destructive politics.

The definition of social movement

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LINDA GORDON:

These sociologists go around about trying to define a social movement all the time. I don't really have any precise definition, partly because historians are the first to insist that history never repeats itself. Every social movement is different. But, I would say that a social movement is something that happens when large numbers of people try to affect social policy or political policy, but they do so not in the conventional electoral system. In other words, they go beyond trying to vote or trying to get other people to vote, to try to find other ways of putting pressure on people in power.

Every context, every era produces its own kind of social movements and leaders

01:03:16:18

LINDA GORDON:

Historians like to say history doesn't repeat itself, because we deal with evidence and the factual, and those things are always different. I deliberately ended my book about the Ku Klux Klan with a quote. Let me start that again. I deliberately ended my book about the Ku Klux Klan with a quote from a really extraordinary journalist of the 1920s and 30s, Dorothy Thompson. She became very well-known because she was one of the first people to see the death camps, the concentration camps. But she said something like this, 'If a

fascist is going to come to the United States, you can be sure that he will not campaign on a platform of fascism, he will campaign as an ultra-American.' That quote I really like, because it identifies that every context is going to produce its own kind of social movements and social movements leaders, good and bad.

How the Klu Klux Klan defined Americanism

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LINDA GORDON:

The Ku Klux Klan defined Americanism in a very, very simple way. It was a country whose citizens were native-born, white Protestants. And to support that claim that that's the definition of American, they of course put out a lot of false history claiming that the United States had always been a country exclusively of white Protestants. They couldn't say native-born because they knew that the early white settlers came from abroad. But that narrowing of what counts, and you can use various terms for it. The Ku Klux Klan sometimes said, "Real Americans." They sometimes said, "True Americans." They sometimes said, "Hundred percent Americans." They sometimes said, "Authentic Americans." You can put it a lot of different ways, but what they're trying to do is to exclude a lot of people who actually lived in this country at that time and say, "You really don't belong here. You cannot claim to be American."

Origin of the KKK

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LINDA GORDON:

The first Ku Klux Klan arose in the south and it arose immediately after the Civil War and it had very simple goal, defend white supremacy. Do not allow blacks to become citizens, to become economic successes, and so on. It was a much broader notion of American, you would think, because they just said, "white." But in fact, that isn't true and you can't define white so simply because there was already so much intermarriage. Or I should say, not intermarriage always, but actually forced sexual contact from white men with black women.

Tendency to label and blame "outsiders" in America

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LINDA GORDON:

I think in many situations, people have a tendency to want to blame outsiders for their problems. But I think a particular characteristic of the United States, which is kind of odd because we are a nation of immigrants, but never the less we had a long-term nativism movement. Which wanted both to shut the doors, but also had very Ku Klux Klan kind of ideas about who ought to come to America. The first Federal immigration restriction law that was passed in 1924 was something that put into law exactly the nativist Ku Klux Klan idea of who should be allowed to come, white protestants. Which to them meant

people from Northern Europe, the British, the Scandinavians, and so on. The movement against immigration intensified between the years of 1880 and up until World War II. But the problem there, what made them particularly upset, was that most of these immigrants were not white Protestants. They were Catholics from Southern Europe; they were Jews from Eastern Europe; they were Russian Orthodox or Greek Orthodox coming from further east; and actually, some Muslims coming from Syria, Lebanon, and so on. It was always a racially defined system. Anti-immigration sentiment has always been racially defined. It has always focused on certain groups of people who are not deemed to be the "right kind of Americans."

The second Klu Klux Klan

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LINDA GORDON:

The second Ku Klux Klan, which incidentally was not at all secret, it was an entirely public organization. They liked to hold big outdoor rallies and they liked to hold them particularly on July 4th, in which you had a combination of promotion of Klan and promotion of what they called, "Americanism." These things were very state-of-the-art, high-tech affairs. In one major one in Indiana, the Imperial Wizard as he was called, who was head of the Klan flew in on a small plane. They claim that somewhat like 50,000 people were at this gathering. Again, I think that's an exaggeration, but we had thousands of people and I bet the overwhelming majority of them had never seen an airplane, or certainly not seen an airplane in the air. Then, that wasn't

enough. They had a daredevil who, while the plane was in the air, did acrobatics on the wing of the plane. They had under the fuselage of the plane, lit by electric lights, a cross, which stood for the Protestantism of the Klan. It was also, and this is extremely important to their appeal, it was also a fun event. They had contests; they had races; they had prizes; they had enormous numbers of food; games for kids; they had baseball. They were trying to use this to draw in more and more members. In other words, it was a recruitment technique as well as what they called, "A celebration of Americanism."

