Radical Feminism

edited by Anne Koedt • Ellen Levine • Anita Rapone

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.
A Woman's Place is in the Oven

by Sherry Sonnett Trumbo

Sherry Sonnett Trumbo is a writer who lives in California

One of the most valuable qualities of television is its ability to keep us in touch with the past. Tune in any time and there, in the form of countless old movies, the American past, unadorned and without comment, unwinds before our eyes. The movies of the past forty years provide a history of what this country was thinking, feeling, valuing, admiring, and condemning at any given time. The message may not be at all what was intended, since time has a way of distilling intentions until only actualities remain. But intended or not, the message is there and it is ours if we sit back and bear with the commercial interruptions.

The other night I watched a movie called “The Bachelor Party.” Made in the middle 1950s, it’s about a young married couple in New York. He works as a bookkeeper during the day and attends school four nights a week to qualify as a CPA. She discovers she’s pregnant and that means of course she’ll have to stop working (her job is so inconsequential that we never learn what it is), which is a blow both to the current finances and their future plans.

The wife, upset at first, quickly adjusts to the idea of parenthood and looks forward to it. The prospect of fatherhood, however, throws the husband into a crisis. Does he love his wife, does he want to be a CPA, is it all worth it?—“it all” meaning the emptiness, the boredom, the fatigue. In the course of a single night, he works it out with the help of assorted neurotics, including the stand-

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ard nympho ("Just say you love me!"). In the end, he returns to his own bed and board, reaffirmed in his love for his wife, his desire for the baby, and the rightness of the course of his life. Somehow, the film seems to inform us, he has come through, he has grown up, he has accepted responsibility.

Well, what can you expect? The movie was made in the Fifties, right? And things have changed: if the movie was made now, the young man would see it's all hype—empty, pointless—and he would split, searching out who knows what, but at least free and together. Progress, right? May I now draw your attention to the little woman?

In both the actual and hypothetical versions of this story, it is the woman who represents home, family, and duty. Whether this is seen as security hence good, or security hence stultifying, the woman's role and position have not actually changed. In spite of all the progress we are eager to tell ourselves has been made in the last few years, we can count on the depiction of woman's place to be pretty much the same. ("A woman's place is in the oven.")

Lately, we have had a rash of "tell it like it is" movies—all with men as the central characters. These movies are about men who try the System and leave, or men who from the beginning have nothing to do with the System, or System men who somewhere toward the last reel begin to see the light. (Whether they really tell it like it is remains a question worth asking.) These men are at odds with society in one way or another and the story of each movie is the coming to terms with that conflict. Above all, the important characteristic these men share is their awareness that something is very wrong with the society as it reveals itself to them; they sense that the fault does not lie entirely within themselves, that it also lies in a society which forces them into dehumanizing, dead-end, and even unnatural roles.

To men watching these movies, it is relatively unimportant what a particular hero's problems are or what particular answers he finds, if any. The important thing is that the male audience has a chance to see a man, some man, trying to work out solutions and pursuing alternatives. Characters like Bobby in "Five Easy Pieces" and the driver in "Two-Lane Blacktop" give their male audience a model and a starting point. Depending on the degree of response and identification, men who see these movies are at least made aware that other men in other places are trying other possibilities. This almost subconscious transmission of abstract ideas is where the real power of any art form lies.
But where is the movie about a woman going through the same processes? Where is the movie that shows us what alternatives and possibilities are open to us as women? A script for that movie is probably lying right now on some female writer’s desk—or more likely in her head, unwritten, because who would make it anyway?

For women, there are very few relevant models offered by movies or the rest of the culture that will help ease the fear and pain of liberation. Consider the movies just mentioned as useful to men. The girl in “Two-Lane Blacktop” screws her way around the country; if she didn’t, it isn’t likely the men in the movie would want her around for very long. At no time are we given a clue to who this girl is. She is not permitted to express a single desire, thought, or feeling. She is totally nonperson, without even the single emotion credited to the driver and the mechanic—love for the car, an inanimate object. In all fairness, it should be noted that no one in the movie is alive—it has a certain kind of austerity and super-coolness that is no more real in our time than college movies of the Thirties and Forties were in theirs.

In “Five Easy Pieces,” Rayette, the waitress, is a typical dumb broad, great for shaking up with but you wouldn’t want to introduce her to your family. She loves the lug even though he treats her mean. We’ve seen her many times before (Shirley MacLaine in “Some Came Running,” for instance) and she’s more than a bit dull. The second woman, the musician, is more interesting and for a while it looks as if she might have something original to say to us. On the surface, she is the new woman—active, purposeful, sure of herself. But, after all, she turns out to be what we know all women really are; turned on and conquered by brutality, she is a cold-hearted security seeker who denies our hero his one apparent chance of happiness.

Perhaps the most interesting female character in a recent movie is Olive, the wife in “Drive, He Said.” Sister to Catherine in “Jules and Jim,” she very clearly exemplifies the waste and confusion that make up the lives of most women. The fact that she must be described as the wife, while the men are the basketball player, the revolutionary, the professor, etc., is the sum of her problem. She is the victim of men’s attitudes toward her. Indulged, placated, protected, she is partially forced and partially allowed to remain in a virtual state of childishness—irresponsible, unpredictable, without direction or purpose. Expected to do nothing, allowed to do noth-
ing, she slips into boredom and apathy, the central emotions of her life.

