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.
Woman and Her Mind:
The Story of Everyday Life

by Meredith Tax

This article is the first half of a longer article published by the New England Free Press, 791 Tremont St., Boston, Massachusetts, under the title Woman and Her Mind. The other two parts of the article deal with psychological aspects of consumerism, and of work as it is defined for women, including sex as work. Meredith Tax was a founding member of Bread and Roses, a socialist women's liberation organization in Boston, many of whose members contributed to the conception and writing of this article. She is now completing work on her book The Rising of the Women, a history of women in the labor movement from 1890 to 1920, to be published by McGraw-Hill.

In our society, where competitive individualism and the cash nexus are the dominant values, men are raised to see the world as a series of "challenges." They are taught to view everyone as a competitor for money, prestige, women, and the rest; and to be constantly on guard. American men are brought up, moreover, to see these challenges in sexual terms, as if each involved their "masculinity," and to meet each embryonic threat with the maximum aggressive response.

They are taught that to be masculine is to be physically and verbally aggressive, hyper-active sexually, authoritarian in manner, and capable of abstract thought. Being observant of the ordinary details of daily life is not considered part of being masculine. Men are taught to chart the stars in their courses, but not to notice when someone in the room has been crying. Or, if they are forced to

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notice, to regard it as a threat and act aggressively or condescendingly or helplessly. Sensitivity to other people's needs is considered, in our society, to be feminine. So is vulnerability to other people. The ideal American male, in terms of the dominant values of our society, is a competitive machine, competent, achieving, hard-driving, and soulless, with a sexual life, but no personal life. Fortunately, most men can't live up to this ideal; but the strain of trying is considerable.

Further, men are relatively unaware of their social environment because they don't have to be. It's not their job. They don't have to notice the comparative cost and beauty of various costumes. They don't have to be tuned in to the nuances of social behavior so that they can please those whom it is essential to please. They don't have to listen for footsteps behind them in the street at night (though they have to more than they used to). The passing scene presents no social opportunities to them which must be seized or forever lost. Men are taught to be active, to go and seek what they need; not to look pretty and wait for it to come into their vicinity. Men don't observe each passing cloud over human relations as if their whole future depended on it.

There's a reason for that: it doesn't. Women are hyper-aware of their surroundings. They have to be. Walk down a city street without being tuned in and you're in real danger; our society is one in which men rape, mug, and murder women whom they don't even know every day. You'd better keep track of what car is slowing down, and of who is walking up behind you.

You must be constantly on the watch for other reasons. Without this radar, how can you be sure of taking advantage of your opportunities? The role you have been given is a passive one; you can't go out and promote what you want, but must think fast and grab it as it flies past. You must be prepared to return the right kind of smile to passing Prince Charmings. And since your role also includes being a mediator between the men in your life and their acquaintances, you must also be perpetually on guard to smooth out a fight, be conciliatory or forgiving or cute, and keep unpleasant things from happening.

The self-consciousness and consciousness of others that is trained into women is necessary, but it is also extreme and oppressive. There's a lot to be said for being conscious of other people's behav-
ior and needs; and even the self-effacing emotional service-station aspect of many women's behavior is preferable to the unconsciousness bred into men. But the price is high. Since our awareness of others is considered our duty, our job, the price we pay when things go wrong is guilt, self-hatred. And things always go wrong. We respond with apologies; we continue to apologize long after the event is forgotten—and even if it had no causal relation to anything we did to begin with. If the rain spoils someone's picnic, we apologize. We apologize for taking up space in a room, for living. How willingly we would suffer to prevent someone else a moment's discomfort! This is one of the hardest habits to break. And it's a vicious circle—our self-hating desire to preserve men from the consciousness of the pain they are causing enables them to remain unaware that they are causing it, and thus to remain less human than they could be. If we could only break out of this circle, stop apologizing and effacing ourselves, and live less tortuously! But of course there are reasons why this doesn't happen easily. Men and women are brought up to be like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with pieces carved out of their selves so they can fit into one another in the neurotic dependence most of us call love. If you make yourself whole, where are you going to find a jigsaw puzzle to fit into?

But those pieces that have been taken out of our heads! The self-consciousness we are filled with! It is so painful, so physical. We are taught to feel that our only asset is our physical presence, that that is all other people notice about us. The most minute blemish on a total person—a pimple, excess weight, a funny nose, larger than average breasts—can ruin a day, or years, with the agonies of constant awareness of it. The whole world is looking only at that pimple! These agonies are adolescent and excessive, if considered from a detached viewpoint. It is precisely in adolescence that we become conscious of how immensely we are impinged on by the world, how easily it can destroy us, how much we must have on the ball to survive. It is as we grow older that we desensitize ourselves and block out these agonies of consciousness in order to function. But we pay the price of false consciousness.

