

The Women's Liberation Movement

Discrimination Against Women: Preconditions of the Movement

Comparable conditions for women and comparable discriminations against them operate in all the countries where Liberation Movements have arisen. The similarity in the position of women in these countries may have relevance for the development of the movements there; indeed, it may be a precondition of their existence. These are industrial countries. Women's Liberation has not developed in rural areas, farming or peasant. In Italy, for example, it is mainly to be found in the cities of the North.

Outside the socialist countries these are the main nations in the world with egalitarian programmes: they are liberal democracies, ostensibly organized through consensus politics. Within the ideology of equality, the overt discriminatory practices come as a shock.¹ The egalitarian ideology does not mask a gap between the 'reality' and the 'illusion' offered but, on the contrary, is the way in which both the discrimination and the opposition to it is lived. The belief in the rightness and possibility of equality that women share has enabled them to feel 'cheated' and hence has acted as a precondition of their initial protest. In fact, what we are witnessing in this general denigration of women is an inevitable consequence of the socio-economic system of capitalism in which it operates. The inferiorization of women is essential to its functioning.

1. Or do they? Maybe the struggles of oppressed peoples in the advanced capitalist world with their constant expression of outrage at the abuses they suffer contribute to maintaining an equilibrium. The structural inequities and inequalities of capitalist society are made less visible by each assumption that they should not be there. Could these be as effectively concealed by revolutionary demands as they are by reformism?

Yet offered a mystifying emancipation and participating in an ideology of equality, the sense of something wrong is more acute than where women share in the openly dominative structures of feudal, semi-feudal or early capitalist societies.

All the countries characterized by Women's Liberation groups can point to the same areas and usually something like the same degrees of discrimination. Women in all the countries constitute a little more than one third of the labour force (the American figure of forty-two per cent is the highest). Their wages range from around half to nearly three quarters of the equivalent male wages. The largest percentages of women workers are, in all cases, in unskilled jobs. All countries in signing the Treaty of Rome, ratifying the International Labour Organization agreement, or instigating their own Equal Pay Acts are committed (in slightly varying ways) to authorizing equal pay to all workers for equal work. In England it has been on the Trade Union Agenda since 1888.

Girls compose from less than one quarter to over one third of the university student body. The American figure is exceptional. In no other country are they more than twenty-six per cent. In nearly all cases, though they can leave school as well qualified, their opportunities for higher education and further training (apprenticeships) or part-time study (day release) are less than half as good as the boys'. In the majority of these countries there has been an acclaimed policy of equal educational facilities for all for the best part of a hundred years.

Legal discrimination disguises itself as 'protective' legislation. All countries operate some legal prohibitions on the type, hours and place of work of women and minors. The interests of the married woman are ostensibly safeguarded by the necessity of her maintenance during and after marriage. Usually her earnings are classified as part of her husband's income and the man, as assumed provider, is also legal custodian of the child. All these laws are the consequence of the woman's assumed dependence on the man - in fact, of course, they create and ensure it. This in countries which utilize women in what are recognized as the most exhausting jobs;

countries which do not simply extol motherhood, but more invidiously stress the profound implications of mother-love and nurturance: giving her the tasks and him the rights.

Degrees of availability of contraception and abortion differ in the various countries. In all of them its distribution and safety is random and haphazard. In none of them is it considered the automatic right of every woman. In all of them it is the privilege of the rich (white middle class) or the abuse of the poor (e.g. the use of Puerto Ricans as guinea pigs in testing birth control devices). Even the most liberal laws on abortion, as in Scandinavia, England and New York, force the woman to provide 'reasons' which are equivalent to self-denigration (physical or financial difficulties are rarely as acceptable as confession of psychological ineptitude). All this in industrial countries urging (for the rest of the world?) population control: countries extolling individualism and its correlate – a high degree of personal attention for the young child.

All these countries exhibit an essential imbalance of production and consumption. Women as housewives are seen as the main agents of consumption. The ethic of consumption (spending money) is counterposed divisively to that of production (creating wealth) – the province of the husband. Appealed to as consumers, women are also the chief agents of that appeal: used aesthetically and sexually they sell themselves to themselves. Used in these advertisements they also lure men into the temptation of 'luxury' spending. Woman's fundamental job as provider of food, health and welfare comes to seem an extravagance and so does she along with it. Her responsibility for the most basic needs of people is converted into a leisure-time activity and she a play-thing (if she is young enough) that accompanies such work. Both she and the job are evaluated accordingly. Despite her work, she represents leisure and sexuality. And this in industrial societies which have, at least in the Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, an ethic of puritanism and hard work.

