

The following is a paper I wrote on Riot Grrrl for my Social Movements and Social Change class last semester (Fall 2002), a Sociology class taught by Dr. David Croteau and sometimes offered at the university I attend, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. The paper had to discuss the three important parts of social movements: structural conditions and grievances, political opportunity, and mobilizing structure. The last part of the paper had to be our own analysis of the movement.

At the request of some of the people that I interviewed as research for this paper, I've made it available online, at least temporarily. This may be gone within a month or two, so read it while you can.

If you would like to use anything I have written, please give credit and contact me first. Likewise, if you have any questions, my e-mail address is [thatimpossiblesound@yahoo.com](mailto:thatimpossiblesound@yahoo.com).

By the way, I got a "B+" on this paper.  
Thanks to everyone who did the interviews.

-Sarah (Maitland)  
March 3rd , 2003

## **Riot Grrrl**

Riot Grrrl was a young feminist movement mainly within the punk rock and alternative music scenes beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C. Due to the media scrutiny in the mid-1990s and other factors within the actual movement, Riot Grrrl stalled. It still exists today, but on a much smaller scale, and chapters that are started now, if they ever even get off the ground, usually disband within a year, if not less.

### **Structural conditions/grievances**

Since Riot Grrrl was primarily a movement within punk rock or alternative music culture, Riot Grrrl wanted to encourage more girls to become involved in punk rock or D.I.Y. by forming bands, producing zines, booking or setting up shows, becoming DJ's, starting record labels, and organizing protests. And while each chapter focused on different issues, in scope, Riot Grrrl focused on rape, domestic violence, self-defense, street harassment, racism, classism, homophobia, AIDS activism, fat oppression, sex workers rights, and ableism (Emplive). Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards wrote in their book Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, "They were righteous and intent on challenging all forms of oppression: hatred of punks and kids who looked different, classism, the marginalization of sex workers, as well as sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia" (Baumgardner and Richards 91).

### **Political opportunity**

Events such as the 1989 and 1992 demonstrations in D.C. in support of reproductive freedom, the Gulf War, Anita Hill testifying against Clarence Thomas, and the general rise of the Right-wing in the U.S. are a few of the national or world events that influenced the Riot Grrrl movement. However, the movement was directly influenced by the Mount Pleasant Riots in D.C. (riots began

after a racial shooting), and the 1991 *Newsweek Magazine* claim that “feminism is dead” (Baumgardner and Richards, Emplive).

‘Once upon a time...’ last spring (’91), Molly and Allison (Girl Germs, Bratmobile) went to Washington, DC, shook things up and got shook up, and connected with radsoulsister Jen Smith who wanted to start this girl network and fanzine called Girl Riot. (This was also inspired by the Cinco de Mayo riots occurring in her neighborhood at the time.) So that summer a bunch of us Olympia kids (Bratmobile and Bikini Kill) lived in D.C. to make something happen with our friends there. Tobi (Bikini Kill, Jigsaw) had been talking about doing weekly zines in the spirit of angry grrrl zine-scene, and then on restless night, Molly made this little fanzine stating events in the girl lives of the Oly-D.C. scene connection – and Riot Grrrl was born. Kathleen (Bikini Kill) took it a step further in that she wanted to have weekly D.C. grrrl meetings too, to connect with and see what’s up with the grrrls in D.C. With a lot of effort and organizing on the part of Kathleen and other D.C. and Oly grrrls, weekly Riot Grrrl meetings started happening at the Positive Force house. It was great, like 20 girls came and we talked about female scene input (or lack of it) and how we could support each other, etc. (Bikini Kill #2).

Riot Grrrl chapters tended to work with other feminist and queer-centered organizations along with some other activist groups, like N.O.W., ACT-UP, H.I.P.S. (Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive – which early Riot Grrrl D.C. chapters worked with), Positive Force, and Food Not Bombs. There were really no known opponents to the movement, although it suffered from the same stereotypes and bad impressions that most feminist movements suffer from, and perhaps a lack of outreach to older feminists and Second Wave feminist organizations, which just did not seem to understand what Riot Grrrls were trying to do.