What gave rise to the second KKK

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LINDA GORDON:

A number of important of historical events gave rise to the second Klan. One of them was this massive immigration, the majority of which were not white Protestants. Another was World War I. Even though the United States did not participate for long in that war, the war produced a real reaction afterwards in which there was an intensified suppression of descent. It was a period in which the so-called "Palmer Raids" were literally deporting people who had spoken out against the war or who had socialist ideas, whatever. While the second Klan did not have the same kind of anxiety about those things, it did I think, take from that experience that it was a good thing to suppression dissent—a good thing to suppress the wrong kind of people. Then another much more specific thing happened and that was the 1915 premiere of a very

famous film called "Birth of a Nation." It was not a talkie yet, it was a silent film. It is one of the most valiantly racist films that you could imagine because its main shock comes from a scene acted out, in which you in which hundreds of African Americans are running wild. They're portrayed as savages and they're portrayed as interest in only one thing, and that is attacking white women. Again, the second Klan did not adopt that in total because their focus was not on African Americans, and there were good reasons for that. They were not any less racist than the first Klan, but in the 1920s the number of black people who lived in the northern and western states was very small. For example, in Oregon, which happens to be my home state and was one of the biggest Klan states, the number of African Americans was virtually zero. Even the number of Jews who they went after was less than 1%. In Oregon, most of the people who lived there had never seen a black person, had never seen a Jew, and many of them had never seen a Catholic. Yet, they were able to rev up this intense fear and anger of the wrong kind of people.

How the KKK spread their message

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LINDA GORDON:

The Ku Klux Klan was actually a movement operating state-of-the-art, technological developments. It's true that their main form of communication was newspaper. They had 150 different print publications. But they also owned two radio stations and radio stations… The Ku Klux Klan owned two radio stations and radio was a new technology. In fact, the 1920s is the

period of the most rapid change in the number of people who had radios. I think that on the whole, the Klan loved new technology. On the other hand, what they didn't like was science, basic science. For example, they were apoplectic about evolutionary theory. That is partly that they were not so much that they were just against science, but against scientists. Because scientist to them represented secular, urban, professional, liberal or even left-wing people, and that was the enemy.

The KKK as a populist movement

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LINDA GORDON:

I'm one of many historians that doesn't like the way your word populism is being used today. That is because it represents lack of knowledge of the original capital P, Populist Party of the 1890s. That was a political party, it ran its members for offices. It was a very progressive party. It was in favor of trade unions. It was in favor of the eight-hour day. It was in favor of protecting small farmers. The problem we have is that term has migrated, the term populism. It is now used, as I see it and I look for it carefully, the word populism is now strictly pejorative, and it refers to specifically, demagoguery and bigotry. It refers to movements or people who try to wretch up that kind of anger against people that they see as unlike them, and also using a certain kind of rabble-rousing rhetoric, as opposed to talking concretely about policies. This kind of populism, of which the Ku Klux Klan was a perfect example, would never have been called populism at the time because in the

1920s populism meant the Populist Party, which was on the left, not on the right. But I think there is another characteristic of populism that we need to register. That is that bigotry is almost always directed at people less advantaged than they are, it is never directed at the top. This attack on immigrants, this attack on Jews and Catholics who were disproportionally poor in the 1920s because they were new immigrants. I think that is fundamental to the new sense of what populism is.

How the second KKK connected bigotry with morality

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LINDA GORDON:

Klux Klan virtually wedded bigotry to its sense of morality. The problem was, its morality came from a very, very strictly Evangelical Protestant sense of what was ethical and what was immoral. For example, their case against Jews and Catholics was fueled with accusations of immorality. For example, they alleged that Jewish power in Hollywood, we know that early Hollywood had a lot of Jewish money in it. But the Klan alleged that it was not profit seeking that made Jews of into Hollywood, it was a deliberate plot to ruin the morality of American women by having women in scanty clothing in the movies, or even plots that registered something other than complete condemnation of anything that seemed sexual. What's interesting though, is that this issue of morality is almost exclusively about sex. There are other kinds of morality like political corruption or stealing, or violence. The Klan was not so concerned about that. I think it has to do with the very deep

connections, at least in that period, between racism and sexuality. Probably the Klan's worst sin, or what they thought of as the worst sin, was intermarriage or what was called then miscegenation. This is a period of time in which the majority of American states had laws that banned people of different races from marrying each other.

The way the second KKK promoted itself

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LINDA GORDON:

The Ku Klux Klan was a first in a very important way against social movements. To the best of my knowledge, it was the first social movement to hire a for-profit PR firm. That PR firm was responsible for much of the very immediate just exponential growth of the Klan because it operated a pyramid scheme. The scheme was recruitment by commission. If I can get you to join the Klan, you have to pay a $10.00 initiation fee and I get to keep 40% of that. That's a very, very high percentage. But then you can go out and recruit other people, and you get to keep 40% of their initiation fee. Let me point of that $10.00 in the 1920s was worth over $120.00 today. This is not an organization of poor people. Like all pyramid schemes, eventually you run out of more people to recruit. So the people at the bottom of the pyramid are sort of out their money. This particular PR firm was unbelievably greedy, because of that 60% of initiation fees that supposedly went to the Klan, they took 80%. This is partly the result of the fact that the first Imperial Wizard of the second Klan, a man called William Simmons, was probably the world's

worst businessperson. Didn't really have any idea about how to operate this and was taken in by this Atlanta PR firm. I think this is a very important event. A social movement using that kind of state-of-the-art understanding of how to promote itself.