The Organization of the Movement

Women in the different countries experience a comparable oppression and the Women's Liberation Movements have comparable aims, but organizationally, and hence to some extent theoretically, they can be quite dissimilar. This diversity is largely due to their different origins. In England the length and strength of unionized working-class struggle is crucial, in Italy it is the Marxist students and in America the Black Power struggle. I have selected five countries, each with somewhat different problems and different methods of organizing. I hope thereby, to illustrate the diversity possible within a united aim: the Liberation of Women.

England

The first whisperings of the Women's Liberation Movement in England were late in 1967; by 1968 it was a named and organized movement. Its earliest manifestations were from three distinct sources: American radical politics, psycho-cultural-political groups and, in 1968, the labour movement. Specifically these were the American women in London working against the Vietnam war and for U.S. deserters (e.g. The Stoppit Committee), the grass-roots politics of Agitprop and the psycho-politics of the Dialectics of Liberation Congress and the Anti-University, and then the strike of Ford women workers for equal pay. Later these seminal groups were joined by women discontented with their role in the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation, and first caucuses and then separate groups were formed within the traditional left sects. Many already existent equal-rights organizations quickly identified or provided an overlapping membership – for instance, the Open Door International and Mothers in Action. By late 1969 many of the major towns had Women's Liberation groups and a number of the larger cities, particularly London, had several different organizations in operation. The

basic principle of organization is the small group (see pp. 59-60). In March, 1970, the first national conference took place. Originally called by a group of women historians as a small study workshop, it was transformed by the growing urgency of the disparate groups and of individual women into a week-end conference of 600 participants. The present organization of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain stems from the resolutions of this conference.

The conference set up a National Co-ordinating Committee (N.C.C.) composed of two representatives from each group (this composition is, in fact, fairly informal except for voting on controversial issues). It is an umbrella organization without initiatory powers and without a programme. Any group can ask for support from other groups for its campaigns and actions; only if all participant groups agree does it become the responsibility of the N.C.C. - for instance, as in the case of the nationwide demonstrations on International Women's Day, 6-8 March (1971). The N.C.C. is entrusted with the setting up of national conferences to be held three or four times a year in different regions (so far in Oxford, Sheffield, Liverpool). Of course, in a new movement forging new theory there is a wide political spectrum - from Liberal-radical through to revolutionary socialist and anarchist, with all the different tendencies within each. Sectarian differences are present, and are the joy of an antagonistic media. When the media first latched on to Women's Liberation, the divisive tactic was to set Liberationist women arguing against women who opposed the movement. Now that the commercial instinct has hailed 1971 as the year of the feminists, the divisive strategy is more sycophantic: set different groups of the Women's Liberation Movement to argue against each other, or say where they differ. As a result of a bad experience of this sort, the N.C.C. made one of its regulations that each group could describe their own politics to the press, etc. but not those of other groups. The hope is to keep disagreement for fruitful debate within the movement and to prevent the sectarian battles that have riddled so many previous revolutionary movements. There is all the difference in the world

between the proliferation of different autonomous groups and divisive fragmentation.

Because the groups are autonomous one cannot describe a unified political aim; however, the very existence of a national organization presupposes some shared assumptions. Women's Liberation in England is a broad-based movement, hence, it is primarily concerned with all women, no matter what their political experience or opinion. For some, the grass-roots concept is in itself the correct one, for others the more orthodox Marxist conception of a small formation of revolutionary cadres may be on the agenda - understandably, in the absence of a Marxist analysis of women's oppression, its time is being postponed. Most, but not all, of the English groups are closed to men.