### **Mobilizing Structure**

Riot Grrrl had the intention of being a non-hierarchical movement where there was no one leader and where no one member or members were any important than other members. There was no

set criterion for membership, but it was obviously directed towards young women involved in punk rock. There is an indeterminable amount of members then, and currently, but members were usually young white women in their teens and twenties, mostly upper-and-middle class, although Riot Grrrl claimed to be open to all ages, races, and classes. Whether or not to allow boys at meetings was something that was determined by each chapter, and sometimes it depended on what issues were being discussed. Some chapters only allowed boys at meetings once a month, for example. Over the past decade, Riot Grrrl has become international, with chapters in Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom, and South America. Apparently, the European and U.K. chapters are a bit more diverse as far as having a variety of members from different races and social classes. A Richmond chapter has not existed in at least 4 years, although there have been a couple attempts within the past 3 years to start a new one, neither of which was successful. But there have been two feminist organizations over this past year that have been influenced by Riot Grrrl. The Richmond Radical Art Girls, a feminist art collective, unofficially disbanded in the winter or summer of 2002. WATTS (Women Advocates to Terminate Sexism) began in February 2002 and is still around. Since Riot Grrrl is not an “official” organization, there is no staff, no office space, and the volunteers are the members. Members can put as much or as little time as they want into the chapter and its activities. Money is fundraised – usually through punk rock shows, bake sales, yard and garage sales, and the sales of zines and other items. Its tactics are primarily of the grassroots, direct action and consciousness-raising variety. In the book Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism, Melissa Klein writes:

Early Riot Grrrl ideology was much like the “safe space” women-only feminism that characterized the second wave. Riot Grrrl often used second wave activist techniques but applied them to third wave forms. The “safe space” Riot Grrrl created was more often the mosh pit than the consciousness raising group, but lyrically the music often functions as a form of CR. And whereas some second wave feminists fought for equal access to the workplace, some third wave feminists fought for equal access to the punk stage (Heywood and Drake 215).

## **Framing Processes**

Riot Grrrl communicates its issues mainly by consciousness-raising through songs and zines, and also through workshops when Riot Grrrl Conventions were held. It was and is not a group that goes out and tries to change policies, nor one to really provide solutions either. Its main purpose was to make young women aware of feminism and queer issues, to politicize them, revolutionizing people one person at a time. Their collective identity seems to be based on the dismantling of sexism and the patriarchy, the personal being political, and of course, punk rock. Riot Grrrl is primarily culture based, and its music overshadows the politics greatly, to the point where they are inseparable. Bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Huggy Bear, and Heavens to Betsy were out to basically prove that one did not have to be a technical wizard to play instruments, and to encourage women to form bands. "Bikini Kill are activists, not musicians," is a line in their song "Thurston Hearts the Who." Slogans for the movement include "Revolution Grrrl Style Now!", "Girl Power!" (pre-dating the Spice Girls' similar rally cry by 5 years), "Dorky=Cool" (based on the premise that to be male or a male musician automatically made one cool, and that women shouldn't have to adopt an unemotional, stereotypical male stance to be cool), "Stop the J-Word Jealousy from Killing Girl Love" and "Grrrl Love Equals Good Love", (both slogans are meant to combat jealousy and competition between girls, either internal or external), and "Girl Love Does Not Mean Man Hate."

## **Analysis**

While Riot Grrrl was influential in punk rock and alternative music circles, it is a somewhat poor social movement organization. On the one hand, it is responsible for politicizing perhaps thousands of young women over the past 12 years, but on the other hand, it has failed to make any great social changes outside of the music spectrum, i.e., allowing women musicians and bands become more accepted. When Riot Grrrl is written about, even in books that aren't strictly about alternative or punk music, the focus is always on the music and the bands, with the politics taking the backseat, which may or may not be the media's fault in part. All the supposed "leaders"

and icons of the movement are and were musicians. Even today, those same people are looked up to, and their words from 10-12 years ago are treated as scripture. There hasn't been a flood of people writing new manifestos or attempts to improve on those ideas the founders of Riot Grrrl had a decade ago, despite there being factions of former Riot Grrrls who criticize the movement.