We make ourselves viable by blocking out the everyday realization of how we have been emotionally deformed by our socialization, and how convenient this deformation is for men, employers, advertisers, and anyone else who wishes to use us. What damage
has been done to us as girls—what a sowing of self-doubt and self-hate that is never completely harvested, always springing up again. How we have been denied the opportunity to choose—a self, a man, a career, a life-style—until we become unable to make choices of the most trivial kind. Our inability to choose is part of American folklore: the woman in cartoons who sits dithering in a shoe store for hours, unable to decide between two pairs of pumps. When you have been told all of your life that the right pair of shoes, or the right hair-do, can determine your whole destiny, it is difficult to make such decisions casually, especially if the only sphere in which you have the scope to make decisions at all is this limited one.

To realize this is just to live with the everyday knowledge that one has lost an arm. But to block out this realization is to pay the price of false consciousness. It is to think that you are miserable because you have a pimple, rather than because you have been taught to think of yourself, and always been treated, as an object for sale, and your market value (thus your only value) has been temporarily impaired by the pimple.

We have to face the fact that pieces have been cut out of us to make us fit into this society. We have to try to imagine what we could have been if we hadn’t been taught from birth that we are stupid, unable to analyze anything, “intuitive,” passive, physically weak, hysterical, overemotional, dependent by nature, incapable of defending ourselves against any attack, fit only to be the housekeeper, sex object, and emotional service center for some man, or men, and children. And that only if we’re lucky—otherwise we must act out a commercial mockery of even these roles as someone’s secretary!

We didn’t get this way by heredity or by accident. We have been molded into these deformed postures, pushed into these service jobs, made to apologize for existing, taught to be unable to do anything requiring any strength at all, like opening doors or bottles. We have been told to be stupid, to be silly. We have had our mental and emotional feet bound for thousands of years. And the fact that some of the pieces that have been cut out of us are ones we can never replace or reconstruct—an ego, self-confidence, an ability to make choices—is the most difficult of all to deal with.

All of the women I know who have done things, jumped hurdles, and stepped even a pace outside of the charmed circle of the bour-
geois family, have had to face the damage that has been done to them, and struggle with the rules they have internalized. To some of us, this process has taken the form of a "nervous breakdown"; for others, a long period of sheer personal horror; to others, a more drawn-out process of repeatedly sinking under despair, and rising again. I think that for some of my generation, caught in the kind of double binds we have all been caught in, it is impossible to achieve revolutionary consciousness without some sort of confrontation with the self. Politically, this is both a weakness and a strength. It is an asset to come to political understanding through personal pain: it makes possible a gut understanding of how society works as a system dependent on the personal suffering and deprivation of each of us. Such understanding is a help in building a revolutionary movement. Only by realizing what we might have been, can we imagine how different women in a post-revolutionary society might be able to be. But knowing that we cannot achieve this ourselves, that no matter how we struggle we are still in some part of ourselves "damaged goods" (to use the appropriate capitalist terminology), that we can see what has gone wrong within ourselves, and still be unable to put it permanently right—this is very painful and discouraging. But it is necessary: it is this realization that makes it evident that there really are no individual solutions to woman's oppression, no way that one can float free of our society and its conditioning. The pain of it is what makes us search so urgently for new forms of social organization that can help us, and others, change and transcend our limitations. This pain is what makes us realize, in our everyday lives, that social change is absolutely necessary. As Lucy Stone put it almost a century ago:

"In education, in marriage, in everything, disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

The things that mess us up are so built into the structure of society that only the most radical of social changes—one far more radical in its attack on the basic institutions of this society that traps us, and far more drastic in the changes it effects on human consciousness, than previous revolutions—has a chance of doing the job, of freeing us and freeing those who will be born out of our lives.
Female Schizophrenia

A young woman is walking down a city street. She is excruciatingly aware of her appearance and of the reaction to it (imagined or real) of every person she meets. She walks through a group of construction workers who are eating lunch in a line along the pavement. Her stomach tightens with terror and revulsion; her face becomes contorted into a grimace of self-control and fake unawareness; her walk and carriage become stiff and dehumanized. No matter what they say to her, it will be unbearable. She knows that they will not physically assault her or hurt her. They will only do so metaphorically. What they will do is impinge on her. They will demand that her thoughts be focussed on them. They will use her body with their eyes. They will evaluate her market price. They will comment on her defects, or compare them to those of other passers-by. They will make her a participant in their fantasies without asking if she is willing. They will make her feel ridiculous, or grotesquely sexual, or hideously ugly. Above all, they will make her feel like a thing.

