An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles

The following represents the thought of THE FEMINISTS as of the dates attached. Since that time the analysis of the group has undergone considerable change. Specifically, THE FEMINISTS has discarded the notion generally accepted by popular feminism that the sex-role system defines the oppression of women or that our enemy is the male role. The inadequacy of the sex-role theory of oppression becomes obvious when one considers its implication: that both men and women are oppressed by their respective sex-roles. Which is comparable to: both slaves and masters are oppressed by the slave system. By adopting this theory the women’s movement has managed to skirt the issue of power and its relationship to oppression. Our present theory, The Function-Activity Theory, relates oppression and power by defining oppression in terms of confinement to inherently powerless activities. An explanation of this interpretation as well as a criticism of the sex-role theory can be obtained from THE FEMINISTS, 120 Liberty Street, New York.

History

On October 17, 1968, New York City, a group of feminists decided to begin a new kind of feminist movement: radical feminism. Most of us had been crossing organizational lines during the past year in the attempt to formulate an adequate solution to the persecution of women. But it had finally become evident that what we were groping for was not the sum of current ideas on women, but

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an approach altogether new not only to feminism but to political theory as well.

We decided to operate under the transitional name of the day of our beginning, October 17th, until we were prepared to outline our analysis of the class condition of women and its implications and to present our program for the elimination of that class condition. We are now ready to present our analysis and plan and, therefore, announce the formation of our organization: THE FEMINISTS.

June 13, 1969

I. Conceptual Analysis

The class separation between men and women is a political division. It is in the interests of those individuals who assume the powerful role and against the interests of those assigned the powerless role. The role (or class) system must be destroyed.

The role system is neither necessary to nor in the interests of society. It distorts the humanity of the Oppressor and denies the humanity of the Oppressed. The members of the powerful class substitute the appropriation of others to extend the significance of their own existence as an alternative to individual self-creativity. The members of the powerless class are thereby prevented from individual self-creativity. The role system is an attempt to justify living for those who believe there is no possible justification for life in and of itself.

Women, or "females," were the first class to be separated out from humanity and thus denied their humanity. While men performed this expulsion, it is the male role or the role of the Oppressor that must be annihilated—not necessarily those individuals who presently claim the role. Men, as the only possible embodiment of the male role and as the first embodiment of the Oppressor role, are the enemies and the Oppressors of women. The female role is the product of the male role: it is the female's self-defense against the external coercions imposed by the male role. But because the female role is the internal adjustment of the female to the male role, the female role stabilizes the role system. Both the male role and the female role must be annihilated.

It is clear that, in addition to the role system, all those institutions which reinforce these humanly restrictive definitions must be elimi-
nated. But we are not sure yet how many forms in human culture are patterned on the role system. Certainly all those institutions which were designed on the assumption and for the reinforcement of the male and female role system such as the family (and its sub-institution, marriage), sex, and love must be destroyed. In order to annihilate these institutions, we must clearly understand the dynamics within them. Until we fully understand these dynamics, we cannot know everything that must be eliminated nor the desirable form of our alternative.

All political classes grew out of the male-female role system, were modeled on it, and are rationalized by it and its premises. Once a new class system is established on the basis of this initial one, the new class is then used to reinforce the male-female system. It is necessary for the members of all classes to understand and root out of our value system those principles and justifications for classifying any individual out of humanity.

The pathology of oppression can only be fully comprehended in its primary development: the male-female division. Because the male-female system is primary, the freedom of every oppressed individual depends upon the freeing of every individual from every aspect of the male-female system. The sex roles themselves must be destroyed. If any part of these role definitions is left, the disease of oppression remains and will reassert itself again in new, or the same old, variations throughout society.

In addition, we must propose a moral alternative for the self-justification of life to our present system of the appropriation and denial of other individuals’ humanity. We need a new premise for society: that the most basic right of every individual is to create the terms of its own definition.

July 15, 1969

II. Organizational Principles and Structure

THE FEMINISTS is a group of radical feminists committed to intense study of the persecution of women and direct action to eradicate this persecution.