Holland²

Holland is in many respects a comparable country to England. Ostensibly, it is highly 'democratic' and tolerant, in the first instance, of protest and non-conformity. One of the strands in the political life of the sixties that was important for the development of the Women's Liberation Movement in England was yet more crucial in Holland - the anarcho-culturalist protest movement. The Provos, whose demonstrations provoked the state violence behind the velvet glove of 'consensus' democracy, gave way in the late sixties to groups who mocked and teased the institutions they wanted to destroy. It is within this tradition that one of Holland's two large Women's Liberation groups exists - the Dolle Mina's. Their actions are playful and offensive - thereby illustrating the underlying insult behind the 'normal' treatment of women: they wolf-whistle and pinch men's bottoms, tie pink ribbons round urinals, considerably discomposing the staid Dutch burgher. Many of the women joined a women's movement through dissatisfaction with their 'feminine' roles in student and other

² See Margaret Walter's description in *Shrew*, November-December, 1970. I am totally indebted to her for this section on Holland, which, to all intents and purposes, is a 'quotation' of her article.

radical groups. It is interesting that though there are many Marxists among the Dolle Mins, their orientation (reflecting their heritage mentioned above) seems to be largely cultural, protesting sexual discrimination against women. The other group MVM - Men and Women in Society - is larger, older and 'serious-minded'. It concerns itself with the general conditions of women within the already available social framework - with legal reform, with child-care facilities, with social and economic discrimination. Its character and aims are comparable to those of the American National Organization of Women.

The two groups seem very different; but despite this, and despite their different origins, seen from a negative perspective they are very alike. A lack of politics unites them. The former group is culturalist, the latter reformist-economist and, though both cultural and economic questions are together crucial for political struggle, neither group seems to be over concerned with making the connection. Perhaps symptomatic of this - and certainly illustrative of a similarity that overrides the apparent differences - is the fact that both groups are for men and women, and men are frequently dominant.

Sweden

The experience of women in Sweden, throughout the last decades has been somewhat different from that of women in the other advanced capitalist countries. Sweden has always had sexual egalitarianism high on its programme. Presenting itself as the most democratic, nay, 'socialistic' of capitalist countries, the emancipation of women has always been a good advertisement for the humanitarian fairness of its society. It never fell into the glaring pitfalls that England sunk into in its crude utilization of women for the economy where at one moment women were 'manning' the munitions factories, the next extolled as the housebound doll and mother. In Sweden in the thirties, a commission headed by Alva Myrdal investigating the declining birthrate, recommended not that women should be sent home to gestate and nurture, but that the state

should provide child-care facilities, flexible work hours and social amenities - family restaurants, laundries, communal housing, etc. Swedish women earn on average just over 70 per cent of a man's wage, jobs are officially open to all, education is the same for both sexes with boys learning household and child-care subjects. Contraception, abortion and divorce are relatively easy, the unmarried mother is not discriminated against. Countries unable to cope with such egalitarianism have made the usual conversion of tolerance into neurosis, fabricating for Sweden a phenomenal suicide rate and total promiscuity.

Yet this unabating concern with the position of women has also had its peak-moments and its tailing-off periods. Feminists rightly point out that discussions of the position of women are prominent in the news for those years when some important economic readjustment has to take place: for example, when there is a shortage of 'man-power', when more scientists, technicians, etc., are needed - as now. In other countries the actual *position* of women is, of course, also crucially affected by different economic demands: in England, for instance, more teachers were wanted in the early sixties - hence it was suddenly discovered that married women had 'two lives' and could go back to such work after child-raising. Today, more engineers are wanted and women are suddenly declared suitable. But in Sweden this alteration is accompanied by a resurgence of explicit discussion (claiming to be disinterested) of women's roles. This overt debate can, in fact, *obscure* the issue: the economic expediency becomes invisible, behind the social concern. Indeed this problem is more generalizable. The very stress that Swedish society puts on sexual equality makes it hard to see the oppression of women. Until fairly recently this could be said to have had, inevitably, a retarding effect on a Women's Liberation Movement. Every demand that feminists made was readily incorporated: communes are well financed (privately or by government aid), a proposal for a working week of thirty hours for men and women was welcomed (whether it would ever have been instituted nationally is another matter) by big industrialists, at the time anxious to

decrease the work force without creating visible unemployment, a suggestion for paying housewives was supported by conservatives (after all it is a way of keeping women at home). In all countries where Women's Liberation groups occur there are those who stress that their movement is for the liberation of men and women (the creation of so-called 'whole people'); only in Sweden was this notion institutionalized; in the mid-sixties the 'women question' was renamed 'the sex-role debate' – the ideology of equality had penetrated even a movement that was set up to demonstrate its absence. Men were as active as women, for the question was not the oppression of the one group but the relationship (individual and generic) between the sexes.

