Welcome to our silver anniversary issue. Join us as we celebrate our movement, the roads we've traveled, and the richness of women's lives. Join us as we celebrate the future of feminism.

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policy alternatives, as well as to our lack of political strength and our poor level of political organization.

What we need are enhanced relationships between local-level leaders and activists and a core of progressive activists working together to create new public policy and practice. What we need to do is broaden debate by distributing more widely the policy work already done by single-issue organizations and academic scholars. What we need is a progressive platform—a clear economic agenda linked to a cultural vision. In short, a common movement that makes visible the possibility of a democratic future. 

Urvashi Vaid is director of the Policy Institute, the think tank of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. (Text from edited extracts of Vaid's speech to the National Studies Association Convention; June 22, 1997)

Merit Badges for The Revolution

By Mari J. Matsuda

Late one night I visited the new Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial in Washington, D.C., with four other law professors of color. We critical race theorists read the memorial’s pledges to feed the hungry and rebuild a nation. We lamented the absence of a New Deal for our times. The monument expressed ideas we midnight visitors shared, but our admiration was coated with the irony that clings so mournfully to our point of view. Looking at the life-size figures of men in a breadline, one of us commented, “I guess no colored folks were poor during the Depression.” The image of American heartbreak circa 1930 is of able-bodied white men in the stance of degraded hunger.

White men still stand in breadlines, but the perceived face of our poverty is now black, and no president comes forward to speak of ending poverty with the sober resolve reserved for times of war. The war on poverty ended the day that the image of urban children of color replaced the image of ragged white children in Appalachia in the photogravure of American poverty. Theories of genetic and cultural predisposition to poverty overtook the notion of poverty as something unfortunate that happens to people, like flood and famine, that good citizens respond to with aid. Racism constructs today’s poverty as bad choices: “Those people just don’t want to work.” A version of racism directed against my own people shores up the belief that poverty is a choice. The model minority myth describes Asians who arrive here penniless, and uplift themselves through values of work, education, and family. Never mind that large numbers of Asian immigrants live in poverty, made worse by so-called welfare reform; and please don’t remind anyone that Asian Amer-ian mom-and-pops perch precariously atop the powder keg created by our abandonment of the urban poor.

The combination of lies about hardworking Asians and lazy blacks, the erosion of white poverty, and the women-blaming image of the welfare queen, has made poverty acceptable in this nation. When racism and patriarchy intersect in this way, look for heterosexism too.

“We think the people who are poor,” explains a white counselor to a black single mother, “are lazy and unworthy.” This is the point at which we need to fight. “Those single-parent homes are terrible. No male role model, no breadwinner, generations of children growing up poor.” Instead of mal-distribution of wealth, it is resistance to heterosexual coupling that causes poverty.

Given this ideological entanglement, it is clear to me that we can’t fight racism, homophobia, poverty, and patriarchy as separate battles. But many allies see otherwise: good leaders in the civil rights movement who don’t get why gay rights are central to our cause; heroic labor organizers who insist class is the main issue; activists in the Asian American community who say, “Push too hard on feminism and you’ll alienate our grass roots;” white feminists who feel picked on when they labor to organize an event only to field complaints that the music or the food or the complexion of the proceedings was too white. Working for social change brings us right up against the basic fact of American segregation: we don’t know much about each other across lines of race, class, and sexuality. We are clumsy, ignorant, and hurtful when we try to cross those lines.

Make yourself a merit badge if you were in one of those conflicts and stuck it out. Feminist work is coalition work, and...
love you, I admire you, you are my sisters, and I will stay in it with you until the day I die."

We didn't invent the divisions that explode in our faces every time we try to work together; they were handed to us and we will defeat them. This is the eve of our new progressive coalition. There are too many unhappy people. All they need is some good information to realize that their misery comes from living in a nation divided, where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the middle class finances the transaction. Their misery comes from patriarchy, which sets impossible standards for men and leaves scars on women's bodies. It comes from racism, which makes us ever fearful of difference. It comes from homophobia, stealing from us the selves we would discover if rigid roles in gender and sexuality faded away.

A progressive coalition can put this poison out of our lives forever.

Our coalition must have feminism at its core, and share that core with a utopian vision of economic equality, dignified work for all who are able, and a promise of care for all who cannot care for themselves. Our coalition must reject homophobia and acknowledge the history of American racism, defining a good world as one in which nonsubordinating differences in culture, language, sexuality, and style are treasured and nurtured. The key to building this coalition is the fun of it. It is simply more fun, as the young people who live by the antiracist, anthropomorphic creed have found, to roll around in difference. Learn about it, let go the fear of it, and feel giddy from that letting go. We would never watch the same TV program over and over, all day and all night. Why would we want to live in the same TV program, over and over, all day and all night? English only, Western culture, hetero heter allos, and the litany I grew up on as a voracious reader of supermarket magazines: buy-this-gotta-look-good-getta-guy. Losing that is called freedom.

All my sisters with their merit badges, pushing an antiracist, anthropophbic class-busting version of feminism and living to tell of it, are getting ready to bring the progressive coalition to full bloom.

Those lovely third weavers, with their clothes, their attitude, their music all so fresh and intriguing to me, will lead us. We are waiting, clusters of outsiders meeting at midnight to gaze at the monuments of American culture and whisper our truth: there is so much promise there, and so much evil.

FDR felt constrained to hide his disability; felt compelled to sign an executive order locking up my father's family along with virtually every other Japanese American living on the West Coast during World War II; and could not find a way to welcome Jewish refugees before the horror closed in. For some of us, those facts loom large when we visit the memorial. I behold FDR's gentle smile and wonder if his spirit longs to join us as we move to a place where able-bodied and disabled are one; where we shake off the curse of past hierarchies. He followed us part way there, for the true architects of the New Deal were the thousands of poor men and women who marched to Washington to erect a tent city on Roosevelt's doorstep. Black, white, yellow, brown, they demanded jobs, education, health care, and food for their children, and they refused to leave until they made history. That history reflects a compassionate, can-do sensibility that is alive and waiting for the next deal, the third wave, the great progressive coalition that you'll read about in pages of Ms. over the next 25 years. Someday we'll build a monument to our struggle, and old women will come to lay their badges down at its base. I'll see you there. 32

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