You can say what you like about class and race. Those differences are real. But in this everyday scenario, any man on earth, no matter what his color or class is, has the power to make any woman who is exposed to him hate herself and her body. Any man has this power as man, the dominant sex, to dehumanize woman, even to herself.

No woman can have an autonomous self unaffected by such encounters. Either she remains sensitive and vulnerable to this pain; or she shuts it out, by saying, "It's only my body they are talking about. It doesn't affect me. They know nothing about me." Whatever the process, the solution is a split between mind and body, between one self and another. One may hate the body and consider the mind the real "self." One may glorify the body, as a means of satisfying one's desires by becoming an instrument to satisfy the desires of others; in this case the body becomes a thing, and the mind a puppeteer to manipulate it.

Both of these solutions (and most of us get sucked into one or the other) can be called schizophrenic. R. D. Laing defines schizophrenia as a social process in The Politics of Experience:

... no schizophrenic has been studied whose disturbed patterns of communication has not been shown to be a reflection of, and reac-
tion to, the disturbed and disturbing pattern characterizing his or her family of origin. . . When one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems that without exception the experiences and behavior that gets labelled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation.

In *The Divided Self*, Laing describes the experience of schizophrenia, the contradictory kind of self-consciousness that extends to one's very existence, that is, who is literally not sure he exists:

1. Being aware of himself and knowing that other people are aware of him are a means of assuring himself that he exists, and also that they exist. . . The need to gain a conviction of his own aliveness and the realness of things is, therefore, the basic issue in his existence. His way of seeking to gain such conviction is by feeling himself to be an object in the real world; but, since his world is unreal, he must be an object in the world of someone else, for objects to other people seem to be real. . .

2. In a world full of danger, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger. Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others. The obvious defense against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another. (Penguin edition, pp. 108–109.)

Let us translate this into the terms of everyday life; go into the mind of a woman who is confined to her house, who goes out only to shop, to visit other women, or to chauffeur her kids, and whose only work, or function, is to take care of a man and some children. For her the contradiction will present itself this way:

"I am nothing when I am by myself. In myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world. Other people recognize him as real, and take him into account. He affects other people and events. He does things and changes things and they are different afterwards. I stay in my imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent, and that no-one cares about but myself. I do not change things. The work I do changes nothing; what I cook disappears, what I clean one day must be cleaned again the next. I seem to be involved in some sort of mysterious process rather than actions that have results.

"The only time that I think I might be real in myself is when I hear myself screaming or having hysterics. But it is at these times that I am in the most danger—of being told that I am wrong, or
that I’m really not like what I’m acting like, or that he hates me. If he stops loving me, I’m sunk; I won’t have any purpose in life, or be sure I exist any more. I must efface myself in order to avoid this, and not make any demands on him, or do anything that might offend him. I feel dead now, but if he stops loving me I am really dead, because I am nothing by myself. I have to be noticed to know I exist.

“But, if I efface myself, how can I be noticed?”

It is a basic contradiction.

Laing explores it further. His language is extreme, since he is describing extreme states; but they are only heightened versions of what most of us go through at some point in our lives, or every day.

As a death ray, consciousness has two main properties: its power to petrify (to turn to stone; to turn oneself or the other into things); and its power to penetrate. Thus, if it is in these terms that the gaze of others is experienced, there is a constant dread and resentment at being turned into someone else’s thing, of being penetrated by him, and a sense of being in someone else’s power and control. Freedom then consists in being inaccessible.

To turn people into stone is the ultimate way of objectifying them. To be able to penetrate them is to be able to see through them; the slang is an accurate description of that feeling: “I can see right through you” means “You don’t fool me; I see what you’re really like.”

We often experience these states as projections from our own minds onto someone else’s. It is that someone who turns us into stone, makes us objects, oxen sick-tongued and slow of motion. We are petrified with fear of someone else’s power; someone else can see through us, can see what we are really like under our fragile veneer of normality. The person who sees through us has power over us.

In the walking-down-the-street scenario, our heroine can experience verbal assault in four different ways:

1) She can turn the construction workers to stone: “Look at them—what a mechanical response—they are like puppets. I don’t have to listen to them. I can black them right out. I can petrify them with a look. How dare they speak to me!”