However, by the late sixties the easy accommodation of the problem was itself seen as problematic and groups specifically for the Liberation of Women were established in Lund and Stockholm. These tend to be explicitly Marxist groups and seem to be following a Marxist model for organization. They are not interested in forming a huge movement as yet (indeed the success in terms of rapidly growing numbers is a problem) but instead feel that the political and theoretical work has to keep pace with numerical expansion. The development of a 'politics' which could keep command of a movement is promulgated in two ways: through Marxist study groups and through organizational work among women workers in low-pay factories. The direction, then, has been from the wider, inclusive discussion of 'sex-roles' to tighter Marxist groupings, analysing and organizing around women.

France

France presents an almost opposite phenomenon. Women's Liberation started as a small group of Marxist women in Paris in late 1968. Some were Americans, others mainly students who had been active in the May Revolution. For over a year they concentrated on Marxist theory, not attempting to grow at all in numbers. Then they undertook the first action – a demonstration at Vincennes University – the 'red ghetto'.

The vulgar (politically and sexually) reaction of their fellow male revolutionaries was extreme (see p. 86). Just previously representatives had attended the first English National Conference (Oxford, March, 1970). The two events – the attitudes of male 'comrades' and the broad base of the English movement – determined the Paris groups to open up. There are now a considerable number of neighbourhood groups both in Paris and in some provincial cities and there are sectarian Women's Liberation groups. The actions of all groups are militant and their position explicitly anti-capitalist; they attack the family and all laws that maintain it (the prohibition of abortion, for instance), they work on radicalizing concepts of child-rearing, they attack the commercial use of women by the media and they stress the oppression and exploitation of working-class women. There have always been close links between the French and English Women's Liberation groups and now, from very different beginnings and the somewhat different cultural and economic treatment of women in the two countries, the two movements bear closer and closer resemblances. The French groups have always been more explicitly socialist, usually Marxist, but from their Marxist notion of a cadre-formation they have moved, at the moment, to a broader-based movement. In England, the broad-based, all-inclusive movement has, I think, been growing more explicitly socialist (certainly more revolutionary) since its analyses have constantly come up against the bed-rock of oppression in a capitalist society. Though this strong leftwards tendency is, in turn, provoking some internal criticism.

The U.S.A.

I find it extremely difficult to write about the American Movement. Like America itself it seems to defy coherent analysis. One feels the movement is everywhere – but can often find it nowhere clearly. There are so many groups and so many different positions that it seems pointless to catalogue them here; it would be better to take up later some of the basic, shared concepts.

There is a further difficulty. In my other brief surveys I have relied on a combination of my own experience of the countries concerned and their movements, together with the analyses made by participant sisters. This is impossible with the American movement. An individual and a foreigner feels small both in relation to the size of the country and to the size of the movement. I have visited parts of the East Coast and the Mid-West but not the South or the West Coast. I have held discussions with many groups and individuals – but an overview cannot come from this. In America, you talk with people to find out the perspectives of their group, what they are doing and where they see themselves as differing from other groups. This is not equivalent to the sectarian differences found, say, in England – differences of political analysis that pre-date the Women's Liberation Movement; on the contrary, it is intrinsic to the growth of Women's Liberation itself. The formation of different groups with diverse political analyses is *how* the movement and *how* the analyses of women's oppression develop in America. This is true of nowhere else – not even of neighbouring Canada. Not, interestingly, is it true of the Student or Peace (in Vietnam) Movement. It is true, somewhat differently, of the Black Movement.

The Black Movement was probably the greatest single inspiration to the growth of Women's Liberation. It started with the relatively moderate beginnings of the Civil Rights protest in the early sixties, and at each encounter with the hostile, racist society, grew more militant. The progress of Black Power has been from a broad, open opposition movement to a successively narrowing and intensifying revolutionary-cadre organization. In the process of developing revolutionary concentration a number of militant groups were formed, of which the Black Panthers are the best known. Something roughly comparable happened with Women's Liberation; it moved from a broad-based egalitarian, oppositionist struggle (now seen as reformist – even more chronically so than Martin Luther King among the Blacks) to a number of organizationally tighter and analytically and practically more revolutionary groups – to a political position of radical feminism:

Radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based upon their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organize politically to destroy this sex class system. As radical feminists we recognize that we are engaged in a power struggle with men, and that the agent of our oppression is man in so far as he identifies with and carries out the supremacy privileges of the male role. For while we realize that the liberation of women will ultimately mean the liberation of men from the destructive role as oppressor, we have no illusion that men will welcome this liberation without a struggle.... Radical feminism is political because it recognizes that a group of individuals (men) have set up institutions throughout society to maintain this power.³