How the KKK perceived the Women's Suffrage Movement

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LINDA GORDON:

The second Ku Klux Klan was born just when the women's suffrage amendment passed. My hunch is, that many Klanspeople would have been opposed to women's suffrage. And I said Klanspeople, not Klansmen. This Klan had a lot of women. At 1.5 million women and I'm sure a lot of those women were not supporters of women suffrage. That was very common. But once it passed, I think they immediately saw the advantages of it for them. Because from their point of view it multiplied the white vote, the white protestant vote. And since many people who were going to become American citizens were still relatively new, Jewish people, Catholic people, lower proportions of those people were registered voters. So, the Klan used it for all that it was worth. But it's also true that even Klanswomen, some of them were very progressive when it came to women's rights. This is something that's a contradiction in a lot of conservative movements. If you read their publications they would say, "Well, women belong at home. Women's role is to be mothers. Women's duty is to support their husbands in whatever they want to do." But in fact, as women saw opportunities for getting involved in

politics directly themselves, they saw that this was enjoyable and they liked the feeling that they could be influential. So by and large, the second Klan was convinced that the women's suffrage amendment aided its growth.

Similarities between America's current situation and the country in the 1920s

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LINDA GORDON:

There is an interesting saying about something I said before, people say "History doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes." Well, I do think there is a rhyme. There are a lot of similarities. First, the anti-immigrant sentiment. That is interesting because the proportional number of immigrants coming into the United States in that earlier period was three times as high as it is today, and that's including both legal and supposedly illegal immigration. The other aspect of this is the bigotry and the bigotry that generally speaking, aims downward. Now this is not exclusively true today, but you certainly see this kind of re-legitimation, saying very discriminatory things about people who aren't white, about people who don't speak English as their first language, about people who are not Protestants. Not so much Catholics, I think Catholics have now been assimilated into even right-wing Americanism. But anti-Semitism is definitely rising and ironically, we have a rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia at the same time. Some theorists would say that anti-Semitism is closer to racism than it is to a religious prejudice For example, the Klan believed that if you were Catholic, if you converted to Protestantism then you would be just fine; you would be a

great American. But a Jew could never become a good American because it's in the Jewish body, it's in the Jewish blood, and that sense even though Jews tend to be seen as white, the Klan didn't see them that way. I do think that some of the anti-Semitism that we see rising today coming from the right-wing has that kind of racist quality.

The meaning of "Make America Great Again"

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LINDA GORDON:

The slogan "Make America Great Again," I believe it's actually a code and the code means, restore America to the people that deserve to be called Americans. Because it's a code, it's filled with subtly excluding messages. These people are not the people who will work to make America great again. It also has a more immediate political code, which is code for right-wing politics because it implies people who are liberals or on the left, are not as patriotic as people on the right. That is almost exactly a repeat of Ku Klux Klan ideas except that in the '20s they were confining it to Protestants.

The second KKK declined, but the ideas persisted

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LINDA GORDON:

The rapid decline of the Klan, which happened from the mid to the late 1920s, I wish I could say there had been a big grasp with social movement

opposing the Klan, but that was not the case. It declined from some of the scandals among its members, but particularly from its approach to getting money. Many members began to see the Klan as nothing but an excuse for demanding more and more money from us. There's the initiation fee, there's the dues, there's the cost of the robes, there's all the paraphernalia. Then they had this way that you could advance in your status and you had to pay each time. But I think we have to remember, especially if we want to think about today, that we don't want to focus on the Ku Klux Klan itself. We want to focus on groups that have what you may call "Klan-ish" ideas. We do know that quite a number of Klanspeople became supporters of the American Nazi movements in the 1930s. People forget this, these were small relatively, but there were many of them. They filled Madison Square Garden several times with major rallies of people with Swastikas there, and so on. You also see the Klan joining followers of for example, a very interesting radio personality by the name of Charles Coughlin. Charles Coughlin was a Detroit radio person, I think of him as the original shock-jock. He liked to get on the radio with that kind of rabble-rousing rhetoric. What's interesting is that he was a Catholic Priest. A lot of the Klan members, who in the 1920s had been denouncing Catholics became great followers of Coughlin because his bigotry attracted them, and they were happy to sacrifice their anti-Catholic ideas to follow along with the other idea. Especially when we're thinking about today, it's important not to say, "Well is the Ku Klux Klan a big threat today?" Today the Ku Klux Klan is a very small group among many, many white Nationalists groups. I think we need to think about what are the similarities in the ideas of these groups, rather than their particular names.