The American media first got a hold of Riot Grrrl in the summer of 1991, when *Sassy* magazine published a respectful story about the movement. *Sassy* was much more liberal and feminist than other magazines for teenage girls at the time. *Sassy* was clued in by Erin Smith of Bratmobile, who worked as an intern at the magazine that summer. It was around the same time that Nirvana put out their second album, *Nevermind*. Nirvana, as well as the success of fellow Seattle bands Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice in Chains caused a media frenzy centered on the Northwest. Eventually, Riot Grrrl bands were soon hyped up as "the next big thing" in the region. Some members of the movement were reluctant to speak to the media, while others saw it as a chance to reach out and expose the movement to girls who may not find out about it otherwise. This soon caused a rift within the movement, and a "media blackout" was called for by some of the more prominent members in 1992 (Emplive). The Riot Grrrl chapters in D.C. and other areas quit having meetings and shut down operation for awhile as a part of the blackout. But this did not stop the media from writing about the movement – while it tended to water down or ignore the politics of it, they did write about the music and the so-called "fashion". Ciara Xyerra, writer of the zine *A Renegade's Handbook to Love & Sabotage* said in response to the question of how much the media blitz had a hand in Riot Grrrl's decline, and other factors that influenced the decline:

The media blitz was a big problem. It brought a lot of people into Riot Grrrl, including a lot of people that didn't really understand what non-hierarchical meant, or what Riot Grrrl was trying to achieve. I think the media also helped to create a few "stars" out of the women that were heavily involved, which only helped splinter the Riot Grrrl movement apart and drive people away. The fact that Riot Grrrl was essentially a subculture masquerading as a revolutionary movement also contributed to its decline. There was very little real space within Riot Grrrl for women who were of color, poor, differently-abled,

Trans, or not involved with alternative or punk scenes. But by proclaiming “revolution grrrl style now,” many women were led to believe that there would be space for them within Riot Grrrl, and were bitterly disappointed to learn the truth (Xyerra 5).

While more current chapters seem to want to attract girls and people who are not specifically punk rock, they also do not go out of their way to do so. Or if a chapter is diverse in some manner, identity politics are not discussed. Anna Whitehead, of the zine *With Heart in Mouth*, took part in the most recent Riot Grrrl D.C. chapter from 2001-2002:

I see no recognition of race, even from a chapter that was half minorities. Class issues are completely glossed over, or romanticized. Ability is ignored; gender politics are ignored, etc etc. It is easier to say that has not been ignored is: white, middle class, heteronormative politics of girls trying to gain visibility inside a BOYS' world (as opposed to creating a world of their own) (Whitehead 6).

This seems to be the case more so in America than in the United Kingdom or Europe, where, as mentioned, the chapters have been more diverse in races and social classes. Even at the height of activity in the early 1990s, Riot Grrrl tended to alienated women and people who were not in their teens and early twenties, or not white, or not upper or middle class, even if those people were also involved in punk rock and D.I.Y. activities. “A lot of riot grrrl stuff was directed at upper – or middle-class white girls, and I had to think about it a lot, because I’m very, very lower class. I didn’t have a college education...and a lot of the people who started riot grrrl were very articulate and could write in this way that I didn’t understand,” says Olympia, Washington musician Sue P. Fox (Emplive).

The sole purpose of feminist consciousness-raising and communication with other young women seems to bode well for Riot Grrrl, but if any collective action is done, it is usually done through fundraising benefits, workshops, or working with other, more established organizations and the events they hold (for example, N.O.W. or Take Back the Night). Most chapters currently seem to focus on doing projects such as zines, putting on shows, and sometimes workshops. Most do not