Much as, roughly speaking, the central heritage of the Black Movement progressed from Civil Rights through Black Muslims to Black Panthers; so the Women's Liberation Movement has moved from reformist (NOW) through liberationists to radical feminists. Each development of the movement is in some sense a progressive departure from earlier positions, yet it is important that in the Women's Liberation Movement they continue to co-exist. The main reformist group – the National Organization of Women which originated the struggle in 1967 is still, by a long way, the largest single group, highly organized and very active. The distinction between Liberationist and Radical Feminist doesn't exist in Europe (not in large parts of America); I discuss its meaning later (pp. 65–6), but for most of this book I have used the term 'feminist' and 'liberationist' somewhat interchangeably and refer to the whole movement as the Women's Liberation Movement. Briefly, liberationists see the oppression of women as one (though a major one) of the many oppressions experienced by different people in pre-socialist societies; radical feminists contend it is the major and primary one in all societies.

This distinction between radical feminists and liberationists first found expression as a division between feminists and so-called 'politicos'. The latter were those women who still

3. 'New York Radical Feminist Manifesto', quoted Celestine Ware: *Woman Power*, Tower Public Affairs Books, 1970, pp. 58.

worked in alliance with other revolutionary activities – protesting against the Vietnamese war, aiding draft resistance, etc. – and whose analysis was that women were a crucial part of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. For radical feminists, as the oppression of women is the primary oppression in all societies, whatever their mode of production, a revolution here is the priority – from this all the other changes would follow. However, this division seems now somewhat less important. Maybe this is due to the recession of other highly vocal radical activity in the States (the decimation of the Panthers, the retreat of 'Weathermen', the ageing of the Yippies, the uncertainties of the Vietnam Peace Movement) and to the prominence of Women's Liberation in the vanguard of revolutionary action.

If a single inspiration for the movement is to be cited, it was the publication in 1963 of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*⁴ (and her subsequent foundation of NOW in 1966). More interesting, however, is the larger political source of the movement. Broadly, it seems to have come together from three directions. The discontent of middle-class, often middle-aged, women who, told that they lived in a patriarchal society (they dominated their kids with 'momism', owned most of the wealth, got their husbands to the kitchen sink and doing the diaper wash), nevertheless found themselves unable to get professional jobs or rise anywhere on the vocational ladder. A second source was the dissatisfaction of white women militants with their treatment in the Civil Rights Movement and within Students for a Democratic Society; in both, they were 'typists, tea-makers and sexual objects'. A third was the counter-culture, 'politics of experience', and new political sensibility that produced so many different groups in the mid-sixties.

The Women's Liberation Movement in America differed from the later movements in the other countries in not having either a labour movement as one of its component influences, nor, at its inception, a socialist stress on the working-class as the revolutionary class. The socialist women in the movement

4. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, 1963.

were mainly students, in a country seen to be cut up more along ethnic than class lines. The movement, as elsewhere, was mainly white and so-called middle-class – this provoked a double anxiety where in the European countries there is only one: in 1968, the absence of black women in the movement, in 1969, the absence of working-class women.

The absence of Black women has provoked a changing awareness. Initially, the importance of the concept of Black Power was so crucial to the analysis of the situation of women, that Black women's involvement and support was constantly sought. After all, the Black assertion of themselves as an oppressed people within the homeland of imperialist-capitalism led to a comparable realization about women. Both struggles are against oppression in the 'First World'. But a crucial difference led to further definition. Where Black Americans are massively economically exploited and can thus afford to omit their tiny Black bourgeoisie from the revolutionary struggle, women's oppression does not coincide so simply with the lowest economic groups: all women, whatever their class, are oppressed *as women*. However, for Black women not to be involved in the Women's Liberation Movement was critical as it seemed like a competition rather than an alliance between oppressed groups. Analysis then showed that the wage-structure of American society showed the following order: white men, black men, white women, black women. At work, black men did marginally better than white women. Black women were the most oppressed and exploited people within the whole society and, in addition, were often oppressed within their own Black Power Movement: Black men were to be powerful, Black women pregnant. But a coming together of the analysis of the omnipresent oppression of women, by most revolutionary women within both movements (Women's Liberation and Black Power) seems, currently, to be overcoming the earlier divisive situation. There are now black women in their own groups and in the pre-existent Women's Liberation groups, and working-class women are joining in ever increasing numbers as the movement spreads into the factories.