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Gordon's experience of never having a female university professor

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LINDA GORDON:

Something that's very different today is that when I was in college and in graduate school, I never had a woman instructor. But you know, I didn't notice it; I just took it for granted that this was a male world. Sometimes I even say in a certain way, I think you'll understand what I mean, that I didn't know I was a woman. It just wasn't an identity. I identified myself as a student, as a budding historian, and so on. So, when the women's movement began to raise issues that I had never thought about, it was like someone opened the blinds to a window that I had never looked through. Looking back at my career, I know that I was very discriminated against, but I didn't notice it at the time. I do want to say in retrospect though that interestingly enough education is one of the areas in which there was the least sexism. Because in most educational environments, if you got good grades, if you earned your grades you got them, even though you were a woman. So, I think for me, and lot of other people, it was the entry into the world of work, into the world of having a job when all this began to really began to hit me. Many people of my generation described the impact of that early women's movement as just almost explosive. It's like it suddenly opened your eyes to things you had never noticed.

How women were discriminated against

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LINDA GORDON:

One of the things that I find when I'm teaching students about the women's movement, or even just teaching an American history class, is that people do not understand how at the time I became an adult, there were a whole series of legal discrimination against women. Many women who were married could not get a checking account without their husband's approval. They certainly could not get a credit card without their husband's approval. If you were seen by a doctor and you had a serious condition, like say cancer, one of the standard approaches was that you don't say that to the patient herself, the woman. You tell her husband because she will just be too hysterical and won't be able to manage this. There are just… oh, advertisements for jobs, which in those days were in newspapers were divided between help-wanted male, and help-wanted female. You just did not apply for a job that was in the male category. And these are only the official legal things. There are so many subtler, social things. We've come to take some of those legal rights that women now have for granted without understanding the historical struggle that made them happen. They didn't just happen because people gradually thought, "Oh, women should be treated equally," they happened because a huge, powerful, big social movement.

Misconception of social change among the youth today

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LINDA GORDON:

I encounter often, the fact that many students when they're talking about a social change, see it as somehow inevitable, somehow a product of modernization. I'll give you one historical example that I happen to be working on now, that it the birth of the Social Security Act. Particularly the part of the Social Security Act that we call Social Security, which is old age pensions. Many people sort of assume that we got old age pensions because people were living longer, because there were different family arrangements, in which old did not go to live with their children as much. That is not the case. That happened because of the very, very large-scale movement. A very interesting movement because it is the first social movement, I think in the world, that was a movement of elderly people for their own interests. That movement, if it gets a sentence or two in an American History textbook, that's a lot.

The beginning of women's liberation

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LINDA GORDON:

Historians can never give you exact dates for the time that a social movement began. I have to go back to the Civil Rights Movement, because in the Civil Rights Movement, in fact in one of its earliest struggles, the Montgomery Bus

Boycott, in which for one year, just about every African American in Montgomery, Alabama refused to ride the buses because of the way they were required to sit in the back. But what people don't often realize, or are realizing more because of some new books, part of that was particularly about women. It had to do with anger at the sexist way that bus drivers would treat women, calling them bad names, and so on. Then you had within the civil rights movement very, very many women activists who were beginning to feel, "We are not being accepted as equals. Our voices are not being heard." The reason I mentioned the Civil Rights Movement is actually literal. The very earliest part of second-wave feminism, a very disproportionate number of women had worked in the Civil Rights Movement. Some of them had actually gone to the south to volunteer, others had participated in northern demonstrations. It's a complicated relationship, but I do think that one of the parts of it was Civil Rights Movement was winning, was demonstrating that social movements can achieve something, and also it helped women overcome a sense that maybe women don't really belong in public. That maybe women shouldn't participate in active demonstrations or try to speak up at a large meeting, or try to chair a meeting. It was helping people try to get over those sense of limitations. I think formally, the first organized appearances of second-wave feminism were in 1968. But I think the roots were easily a decade old.

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The waves of feminism in America

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LINDA GORDON:

When we talk about first wave feminism, actually historians have mainly used the name the women's rights movement. Even women's suffrage movement is not quite right because there were many rights that these women were campaigning for. Its official beginning was in 1848, it continued off and on through 1920 when women won the right to vote. But along the way, they had won many other rights such as, the right to a college education, such as, the right to become a doctor or a lawyer. What happened between 1920 and the 1960s was not that there was no feminism at all, these women didn't just disappear. But it is true, that as a social movement it was very much in a dance. It was not priority for a lot of people. That had to do a lot with the Second World War, which was obviously a much, much bigger issue. People then started to refer to what began in the 1960s as second-wave feminism. This is a problematic phrase because it implies there's a clear beginning and clear end. Then you have to talk about, "Well what's the third-wave? What's the fourth-wave?" And so on. On the other hand, I do think that it is a reasonable short-hand because there is a period from about 1968 to about 1980, when feminism was a mass movement. There was actually in the '70s at some point, one Gallup polls. I think it was Gallup, I'm not sure. There was a public opinion poll that found more than 50% of American women said they approved of feminism.