2) She can see right through them: “How ridiculous they are, to think they can attract me by behaving so obnoxiously. They are
pathetic and gross. Probably no one loves them. They can’t fool me. I know what they are really like, even if they’re trying to act big.” She may exchange a look with them, nod graciously, or ignore them.

3) Inversely, she can experience these states as projections onto the group of men:

i.) “Look at them staring at me! I’m petrified! What will they do? I can’t move fast enough to get away! My hands and feet are so cold. I feel as if I’m moving through ice water. I will turn into a block of ice if I don’t get away.”

ii.) “I feel as if I’m naked—so ashamed. They are laughing at me. They are pretending to think I’m pretty, just so they can make fun of me. They know what I’m really like, that this dress and makeup are just a fake to hide my ineptness, terror, and ugliness. I feel like I’m being broken into little bits.” She will walk miserably by like a dead thing.

These states of mind are heightened, metaphoric reflections of the real conditions of a woman’s life in our society. For a woman is either an object (turned to stone), belonging to some man and getting her money, status, friends, and very identity from her association with him—or else she is nowhere, disappeared, teetering on the edge of a void with no work to do and no felt identity at all.

From the earliest age a girl is deprived of a sense of herself (ego), the sense of having an identity separate from other people’s evaluations of her. She is also deprived of a sense of her own competence, of her ability to do and understand things. She is told she must be pretty and sweet; she must be loveable; she mustn’t make messes or play rough; she must perform services for Mommy and Daddy and be useful. How different this is from the way boys are socialized—they know they will be loved even if they make messes, stay out late without phoning, get dirty, and act like brats. That’s what boys are supposed to do: have strong, competitive egos. Whereas girls are taught to see themselves as objects rather than subjects (if only by being continually told what they look like, and how important it is to have other people like them). They are taught to be charming, yet passive. They are taught to fail at most activities, so as not to be threatening or “unfeminine.” They are taught to be of “service” to others, not to themselves, so that when they grow up they can be a wife and mother like their Mommy.

Women are stupefied, made stupid, by the roles they are pushed
into. Books on educational psychology always remark the junior high and high school years as ones in which the boys “catch up” to the girls, and begin to surpass them scholastically and on IQ tests. It’s no accident that these years are the ones of increased social pressure upon girls to take up their post-pubescent feminine roles and learn to live with them. It’s not that the boys are growing smarter; the girls are becoming stupefied! Their IQ’s—which, it is now recognized, are largely determined by social pressure and by the subject’s expectations and sense of his own worth—continue to decline.

But this training in stupidity starts long before puberty. It starts before the small girl has enough ego to resist it. A teacher’s training course at Boston University, that a friend of mine is taking, started with a snappy lecture on how children learn to read. The lecturer was a progressive educator; he believed in teaching people differently, according to the educational method most appropriate to them. “Little boys learn by taking things apart; they like to know how things work. The way to teach them to read is to show them an object, like a toy truck, and teach them the names of its different parts. They learn best through tactile and mechanical tools, so that’s how to teach them language. Little girls learn best by rote. They learn faster than boys for this reason. All you have to do is show them flashcards.” My friend was enraged: “But don’t you see that that’s how girls get this way,” she said; “that’s why we’re unable to think!” The teacher admitted that the question might ultimately be one of socialization rather than nature, but “After all, you have to teach them the way they learn best, no matter what the cause is. And it makes your job easier—they’re easier to teach.” Less demanding. And so the cycle is perpetuated.

This remorseless stifling of a girl’s intelligence and ego, this socialization into a life of service, this continued undermining of any possibility of independent achievement outside of the prescribed realm, all constitute a condition one could describe as female schizophrenia. Most women suffer from some form of it at some point in their lives. And most of them think of it as a “personal problem” rather than a social disease. That’s part of the way they’re trapped. For this condition is too widespread and too structurally based to be merely “personal” in origin. Our society could be described as one which drives women crazy.
Many women are so systematically deprived of an ego that they must constantly refer to a mirror, to their physical presence, to reassure themselves that they are actually there, still in one piece. Women’s lives are a series of small dramas in which they play shifting defensive roles. The necessity to do so is real, for they are under economic necessity, and often physical constraint as well, to faithfully play the parts of sister, daughter, wife, mother and lover. Many women see that these are a collection of roles, but the face behind the shifting masks is a mystery even to themselves. The only constant in their lives is misery and a never-ending unsureness of themselves. A woman must, in order to make it as a woman, reflect the desires and preconceptions of every man who has power over her. Otherwise she is out of a job, out of her parents’ house, out of a marriage, with no available slot left to fill. Women have to play at being themselves—that is, their nice selves, the selves made to order on standard patterns. “Just be yourself, dear,” we are told as we go off to the prom. And we wonder, “What does that mean? What am I expected to do?”