organize protests, boycotts, or even letter-writing campaigns, with the exception being Riot Grrrl New York City, which is the only recent American Riot Grrrl chapter that has lasted more than a year. It has been around since 1999. Since there have not been any Riot Grrrl Conventions since the late 1990s (although Ladyfest, a festival that was inspired by the old conventions are sometimes held in individual cities and organized by inhabitants of those cities alone), there has been no definite way to communicate with other chapters or members except through the internet. The use of the internet in Riot Grrrl has its advantages and disadvantages. For one thing, it is easier to spread the word about Riot Grrrl and other groups, protests, and actions. The internet makes it easier to find other girls with the same interests in your area, especially if you live in small towns or cities and feel as if you are the lone feminist. And if one wanted to discuss a matter such as being a rape or incest survivor, it is easier to do it with some anonymity via the internet. But the internet's use in Riot Grrrl seems to breed laziness in a way – while ideas and actions can be discussed outside of meetings during the week via e-mail or a message board or mailing list, sometimes those said ideas and actions are never fully realized since no one is willing to put the work into them. Anna Whitehead said,

RIOT GRRRL IS VERY INTERNET. If I take the stance that riot grrrl should exist (because I often fluctuate on this position), then I would say that it needs to get its ass out into the streets (and I don't just mean like wheatpasting or whatever)...In the chapter I was apart of, there was a pervasive laziness that really took hold; no one took their ideas from off the internet and put them into practice. It was just too much "work." Obviously, this approach leads to nothing getting done (Whitehead 4).

Does Riot Grrrl have a chance of making a significant impact? At this time, I believe that Riot Grrrl making an impact outside of the alternative or punk music spectrum is slim-to-none. I believe any chance of it being studied in the future will depend on the young women it has introduced to politics and feminism, and any individual or future group efforts those women take part in that are even semi-successful and effect social change. It's only influence is what people have learned from their experiences in Riot Grrrl and what they have taken from Riot Grrrl's shortcomings, and

taking that on into their next activist endeavors. I think the only way this movement could make an impact is if it actually makes an attempt to evolve from what it was 10 years ago by writing new manifestos, or making serious attempts to branch out and attract women who are not entrenched in punk culture and not making fun of those who are different and come to them first. And if not that, at least becoming more organized and attempting to understand the concept of non-hierarchy. Robin Jacks, one of the founders of the annual Southern Girls Convention says,

I think autonomous groups can work as long as they have some structure. For example, with Women's Action Coalition, we would take turns facilitating meetings and we would take on whatever responsibilities we as individuals could. We only sponsored events or took on big projects if there was a majority. If someone in the group had a big enough problem with it that they wouldn't want to take it on, we wouldn't do it. That policy has worked out fine for almost ten years now. In the context of riot grrrl however, I don't think this has worked at all. I think most Riot Grrrl chapters are comprised of younger activists who don't have a lot of experience organizing, and I don't think people understand that within anarchistic group spaces you have to have some sort of structure just to make sure that things go down the way they're supposed to (Jacks 3).

I think that one of the reasons why the New York City chapter of Riot Grrrl has lasted 3 years is the way they organize their meetings. Their website states:

The first Saturday of the month, we have a "general meeting" where everybody brings projects, plans, ideas, activist opportunities, stories, zines, whatever. At this meeting, we set the agenda for the rest of the month, so every Saturday has a slightly different focus. Agendas range from planning meetings [benefit shows, guerilla activism] to first support/discussion groups [body image, sexual harassment] the atmosphere is always free-form, not over-structured. Meetings are girls-only (Riot Grrrl New York).

If more chapters could organize their meetings with a decent balance of structure and openness, they could probably achieve more goals and get more things done. And since I believe that the

internet can be used as a good communication tool, it should be used for chapters to compare notes and share ideas, because even if Riot Grrrl Conventions start being held again or Ladyfests are held all over the world, it does not mean that every single member or chapter can attend, or even set up a convention or Ladyfest. Networking is a good tool for everyone. And while I strongly believe that music, writing, and art are essential to movements, I do not think that that's what a whole movement should be based around. There does need to be an even amount of actual activist work involved, even if it is just volunteering for another organization that a chapter chooses to affiliate itself with. Going to a punk rock show and having an all-girl mosh pit is not going to change the world.

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