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It was really participatory and that's the important part of a social movement. It's not just people in particular organizations lobbying congress or drafting legislation, it's because of people on the ground. But it's also an enormous change in women's consciousness and raising their aspirations, so that women who would had previously thought, well, I'll work as a secretary, began to think, well actually, maybe I could go to law school—this kind of change happened. Now that movement tended to be very racially divided and that's a very important part of it. In fact, for a lot of people of color for a time, the word feminism was a code for white feminism. But that's only true if you look at the words. If you look at public opinion polls, not only in that period but right through, African American women come out when you ask them specific questions like, should women have equal pay? Should women be able to be leaders of unions? They are more feminist than white women. What you did have was really a bunch of simultaneous movements that were to some extent, ethnically and racially separated. There was black feminism. There was Latina feminism. There was Native American feminism. There was in the west coast particularly, Asian American feminism. I think to some extent that separateness has converged today.

Beginning of second-wave feminism

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LINDA GORDON:

In 1968, to the best of my knowledge, there was the first large scale, regional meeting of women interested in pushing a new feminism. Some of them were already a part of local organizations, particularly in Chicago. In Boston, where I was living soon after, there was no such organization. There were individual women who through networks heard about this meeting and went to it. I think this meeting was extremely important because it allowed these conversations among women who did not know each other, and who were in different places in their lives. They were mostly young, but they included both a lot of college students, but also a lot of women who already had children and were already married, and were heads of families and who had jobs. The different sets of grievances were being heard by each other and began to build a more overall sense that something is wrong with the treatment of women in our society.

Second-wave feminism organizing

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LINDA GORDON:

When you talk about actual organizations of second-wave feminism there were a few cities, notably Boston, San Francisco, Chicago that had fairly substantial citywide organizations. By contrast, in New York, there never was

such a thing. There were many, many small, little groups. It's also true that many have criticized that women's movement for not creating a large national organization. There was one, it was called NOW the Nation Organization for Women. But it was much more timid and much more narrow in its scope, and there was a big generational difference. Those women were usually some 20 years older than I was at that time. I actually am not sure that it was a mistake or a failure not to create a national organization. Because organizations have certain problems; they tend to set up rules and make decisions about you should focus on this or you should focus on that. And without one you had this let a thousand flowers bloom effect, where people spontaneously were creating activities that mirrored the needs of their own location, their own social position, their own race, their own religion.

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So, in some ways I think of this as almost a good thing that there was no central ruling organization. I think that second wave feminism, in part… I just think that the second wave feminism overdid the spontaneous de-centralized notion. I think there was a certain antipathy to people who became strong leaders and I think that came from the fact that many had experienced organizations in which rather egotistic, macho men kind of dominated leadership. And it created a certain suspicion of that. But I think it's also true that people went too far. There was a sense that some people had called leveling, in which you never wanted to allow particular people to arise and become a figurehead or a leader of an organization. For example, a lot of this grassroots feminism was hostile. I think to someone like Gloria Steinem, they

would say, "Who elected her? She, why does she get to speak for us?" I think that was wrong. I have enormous respect for her, and also you have to understand that she was coming out of a journalism background and that was a very, very valuable thing for the women's movement, but I do think that there were some losses because of this suspicion of leaders. I think that's changed, and as women got older they actually want a little more structure, a little more official organization. I can tell you one anecdote that was very clear about that, the large meetings of Bread and Roses, which was the organization I was a part of, would just go on and on and on. They, because everybody had to talk, there was no Robert's Rules of Order. I was someone, and I was a minority, but there were plenty of others like me, I had a job, I had to get up early the next morning. I had to prepare for teaching. I couldn't sit through a meeting that wasn't over by 10:30, went on until 11:00, 'til 12:00. That is an example of one of the limitations when you don't have a formal organization.