The group is open only to women who accept our principles as recorded in these FEMINISTS papers. Membership must be a pri-
mary commitment and responsibility; no other activity may super-
sede work for the group.

THE FEMINISTS is an action group. The theoretical work we do is aimed directly at studying the means by which women are oppressed so that we may effectively plan positions and actions to fight our oppression. Outside study, participation in discussions, completion of individual assignments and attendance at actions are all equally important and compulsory.

In order to achieve the goal of freeing women, the group must maintain discipline. Any member who consistently disrupts or interferes with our discussions or activities may be expelled. A single action which goes against the will of the group, constitutes an exploitation of the group, or seriously endangers its work or survival, is grounds for expulsion. Expulsion of a member requires a two-thirds majority decision of all members present at a meeting about which notification has been sent to all members at least ten days in advance.

Since infiltration of the group is not unlikely, if a member suspects another of being an infiltrator, that member should confront her before a meeting of the group. When the act of infiltration is established to the satisfaction of the group, the agent(s) will be expelled immediately.

THE FEMINISTS is an organization without officers which divides work according to the principle of participation by lot. Our goal is a just society all of whose members are equal. Therefore, we aim to develop knowledge and skills in all members and prevent any one member or small group from hoarding information or abilities.

Traditionally official posts such as the chair of the meeting and the secretary are determined by lot and change with each meeting. The treasurer is chosen by lot to function for one month.

Assignments may be menial or beyond the experience of a member. To assign a member work she is not experienced in may involve an initial loss of efficiency but fosters equality and allows all members to acquire the skills necessary for revolutionary work. When a member draws a task beyond her experience she may call on the knowledge of other members, but her own input and development are of primary importance. The group has the responsibility to support a member’s efforts, as long as the group believes that
member to be working in good faith. A member has the duty to submit her work for the group—such as articles and speeches—to the group for correction and approval.

In order to make efficient use of all opportunities for writing and speaking, in order to develop members without experience in these areas, members who are experienced in them are urged to withdraw their names from a lot assigning those tasks. Also those members, experienced or inexperienced, who have once drawn a lot to write or speak must withdraw their names until all members have had a turn.

The system of the lot encourages growth by maximizing the sharing of tasks, but the responsibility for contributions rests ultimately with the individual. One’s growth develops in proportion to one’s contributions.

August 22, 1969

III. Membership Requirements and Benefits

One of the characteristics that distinguishes THE FEMINISTS from other feminist groups is its concern for the human development of each individual in the group. Three assumptions underlie this concern of THE FEMINISTS: (1) that women are deprived of their individuality as human beings, and therefore are entitled to expect from a feminist group every aid in achieving this human right, (2) that groups with leaders are hierarchical, and hierarchy necessarily suppresses the initiative of at least the majority of the membership, and (3) furthermore, as leaderless groups are dependent upon the strength of each member, an equal share in responsibility and creativity to oneself and to the group is necessary. With this concern in mind, the group has constructed the following mechanism for achieving the introduction and integration of new members to confident, creative, and responsible participation in the group.

There are three prerequisites for membership in THE FEMINISTS:

1. Basic agreement with THE FEMINISTS’ policy statements.
2. A minimal familiarity with the issues of feminism. It is necessary for each member to develop a working knowledge of the
concepts, the statistics, and the history of feminism, to feel at ease within and to contribute to the group.*

3. Two special orientation meetings concerning THE FEMINISTS.† All new members have questions about the history or ideology of a group that should be answered but that would not be profitable for the group as a whole to review. For this reason we have two meetings: (a) for a discussion of personal experiences and issues relevant to feminism; (b) for the clarification of our policy statements.

While THE FEMINISTS requires a certain preparation for membership, it is very interested in what a feminist group can offer its members, both as initiates and as members.‡ The self-development of each individual, relevant to the group, is considered in two of its aspects: self-perception and confidence. At least three concepts within the group were motivated by this concern for individual self-development:

1. Each member through the meetings should develop an awareness and constructive understanding of the particular ways in which feminist analyses are relevant to each member’s personality and circumstances.

2. Each member can expect the encouragement of, and should give that encouragement to, the other members to develop each member’s areas of special interest(s) relevant to feminism through some medium, e.g., writing, acting, design, radio.