This seeming contradiction is at the heart of the dilemma in which women often find themselves—prized yet ignored, prized as object, ignored as person. It is this that makes it extremely difficult for many women to perceive the prison in which they live and compels them to attribute their unhappiness to faults and neuroses within themselves. Suffering from that particular despair which comes from having nothing to do, unable to account for her condition or to see how she can change it, Olive can only alleviate it through temporary distractions—adultery and, finally, pregnancy. Of course she has contempt for the men around her; it is they who, through unconscious conspiracy, keep her there.

By this time we can all cite the discrimination and the prejudices with which we as women are confronted every day. But if we are to go beyond this awakening, we must deal with the ways in which this discrimination has damaged us. Above all, we must realize that it has left us without any structures, traditions, or guidelines to support us in the search for freedom. Perhaps the bravest, the most determined and the luckiest of us can make it on our own, but most of us, in order even to start on the road to liberation, need some sort of help. We need suggestions of possibilities. We need to know that we are not alone and that we are not peculiar. We need to know that others have tried, are trying, or want to try.

The fact is that almost nowhere in our culture and society are women exposed to this knowledge. Women’s Lib spokespersons, as presented by the media, are often the sort who alienate the average woman, locked in as she is by concern for male reaction and approbation—a concern only natural since in most cases she thinks her very existence depends on a man. Indeed, so many women are so afraid of the ideas of liberation that any direct approach is too threatening. Never taught to function as total, independent beings, these women don’t believe they can assume full and total responsibility for their own lives. For them, it is safer to remain in a familiar prison than to venture out into an unfamiliar freedom.

This is not cowardice. It is the understandable fear of, say, a woman, married, out of the labor market or perhaps never in it, totally dependent and totally defined by the man to whom she is married. How is she to deal with the challenges thrown at her by
young women who have turned away from the ideas and values which she has been told make her life worthwhile? How is she to face the possibility that most of her life has been, if not exactly wasted, then at least a lot duller and emptier than it needed to have been? What is she to think of the women who tell her this? And how is she to prefer them to the men who tell her that she is right not to respond to these women who challenge her?

For these reasons we must realize that while a direct battle cry mobilizes some, it alienates others. We must make certain that the message is sent out in all sorts of ways, directly and indirectly, gently and stridently, subtly and outrageously.

Unfortunately, it is the subtle, gentle, and indirect voice that is completely smothered by the culture at large. Because the ideas of Women’s Lib are so foreign and threatening to the people who control the dissemination of ideas in this society (men and some bamboozled women), and because they threaten very basic structures of the society, those ideas are rarely presented as a natural, completely integrated part of life. Rather, the process of liberation is always made to seem as if it requires special circumstances, special strength. We are made to think that any try at change and development will leave us isolated, irrevocably cut off from what has given us comfort and support in the past. No attempt is made to show how all of us can help each other, can support each other through shared experience with compassion and sympathy.

And yet it is this very idea of the necessity of shared experience and mutual aid that is at the heart of all aspects of Women’s Lib—from equal pay for equal work to lesbian liberation. Only through mutual support and concerned action will all women, no matter what their political and social preferences, gain the right and know they have the right to live their lives in the way they choose. No one claims that all women must live in a certain way, but every woman must be free to select from all possibilities. All options must be open to her; it is she, and not society, who will close some of them. Women as a group will find liberation only through unity, but what we make of that liberation depends on who we are as individuals.

In the past, we were told that if we were good, quiet and didn’t make any trouble, some of us would be allowed into the real world, the man’s world. We were told that if we wanted to be among those few, we had better play by the rules and make the required adjust-
ments. It was, for example, a woman who wrote "Five Easy Pieces," a fact which says a great deal about what women are forced to do in order to compete.

What we need now are women who speak, write, and act as women. There have always been women who have managed to "beat the system" and "make it in a man's world." But too often in the past, these women have jealously guarded their success and purposely disassociated themselves from other women. These are women whose identity and self-assurance comes precisely from viewing themselves as different from and better than other women. Tell them they think like a man and it is a compliment; tell them they are like a woman and it means weak and emotional. They would not wish to work for another woman, but are puzzled when they are not promoted or given jobs of real responsibility.

This must stop. Those of us who manage, despite all the odds, to achieve some influence and to speak where we can be heard, must learn to help each other. We must remember that we are only one of a larger group and that our strength as individuals is directly proportional to our strength as a group. We must learn to speak to each other, to make each other aware of our possibilities, capabilities, and alternatives. Our freedom will not be handed to us by society, but it will be taken when we as a group have the strength and force to demand it.

We must all do what we can, either by addressing ourselves directly to the issues of Women's Lib or by making sure that in all areas of our lives we don't bow to the demands and expectations of conventional male (and often female) thinking. No matter which road we follow, we all have two things to do: to liberate ourselves and to liberate each other. We can't do one without the other and we can't do either unless we do both.