Consciousness raising during the second wave of feminism

01:42:25:05

LINDA GORDON:

Consciousness raising as a name and as a specific practice was a child of second rage... Second wave feminism. However, I suspect that without that name, in very similar ways, it was going on a long time before. Consciousness raising involved small groups of women discussing what they experienced as forms of prejudice or discrimination against women, and sharing those with

other people and then moving on to see how you could transcend that. This is another aspect of what made the women's movement so powerful. There were just thousands of groups happening all by themselves in various locations. Again, I can tell you a specific story from Boston. An early women's, an early consciousness raising group kept having people come and say, "Can we join your group? We want to join your group." And people understood that if the group got too big, it wouldn't be as valuable. So they put an ad in a weekly newspaper, it was called the Phoenix, it's kind of like what the Village Voice was in New York, that said, "If you're interested in forming a consciousness raising group, come to a meeting at such-and-such a place and we will help you do that." Well, a hundred people showed up, so then they put the ad in again and another hundred people showed up. It was, this is a bandwagon effect, but the idea that women talk to other women was organic. It is something that women have always done and it is, like it or not, it is a gender difference. Women have historically been much more intimate with other women than men have with other men. That may be changing, I hope it's changing. But what a consciousness-raising group did it is it took that old pattern of women, that you talked to each other and you tell them your troubles, and politicized it and turned it into a discussion of, "This is wrong. What can we do to change it?"

Issues discussed during consciousness raising groups

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LINDA GORDON:

Domestic violence is a good example of something that happened in consciousness raising groups. I've actually written about it historically, and I know that in the 19th century when, say, a young woman would complain to another one that her husband hit her, she might get the answer, "Well, men are just like that," or, "Maybe try to make his favorite dishes and he will be in a better mood." Again, there's a little bit of an assumption that this has to be accepted, that there's nothing we can do about it. Now, of course, if it was more extreme, the first wave feminism did manage to get, forced the courts to treat an attack on your wife as a real assault. But in second wave feminism, the attitude to that was immediately much more militant and assertive. "Would you like us to come with you and talk to your husband, and explain to him why that is not a good thing to do?"

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Now this is an extreme, being beaten up, but there were also small things. In a consciousness raising group, you would discover how many women thought they were too fat, and suddenly you would begin to say, 'Well, maybe there's something wrong with this feeling that I'm too fat. Maybe there's a beauty standard that is being promoted by advertising, by the culture that we don't have to accept.' In other words, it could deal with very, very small issues all the way to large ones. I am having a devil of a time because I am a single mother and I cannot find a daycare center that I can afford. Now, there

was no simple magic answer to that, but it certainly was something that you would then begin to share with other women who were in that situation. You might say that that consciousness change was more subtle, but I would also say it was more profound. It has to do with who you really think you are, how you feel about yourself, how you act in the world, and it made an enormous change. When I was teaching in, say, the 1990s, I could tell that there were lots of women in my classes who had feminist mothers. I could tell that there were guys in my class who had feminist mothers, and then it was their grandchildren, more recently. I'm not saying it was as strong as it was at the beginning, but it is something that for many women was a permanent change. A friend of mine and I used to joke that we would like to be in a consciousness lowering group, because consciousness raising meant you notice every piece of discrimination, and it got burdensome and worrisome, but.... That's a droll expression, but that is I think something that indicates that kind of change in consciousness, that you are noticing things that you would not have noticed before.

American history books do not thoroughly cover women's movements

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LINDA GORDON:

It's certainly true that women's movements are not well covered in textbooks and in typical history courses. It's not that I've gone and done surveys, but this is certainly my impression. And I think that in many textbooks you will find some information about both waves of feminism, but for example, it

would be much smaller than discussion of, say, what was done to Native Americans or the Civil Rights Movement. Now it may have to do with the fact that women, unlike people of color, if you just look at the category of women, many women are very, very privileged, especially if you're focusing particularly on white women, and it is certainly true that having a high class background can overcome a lot of the discriminations that you might feel as a woman. But I also think that it actually has to do with the status of women itself within the Academy. And here's the way I think about it. If you are a white historian who writes about African American history, that is a high-status thing to do. If you are a male historian who writes about women, that is a low status thing, because women continue to be low status. You can count on the fingers of your hands, the number of men who have written serious things about women. Now that changed a little bit with gay rights, because that movement brought a lot of men into a much greater sensitivity about gender issues, but it is still a major problem. If you look at the book reviews in a historical journal from the recent past and you just look at their topics, you can see that there's so much less scholarship about women than there about many, many other topics.

Gains made during second-wave feminism

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LINDA GORDON:

A lot of gains are about consciousness and they're hard to measure, but there are some gains that are definitely measurable. When I first joined second

wave of feminism, the average wage of a woman was 60% that of a man today, it's edged up to something like 80%, maybe a little higher. It's not perfect, but it's not nothing. Today, half of law students are women. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg entered Harvard Law School, she had to meet with the Dean who said to her, "Why should you be taking a place that can go to a man?" That kind of thing was completely common and accepted. I think however, though, when you talk about law school, for example, a lot of people get the impression that these games have only been for more privileged women and that is actually not the case. Working class women now earn wages that are higher by a lot, proportionally, than what they earned before. The problem is that there often been a lot of destructive things happening that aren't per se about women, but that affect women enormously. Such as, for example, the destruction of trade unions. Labor unions were among the major vehicles that women could use to insist on equal pay and their status, such as the reduction in social spending, which has made it much, much harder for women—especially anything to do with families affects women most. Women still do the overwhelmingly majority, overwhelmingly large part of caring for young children and…and even for caring for children all the way through adolescence.