The greatest women writers, in all ages, have recorded the effects of such expectations upon their mind. Charlotte Brontë, a nineteenth-century feminist as well as a great novelist of feminine roles, wrote in Shirley:

Their sisters have no earthly employment but household work and sewing, no earthly pleasure but an unprofitable visiting, and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health. They are never well, and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. The great wish, the sole aim of every one of them, is to be married, but the majority will never marry; they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule; they don’t want them; they hold them very cheap. They say—I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time—the matrimonial market is overstocked. Fathers say likewise, and are angry with their daughters when they observe their manoeuvres—they order them to stay at home. What do they expect them to do at home? If you ask, they would answer, sew and cook. They expect them to do this, and this only, contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly, all their lives long, as if they had no germ of faculties for anything else—a doctrine as reasonable to hold as it would be that the fathers have no faculties but for eating what their daughters cook or for wearing what they
sew. Could men live so themselves? Would they not be very weary? And when there came no relief to their weariness, but only reproaches at its slightest manifestation, would not their weariness ferment in time to frenzy?

A contemporary novelist, Anaïs Nin, writes of such things at length in her diaries. The following excerpts are from her *Diary, 1931–1934* (Harcourt, Brace & World, and the Swallow Press, 1966):

They all want to sanctify me, to turn me into an effigy, a myth. They want to idealize me and pray to me, use me for consolation, comfort. Curse my image, the image of me which faces me every day with the same over-fineness, over-delicacy, the pride, the vulnerability which makes people want to preserve me, treat me with care. Curse my eyes which are sad, and deep, and my hands which are delicate, and my walk which is a glide, my voice which is a whisper, all that can be used for a poem, and too fragile to be raped, violated, used. I am near death from solitude, near dissolution.

I have always been tormented by the image of multiplicity of selves. Some days I call it a richness, and other days I see it as a disease, a proliferation as dangerous as cancer. My first concept of people about me was that all of them were coordinated into a whole, whereas I was made up of a multitude of selves, of fragments.

There were always, in me, two women at least, one woman desperate and bewildered, who felt she was drowning, and another who only wanted to bring beauty, grace, and aliveness to people, and who would leap into a scene, as upon a stage, conceal her true emotions because they were weaknesses, helplessness, despair, and present to the world only a smile, an eagerness, curiosity, enthusiasm, interest.

From the day she learns to understand signals, all a woman hears is a series of contradictory instructions and conflicting descriptions of the way she is to look and behave. She must be sexy and a virgin at once. She must be appreciative, yet challenging. She must be strong, yet weak. Vulnerable, yet able to protect herself. Smart enough to get a man, but not smart enough to threaten him, or, rather, smart enough to conceal her intelligence and act manipulatively. Desired by all, but interested only in one. Sophisticated, yet naive at heart. And so on down the line.

She is in the position of the little boy Laing talks about in *The Self and Others*, whom a policeman saw run around the block ten times. The cop asked him what he was doing. The boy said, "I’m
running away from home, but my father won’t let me cross the street.”

These contradictory injunctions are, of course, most acute in the realm of sexual behavior. For the first part of their lives, until they leave for college (if they do), most girls are still inculcated with an absolute Puritanism that no longer accurately reflects either the social norms nor the necessities of the economic structure. When a girl becomes “independent,” this older, repressive ideology is replaced by the new, improved, trendy, but equally manipulative, equally mystified, and equally destructive ideology of the “new morality,” in which women are defined as sex objects even to themselves. One of the definitive statements of this ideology can be found in Cosmopolitan, June, 1969. It is an article by a female gynecologist, Barbara Bross, entitled “How To Love Like a Real Woman.” Dr. Bross states:

Sexual abstinence in a normally constituted person is always pathogenic. [Translation: that means “getting sick.”] We have been given sex organs to use them. If we don’t use them, they decay and cause irreparable damage to body and mind. This is blunt, firm, indisputable, and true.

Woman is man’s intermediary between himself and nature. He considers her as part of nature, though he will never say so, but that is what he feels. Her periods echo the rhythm of nature. Her ability to give birth makes her part of nature. She is the mother. She is the earth. She senses where he can only think or act. Woman is, man does. That is the strength and weakness of both sexes.