Some of the Women's Liberation groups are highly organized, with conditions of membership, regular literature, planned campaigns and constant analysis; others are often informal 'consciousness-raising' groups (see p. 61-63). In many of the cities, different groups have come together to set up a centre which provides information about the movement, advice on contraception and abortion, child-care, etc., literature on the status of women and a political focal point.

Thus we see a heterogeneous movement with numerous successes, a proliferating literature, an already visible change in the sensibilities and attitudes of many people to women, and – perhaps most triumphantly – its own size and growth to its credit. Women are uniting.

The Campaigns, Organization and Concepts of Women's Liberation – So Far

Behind and around Women's Liberation, can be seen the entire youth culture and the political groupings of the sixties – Hippies, Yippies and others. There is Civil Rights and the Black Power Movement, organized student militancy, anarchism, and anarcho-terrorism and left-wing terrorism, sectarian groups, and reformist 'Equal Rights' groups that have all had a refflorescence in the name of Women's Liberation. The psycho-politics of experience, the regroupings of the New Left and, in England at least, some increase in Trade Union dynamism have all influenced the formation of Women's Liberation and been influenced by it.

Like most of these political movements, Women's Liberation started with a series of complaints – complaints against the society and against the radical groups that were supposed to be challenging this. In forming itself one of its earliest tasks was to transform these complaints into (a) a political challenge to the social institutions, and (b) to develop an organization that in its form and content would eradicate the relevant faults of the other preceding radical groups.

Campaigns and Their Implications

In all the countries concerned, the Women's Liberation Movement has launched campaigns aimed at all the major dimensions of women's oppression: economic, legal and sexual; her role in reproduction and the socializing of children. In England, the national campaigns directly reflect this pre-occupation with 'all fronts'. There is a nation-wide campaign for equal pay, equal work and equal opportunities; for free birth-control and abortion on demand; for a re-examination of the whole educational set-up and for after-school children's centres; for the provision of easily available, free pre-school crèches and nurseries. Particular groups attack the ideological exploitation of women as 'sexual objects' – by the media and industrial enterprises based on this sexual exploitation, the Playboy Club and Mecca's 'Miss World', for instance. The national campaigns have many aspects. The promotion of birth-control involves investigations of the attitudes of doctors and of women, the capricious, profit-oriented control of it by chemical and rubber manufacturers, the arbitrariness of research into it and into allied gynaecological fields, the lack of interest of the government, and the biased hyper-interest of the press. The provision of nursery schools involves discussion and analysis of the mother-child relationship from the viewpoint of psychology – and of the mother concerned. The sexual exploitation of women and their enforced submission within a society committed – when it feels like it – to the 'naturalness' of their reproductive role, has caused the movement to develop the notion of the 'control of one's body'. This slogan finds its meaning somewhere between 'having control of one's own thoughts' (i.e. freedom of mind) and 'workers' control' (worker-run factories). Women do literally sell their bodies – if not as prostitutes, then to the publicity industries, modelling and so on – much as men and women sell their labour power. As a worker finds himself alienated in his own product, so (roughly speaking) a woman finds herself alienated in her own commercialized body. The female body

in the advertisement may not be her own, but it *does* represent it. The mass of workers experience their alienation individually but women, in this way, experience it generically. The slogan protests against this as it protests against the other dimension: her submission to the arbitrariness of conception.

These are just some of the implications behind the major declared aims of, for instance, the English movement. If nothing else, they show how far reaching 'reform' can be where women's oppression is concerned. In America there are much more extensive campaigns: to reassess (and revalidate) the role of women in history, to eliminate sexism from the law, from the press and from school text-books (this is also happening in European countries - in fact, it was initiated in Sweden). Women in all countries are forming their own feminist theatre, their own pop-groups, their own cinema.

Principles of Organization

(1) Why just Women?