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So, we have losses too. But I do think that one of the things that we see today that I find very encouraging is social movements that are really being led by women. I have been so pleased to see the Black Lives Matter movement really having, major league women in the leadership. You can see that in the climate change movement. These are just a few examples. So, I think we have

to think on both levels. We have to think about consciousness change and the internal psychological change of women, and specific, concrete policies. And of course, we have succeeded in abolishing, not all, but almost all of the actual legal discriminations against women. It took a long time, but it was done.

The Voting Rights Act and women's rights

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LINDA GORDON:

One of the interesting things about the campaign for women's suffrage was that many, many Southern African American women were ardent supporters and campaigned for it, even though they knew they would not be able to vote, because in the South, African Americans were systematically excluded from access to the vote. I think that says a lot. The fact that they did that, that they understood perhaps that even other women were probably going to be more progressive than men, and that is still true. All the opinion polls show that. The Voting Rights Act was hugely important and it too didn't just happen. It was a product of the Civil Rights Movement, and that's why because of its important, I find it... Excuse me, because of its importance, I find it absolutely terrifying that it is being in many ways repealed by removing the enforcement of equal access. I do think that in some ways though, well, let me, let me stop that and say that... I think that's all I would say about that.

The word "feminism" becoming a pejorative term

01:54:12:22

LINDA GORDON:

The word feminism has become a pejorative. I suspect that it happened at some point in the 1980s. I don't think, the only way you could measure that would be to do some kind of quantitative survey, say, of the New York Times and the contexts in which the word was being used. And I'm not sure that it's worth doing that, but I do want to say that I think the re-legitimation of the term is an important thing. I think terms do have weight and when feminism is an evil term, it makes people reluctant to associate with that. I have been interested to just notice a similar thing happening in the other direction about the word socialism. After the Russian Revolution and the, let me see... After the Russian revolution and the Stalinist period that was so incredibly dictatorial and repressive, not only communism, but socialism became a bad word. It is now being revived and it's interesting that one presidential candidate in 2016, Bernie Sanders, was partly responsible for that, but once it starts in a small group, it then spreads and now there've been polls that say quite significant numbers of Americans have generally positive feelings about socialism. So, words are important and I have always thought that it is important, even when it is seen as a bad word, to use the term feminism and to insist that it be associated with so many positive things, not just for women but for whole families—for everyone.

Men's rights groups and white nationalists

01:55:58:11

LINDA GORDON:

According, to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is the organization that really seems to have the best data on right-wing movements, they have found that many, many, many, a very high proportion of white nationalists are also misogynists in some ways. That is certainly true of many of the mass murderers that we have had. I think it is inevitable that you get these violent backlashes. There was a huge backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, that clashes against other kinds of movements. But I think what you get especially today is the…another form of bigotry. I mentioned that bigotry typically condemns the people who are less advantaged than you are. I see the men's rights movement in that way, because they are suggesting that they are being victimized by women. But if you look at the data, if you look at the actual evidence, we still are behind in salaries. We're still behind in positions, we're still behind in all kinds of measures of equality. I do think that there is a kind of social media viralness, even if it's not on the social media, that also comes with just a desire to be bigoted, to be angry, to be, in other words, if you can't find this target, you'll find another target. So that is the way in which I see them as connected to each other. I think there's a psychological unity among, among these points of view.

Getting women into public office

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LINDA GORDON:

The women's movement didn't have the same immediate electoral success that the Ku Klux Klan did, for example. Within its very short period, of the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan elected 11 governors and 45 Congress-people. This didn't happen that immediately with the women's movement. It's partly though, we have to keep in mind that voters may have many issues that they care about, and for example, there were many people who cared more about civil rights or more about the war in Vietnam than they did about women's rights. I think furthermore that the women's movement was never able to get women to focus so specifically on women's issues, that you could actually politically threaten a Congress-person who didn't vote the way you wanted him to do, effectively, and that is I think because there are multiple issues. I think what has changed, and has changed very recently, is the number of women who were actually running for office, and that has to be thought of as a very difficult thing because women have family responsibilities that men usually do not have. Women are raised with a certain difference, with a certain uncomfortableness about being in public. So it took a lot to get over that. Normally I don't think that whether you have women's bodies or men's bodies say in corporate boards is very important, but in a place like the U.S. Congress in place, like the state legislatures, the state or even city councils, I think it does matter very much and it took a long time for that to happen.