3. Each member is guaranteed, and in return is responsible for, equal development on all levels by the lot system and is expected to participate in equal amounts, both as to tasks and hours, with all other members in all the activities of the group. The lot system adds dimension to the types of experience within each individual’s repertoire, and the individual thus gains a sense of self-sufficiency and group spirit.

* One method of quickly surveying this material might be to read such books as The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir; The Century of Struggle, Eleanor Flexner; the latest publications from the President’s Citizens’ Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1968.
† These meetings may be scheduled together.
‡ Each week, the two individuals who chaired the meeting that week will be available to answer new members’ questions outside of meeting time.
1. (a) Because THE FEMINISTS considers each member to have equal responsibility to the group in accordance with the best of that member's abilities at all given times, and
(b) Because consistent attendance at meetings is considered a minimal ability and responsibility of all members, and
(c) Because consistent attendance is essential for knowledgeable, i.e., responsible, voting,

ANY MEMBER MISSING MORE THAN ONE-QUARTER OF THE MEETINGS IN ANY GIVEN MONTH FORFEITS VOTING PRIVILEGES UNTIL THE THIRD CONSECUTIVE MEETING OF THAT INDIVIDUAL'S RENEWED ATTENDANCE.

SHOULD THIS OCCUR THREE TIMES IN A THREE MONTH PERIOD WITHOUT A VALID EXCUSE (E.G., EMPLOYMENT OR ILLNESS), THE PERSON INVOLVED IS NO LONGER A MEMBER OF THE FEMINISTS. SHE CAN REAPPLY FOR MEMBERSHIP IF SHE WISHES.

2. (a) Because THE FEMINISTS considers the institution of marriage inherently inequitable, both in its formal (legal) and informal (social) aspects, and
(b) Because we consider this institution a primary formalization of the persecution of women, and
(c) Because we consider the rejection of this institution both in theory and in practice a primary mark of the radical feminist,

WE HAVE A MEMBERSHIP QUOTA: THAT NO MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF OUR MEMBERSHIP CAN BE PARTICIPANTS IN EITHER A FORMAL (WITH LEGAL CONTRACT) OR INFORMAL (E.G., LIVING WITH A MAN) INSTANCE OF THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE.

August 8, 1969

IV. Programmatic Analysis

The political class of women consists of all those individuals assigned to the female role—all females. The male-female role system is political because the roles are defined by one group (men); men are the powerful class and women the powerless class; men exert their control by way of institutions—the tools of the male role—which, taken together, form the system which ossifies the female role. All male-female institutions stem from the male-female role
system and all are oppressive because (1) they are not only the expressions of this role system but perpetuate this system as well; (2) they are rigid and destroy individuality; (3) they divide (cause competition between) and isolate the oppressed.

In the female role women are defined by their child-bearing capacity which is interpreted as their function. The maternal instinct—desire to bear and raise children—is attributed to women. The concept “maternal instinct”—meaning passivity, unconditional giving, sacrificing, suffering—is used to define woman’s so-called “nature,” thus it creates the context for her exploitation by men.

We seek the self-development of every individual woman. To accomplish this we must eliminate the institutions built on the myth of maternal instinct which prevent her self-development, i.e., those institutions which enforce the female role.

We must destroy love (an institution by definition), which is generally recognized as approval and acceptance. Love promotes vulnerability, dependence, possessiveness, susceptibility to pain, and prevents the full development of woman’s human potential by directing all her energies outward in the interests of others. The family depends for its maintenance on the identification by the woman of her own desires and needs with the desires and needs of the others. Motherhood provides blind approval as a bribe in return for which the mother expects to live vicariously through the child. Between husband and wife love is a delusion in the female that she is both a giver and a receiver, i.e., she sacrifices to get approval from the male. Love is a self-defense developed by the female to prevent her from seeing her powerless situation; it arises from fear when contact with reality provides no alternative to powerlessness. It is protection from the violence of violations by other men. Heterosexual love is a delusion in yet another sense: it is a means of escape from the role system by way of approval from and identification with the man, who has defined himself as humanity (beyond role)—she desires to be him. The identification of each woman’s interests with those of a man prevents her from uniting with other women and seeing herself as a member of the class of women.

