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Radical Feminism

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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.

Women and the Radical Movement

by Anne Koedt

Within the last year many radical women's groups have sprung up throughout the country. This was caused by the fact that movement women found themselves playing secondary roles on every level—be it in terms of leadership, or simply in terms of being listened to. They found themselves (and others) afraid to speak up because of self-doubts when in the presence of men. They ended up concentrating on food-making, typing, mimeographing, general assistance work, and serving as a sexual supply for their male comrades after hours.

As these problems began being discussed, it became clear that what had at first been assumed to be a personal problem was in fact a social and political one. We found strong parallels between the liberation of women and the black power struggle—we were both being oppressed by similar psychological/economic dynamics. And the deeper we analyzed the problem and realized that all women suffer from this kind of oppression, the more we realized that the problem was not just confined to movement women.

It became necessary to go to the root of the problem, rather than to become engaged in solving secondary problems arising out of that condition. Thus, for example, rather than storming the Penta-

Speech given at a city-wide meeting of radical women's groups at the Free University in New York City on February 17, 1968. First printed in *Notes From the First Year*, June, 1968. The speech is representative of the early attempts to define the relationship between the new left and the beginning feminist consciousness. The word feminist then was scarcely if ever used for fear that women's oppression would not be considered "radical." By 1971 the critique of the left was more sharply delineated, cf., *The Fourth World Manifesto*.

gon as women, or protesting the Democratic Convention as women, we must begin to expose and eliminate the *causes* of our oppression as women. Our job is not only to improve the conditions of movement women any more than it is only to improve the conditions of professional working women. Both acts are reformist if thought of only as ends in themselves; and such an approach ignores the broader concept that one cannot achieve equality for some members of one's group while the rest are not free.

In choosing to fight for women's liberation it is not enough, either, to explain it only in general terms of "the system." For the system oppresses many groups in many ways. Women must learn that the technique used to keep a *woman* oppressed is to convince her that she is at all times secondary to man, and that her life is defined in terms of him. We cannot speak of liberating ourselves until we free ourselves from this myth and accept ourselves as primary.

In our role as radical women we are confronted with the problem of assuring a female revolution within the general revolution. And we must begin to distinguish real from apparent freedoms.

Radical men may advocate certain freedoms for women when they overlap with their own interests, but these are not true freedoms unless they spring out of the concept of male and female equality and confront the issue of male supremacy. For example, men may want women to fight in the revolution because they need every able bodied person they can get. And they may need women to join the work force under a socialist economic system because they cannot afford, like capitalism, to have an unemployed (surplus) labor force not contributing work and being supported by the state. And men may therefore advocate state nurseries so that mothers are not kept from work. But has the fundamental concept of women changed? Do these changes mean that men have renounced the old supremacy relationship, wherein women must always be defined in terms of men? Has the basic domination changed?

It is important to analyze the history of revolutions in terms of special interest groups. The American Revolution was a white male bourgeois revolution. The issues were self-government and the right to make a profit without England's interference; the Declaration of Independence was specifically written to justify independence from

England. It was a document which guaranteed rights neither to blacks nor to women. Crispus Attucks, one of the first black men to lose his life for the revolution, was fighting in a vicarious revolution—the white revolution. Betsy Ross sewing the flag was participating vicariously in a male revolution. The rights gained were not for her.

It is always true of an oppressed group that the mere fact of their existence means that to a certain extent they have accepted their inferior-colonial-secondary status. Taught self-hatred, they identify instead with the oppressor. Thus such phenomena as blacks bleaching their skin and straightening their hair, and women responding with horror at the thought of a woman president.

The economic revolution—i.e., change from capitalism to socialism—can also be viewed in terms of male interest. Under capitalism, the majority of men were exploited and controlled by a few men who held the wealth and power. By changing the economic structure to socialism, this particular economic exploitation was largely eradicated. Women in the Soviet Union fought for and supported such a revolution. But whether out of a genuine hope that non-exploitation would be applied as liberally to them, or worse, out of a lack of even a minimum awareness that they themselves were important, the Soviet revolution remained a male power revolution, although many new benefits fell to women. The Soviet Union is still primarily male governed; women's integration into the labor force meant simply that she transferred her auxiliary, service relationship with men into the area of work. Soviet women are teachers, doctors, assistants, food handlers. And when they come home from work they are expected to continue in their submissive role to men and do the housework, cooking and take primary responsibility for child rearing.

It is important for radical women to learn from these events. The dominant/submissive relationship between men and women was not challenged. Not confronted. We were asked by them instead to equate our liberation with theirs—to blame our inferior conditions on the economic structure rather than confront the obvious male interest in keeping women “in their place.” We never insisted upon as explicit a program for freeing women as men had demanded for freeing themselves from economic exploitation. We never confronted men and demanded that unless they give up their domina-

tion over us, we would not fight for their revolution, work in their revolution. We never fought the primary cause, hoping instead that changing the secondary characteristics would win us freedom. And we ended up with a revolution that simply transferred male supremacy, paternalism and male power to the new economy. A reformist revolution that only improved upon our privileges but did not change the basic structure causing our oppression.

A black male revolutionary today would not be satisfied knowing only that the economic structure went from private to collective control; he would want to know about racism. And you would have to show him how white power and supremacy would be eliminated in that revolution before he would join you.

Until we make such similar demands, revolution will pass us by.