Finding hope in today's America

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LINDA GORDON:

I think two things are making me hopeful today. One is the large number of women candidates who not just were elected, but who ran for office, because that's where you have to start. I think that is a really important thing because there is, you might call it a bandwagon effect. If she can do it, maybe I could do it, too. Maybe it isn't completely impossible. The other thing I'm very hopeful about is women's presence in social movements, even if the social movements are not about women. I remember very vividly, just a personal anecdote in the very first demonstration, it was about women's problems, right after Trump was elected, it was the time when people invented the pussy hats, but what I was struck by was how many guys were at this demonstration. This was a demonstration organized by women focused on women's issues and yet there were plenty, plenty of guys. So I feel, actually, I've actually feel fairly optimistic, also, about men changing. You know when, and maybe I'm doing too many anecdotes for you. But anyway, when Trump said, "Oh, that's just sort of locker room talk, don't pay any attention to it." I went around and I asked all these guys in my department, and they're not, they're mostly not young, "Did you ever hear thing like that in your locker room?" Nobody. Now maybe they were lying, but I don't think so. I think there's really a sense that speak speaking in a crude way about women isn't legitimate, and that reflects, then, what's underneath it is a sense that discriminating against women isn't legitimate. It won't be easy. It's not perfect. But I do think there's some very good signs.

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And in some ways, let me just say one more thing. When the figure came out that a majority of college educated women voted for Trump. I was, like many people, kind of shocked and... And then as I began to think about it, I developed a hypothesis about why that is. And I think it is that some women are more pessimistic than others about whether men can change. And in the circles I happen to move in, men have changed a lot. I'm completely optimistic about it. I never think that men aren't capable of change or that they're only going to see women as servants, but if you're in a different culture, you may not have that confidence. So, you may have to accept that. And it is in my sense, the modern version of the 19th century response to a woman who says her husband hit her, "That's just the way men are," this is what I think is the modern version of that.

Women in the Klu Klux Klan

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LINDA GORDON:

There is absolutely no reason to think that women are less racist than men. The polls don't show that, I don't think that. But an interesting thing happens to women in conservative movements. I don't know much about women in these conservative movements today. I'm a historian, I can only talk about the past, but in the Ku Klux Klan, you had a million and a half women joining these women's chapters, but before long they started asserting themselves against the male leadership of the Klan. One common thing was money. They

didn't want to have to send the dues up to the headquarters. They wanted to keep it for their own projects, and they really had power struggles about that. There was a pattern in which male leaders thought they had the right to appoint the women to be head of the women's chapters. And some of the chapters started saying, "This is not right. We are choosing." I think this often happens in conservative movements, that women may, as I mentioned before, they may say things like women belong in the home, but once they have a chance to be out in the public sphere... For one thing, it's fun. It's actually fun to participate in a social movement. I think of it as the hidden secret of social movements that people don't acknowledge, and I have to admit that for the Klan, there was fun. It was a kind of play-acting and all kinds of events and so on. It is, public action is inherently interesting and even conservative women will find that.

The importance of studying social movements

02:04:41:06

LINDA GORDON:

I think it's important to think about social movements because they are underestimated as forces of change. It's really that simple. Just about all of the really major progressive changes that have happened in this country happened as a result of very large-scale social movements. I think it's important that as people live in a democracy, we think about elections, we think about gerrymandering, we think about not suppressing people's right to vote, but we also have to think about the fact that politicians need

pressure from below, so to speak, to do the right thing. And it's nowhere more true than it is today because, and this is what's really different, is that basically running for office in staying in office is all about raising money. Talk to any congressperson, they will tell you that 90% of their time is spent raising money. That's a huge problem because the people who can give them money are not the people at the bottom, and so you have to remind them in other ways.

Fear as fuel for bigotry

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LINDA GORDON:

It is certainly true that very right-wing movements ride on fear, but what's interesting about fear is the way it can be constructed on the basis of no evidence. I mentioned before that the Ku Klux Klan was very strong in the state of Oregon, that didn't have any of the enemies that the Klan said we had to fear: immigrants, Catholics, Jews, et cetera. Similarly, we talked about the men's movement. They are exhibiting fear that somehow women are taking over. Well, it's obviously not the case, but you can develop that kind of notion, and the fear then can become anger and can in many cases become violence. It has to do with another more intellectual problem that I see as a scholar, which is that in any discussion about these kinds of things, it is often true that if you present overwhelming amount of evidence, someone will come up with an exception. Well, my aunt is this way, and she is not the way you just said. It's the way that a personal anecdote can trump, so to speak,

evidence, especially statistical evidence, and so you get this possibly true, but often sometimes invented repertoire of claims that are individual claims. It was particularly true about the Catholics, and how, all the awful things that were happening in nunneries, 'Well, this escaped nun told me that she did such-and-such...' That these things then become viral and they became viral even before there was social media. They just get repeated and repeated and repeated. Even though there's one instance that even if it were true would not be the general pattern. It's got to do with the way we're educated, I think, but it's also true, when I'm writing, I'm always thinking that an anecdote is going to have more power than simply giving some statistics.

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