Many people, inside and outside the movement, argue that the liberation of women involves the liberation of men. Many people contend that the movement will get nowhere unless it can convince men, or at least explain to them, its importance. How can one sex be free without the other? Both sexes are oppressed by sex-role stereotypes... don't you think men would like to be more at home with their children...? don't you think they would like not to have to go down the coal mines and be the breadwinners...? Feminist women remember your womanly hearts and pity the woes of the oppressor... socialist liberationist women remember that under capitalism *all* but the bourgeoisie suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune... Women of the world unite, no longer behind your men, but in front, be our vanguard, take the blows, forge the track, give us our revolution...

In an effort to repudiate the days of obscene ridicule of Women's Liberation (see pp. 84-86), radical men who endorse the movement have taken up various postures in relation to it,

trailing from the tilting, half-begging posture 'let us in' to the falling over backwards 'go ahead, show us the way, you're the new revolutionary hope... we'll support you.'

At this stage, it feels strange to have to 'justify' an all-women movement - but as it still does disturb a lot of people and as some Women's Liberation groups have men members - it seems a good idea to try. It is hard to recall the reasons we first gave, the fear and embarrassment we felt. Yet I do remember being surprised that it was 'all right' talking just to women. Many of us came out of predominantly male political movements, girl-friends belonged to childhood, women's coffee parties were not for us... seriousness was men. I can remember a male comrade asking me who I'd lunched with and when I mentioned a woman's name, saying 'I hate women who have other women for friends.' I can remember the men I worked with at my job and the men I worked with politically, saying complacently of me, 'Oh, she likes being the only woman... I suppose my constant requests for more women were mere bluff... How could I not have been flattered by my position? And I suppose I was. What else was there to be? As women, could we afford to like each other without trivializing ourselves? So, at least in England, where Women's Liberation first started as an all-women movement, we said: 'Well, you see, women are shy in front of men, men do all the talking, take the dominant roles: women have got to learn to be active, to have confidence... then, maybe, we can afford to let men in.' Today, I think, such defensiveness is only used tactically - to make someone really remote from the Movement view this aspect with (patronizing) sympathy and hence open him (or more importantly her) to other dimensions. Though that is not to say that it isn't still true - we still often defer (intellectually and/or flirtatiously) to men - it's just that the reason for segregation has got so obvious that we forget the excuses. It's simply that we are (in this case) the oppressed people and around this we organize.

The American Movement from its outset had the separatist analogy of Black Power; they never had to be quite so polite as we were - American women suffer less from the pedestal

discrimination and the double-binds of old-world courtesy that afflict European women.

The separatist politics of Women's Liberation may have come out of one of the chief manifestations of women's oppression: their diffidence; but it certainly debouches straight into its central theory – that it is women as a group that are oppressed, and that, though all oppressed groups should work to a point of solidarity with each other, their own understanding of their own situation comes from their own analysis. As a militant women's organization, Women's Liberation both counteracts the oppressed behaviour of women in our society (women cannot be submissive, fragile, dependent, etc.), and provides a political base for the analysis of this oppression. Such a separatist movement in no way excludes the awareness of other oppressed groups under capitalism, nor does it pretend that the society does not harm men, too. The movement is largely anti-capitalist and as such assumes the distortion of everybody's life and potential today. But such generalities are moral, not political, and though everyone wants liberation for *all* (men and women) this cannot but be Utopianism unless at this stage, we organize around specific oppressions.

(2) Domination versus Collectivity

Opposing any form of domination in theory, and having suffered its effects in previous radical groups, all Women's Liberation politics act on the basis of developing collective work and preventing the rise of ego-tripping leaders. Outsiders, trying to pin down the politics of a group, complain of the lack of a centre. They are so used to 'spokesmen' that their absence confuses.

Women, having been trained and socialized to passivity and demureness, are particularly vulnerable to any offer to take a back seat once more. Many groups rotate organizational positions, interviews with the press, radio and television, speaking engagements, etc., so that no one develops a too powerful expertise and no one confirms her own inhibitions. Some groups, not wanting too great a diffuseness to result

from the absence of a leader, structure their groups on a formal democratic basis: even making sure by institutional methods that no one shall either dominate or not participate in the time allotted for discussions. Other groups aim at writing papers or books collectively and at undertaking public speaking always in groups. This stress on collective work countermands both the hierarchic nature of the oppressive society and the isolation and/or subservience that women are forced into within the home and in their personal relationships.

Women, directed from childhood towards marriage, living in a 'man's world', relate primarily to men and mainly competitively with each other – whether for a man or for the cleanest wash in the neighbourhood. Working together with other women in a united struggle overcomes this isolation and competitiveness – collective work is part of the process, refusal of leaders is a refusal of male-female, or competitive female-female relationships, such as they are in the society that is being challenged.