All contributions to society which do not add to the individual’s unique development must be shared equally, e.g., all “wifely” and “motherly” duties. Child-rearing to the extent to which it is necessary is the responsibility of all; children are part of society but they
should not be possessed by anyone. Extra-uterine means of reproduction should be developed because the elimination of pain is a humane goal. Marriage and the family must be eliminated.

Friendship between men and women, under the present conditions of inequality, is the pretense that equality and mutual respect exist. So long as the male role exists, men have the option of assuming it; therefore, the relationship is one of jeopardy to women. In actuality, friendship serves to reinforce the female role need for approval and support. True friendship between men and women necessarily presupposes the giving up of all male privileges and the active combatting on the part of the man of male supremacy. Only then can we extend to all a mode of appreciating and understanding each other as unique human beings. This mode must account for free choice, non-dependence, and non-appropriation of others.

We must destroy the institution of heterosexual sex which is a manifestation of the male-female role. Since physical pleasure can be achieved in both sexes by auto-erotic acts, sex as a social act is psychological in nature; at present its psychology is dominance-passivity. One of the ways the female is coerced into sexual relations with the male is by means of satisfying her supposed need to bear children. When reproduction had to be controlled, the myth of vaginal orgasm was created so that the female would remain sexually dependent on the male. The myth of vaginal orgasm stresses intercourse as a primary means of sexual gratification and this emphasis on the genital area and the vagina in particular reinforces the definition of the female as child-bearer even when contraceptives are used to avoid pregnancy.

It is in the interest of the male in the sexual act to emphasize the organ of reproduction in the female because it is the institution of motherhood, in which the mother serves the child, which forms the pattern (submission of her will to the other) for her relationship to the male.

If sexual relations were not programmed to support political ends—that is, male oppression of the female—then the way would be clear for individuals to enter into physical relations not defined by roles, nor involving exploitation. Physical relations (heterosexual and homosexual) would be an extension of communication between individuals and would not necessarily have a genital emphasis.

Rape is the simplest and most blatant form of the male wantonly
forcing his will on the female. Rape occurs whenever a woman un-
willingly submits to the sexual advances of a man. In courtship and
marriage, rape is legalized because sexual relations are part of the
marriage contract.

Prostitution was created by men as the terrifying alternative to
the institution of marriage. The other so-called “alternatives” de-
vised by men are modeled on the principles of prostitution—the
principles of debasement and deprivation. Thus, the essence of the
female (by male definition) is seen to be that of a sexual object,
and is the only means through which she can survive. No female is
permitted to maintain existence outside her sex-object/motherhood
definition. All work for women in the public area must involve only
attitudes and skills applicable to her home functions.

Political institutions such as religion, because they are based on
philosophies of hierarchical orders and reinforce male oppression
of females, must be destroyed.

The elimination of these institutions requires a program under-
stood in terms of stages. Each stage takes into account the interre-
lationship of all the institutions and therefore calls for simultaneous
attacks on all of them. The strategy requires that all avenues of
escape from our destruction of the male role and role system be
closed. The web of institutions which must be dealt with are: mar-
riage (and the family—child-bearing and child-rearing), the de-
struction of which requires the simultaneous destruction of prosti-
tution (and “free” love) and exclusively heterosexual sex; the
provision for a real alternative for the female (e.g., guaranteed
equal annual income); and a program of reparations (e.g., prefer-
ential education and employment).

August 15, 1969

V. Alliances with Other Groups

THE FEMINISTS will not form alliances with other groups ex-
cept on clearly feminist issues. In addition, the focus of the issues
must be consistent with our program. The degree of our involve-
ment (in terms of group time) will be in proportion to how essen-
tial it is to our program.

1. Support—If another group plans an action directly related to
a feminist issue, we may give our group support.
2. Cooperation—We will join with another group(s) to plan and execute a single short- or long-term action.
3. Coalition—In this instance we may join with another group(s) in a long-term multifaceted association.

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