(3) The Small Group

The basic unit of organization in the Women's Liberation Movement is the small group of anything from six to two dozen women. As the group develops it transforms its nature. At first it is the means of bringing women into close personal solidarity and friendship with each other. In the final stage, many small groups see themselves as revolutionary collectives, whose task is to analyse the nature of women's oppression and thereby work out a strategy. The transition marks the changing awareness that as women's problems are not private and personal, so, neither is their solution; or, to put it another way, it reflects the change from personal self-awareness (in the psycho-therapeutic sense) to group-consciousness or the oppressed person's equivalent to 'class-consciousness'. The small group permits the transition from the personal to the political and simultaneously interrelates them. For women are socialized to two obverse reactions: either, because they are

'women', they can go on endlessly about their personal lives, or, because they are dominated by men, when they join a political organization, they imitate men's styles and cannot discuss the personal, but only analyse the so-called 'objective' situation which normally means, quite simply, somebody else's problems somewhere else.

Women who cannot deal with the peculiar forms oppression takes in their private lives are highly suspect when they begin to talk about forms of oppression that afflict other women. The peculiarities and severity of oppression vary according to class and race and women of different classes and races must first deal with the particular forms of oppression found in their own situations. If we cannot face our own problems we have no right to claim that we have answers to other people's problems.⁵

The small group ensures that each individual is safe enough (through solidarity and non-judgement) to probe the experience of personal oppression (to howl and shout, cry and complain) and on this basis to understand others and how oppression comes about.

Concepts of Women's Liberation

The political organization of Women's Liberation as an all-women movement based on maximum collective work and minimum domination by 'leaders' has produced (and has itself been produced by) certain concepts. These concepts are, on the one hand, its initial contribution to the development of its new politics, or, on the other, an expression of the understanding of the oppression of women. Into the first category comes 'consciousness-raising', and 'no leaders', and 'non-élitism'; into the second comes 'sexism', 'male chauvinism' and 'feminism'. In either borrowing or originating these concepts, Women's Liberation makes the first move towards transcending its own beginnings (the first 'complaints' that

5. Pamela Allen: *The Small Group Process*, San Francisco Women's Liberation, p. 15, in *The Small Group, Three Articles by Lynn O'Connor, Pam Allen, Liz Binding*, Women's Liberation Basement Press, Berkeley.

women made) and towards organizing itself as a political movement.

(1) Consciousness-Raising

Many liberationists see consciousness-raising as one of the most important contributions of the movement to a new politics. Women's Liberation is crucially concerned with that area of politics which is experienced as personal. Women come into the movement from the unspecified frustration of their own private lives, find that what they thought was an individual dilemma is a social predicament and hence a political problem. The process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political - this process is *consciousness-raising*. A paradigm that is often given is of a small group of women one of whom decides to describe all her feelings connected with an abortion she has had; in turn, people follow suit. If they haven't had abortions, then their fears, social-moral attitudes, etc. In this way a personal incident that was condemned to the oblivion of privacy is examined as a manifestation of the oppressed conditions women experience: the personal is seen to be a crucial aspect of the political.

Detractors deride consciousness-raising sessions as 'group therapy'. The accusation is more interesting than it is meant to be. It reveals both inaccuracy and prejudice. One might well ask why, in a country like the United States, with a middle-class urban population that is virtually besotted with the need for psycho-therapy and psychiatry, there is (a) anything wrong with people imitating 'group therapy' and (b) why they don't know what group therapy is? In a Women's Liberation consciousness-raising session there is, quite simply, no 'impartial' therapist: all are involved and at stake. But why, if it were the case, would it be a slur? Of course, the apparent denigration of therapy is really only a concealed put-down of women: oh, they're moaning again, gossiping their complaints, having a

nag... what they need is a good therapist (twentieth-century parent-surrogate punisher).

In fact, the concept of 'consciousness-raising' is the reinterpretation of a Chinese revolutionary practice of 'speaking bitterness' – a reinterpretation made by middle-class women in place of Chinese peasants and in a country riddled by psycho-therapeutic practices. These peasants, subdued by violent coercion and abject poverty, took a step out of thinking their fate was natural by articulating it. The first symptom of oppression is the repression of words; the state of suffering is so total and so assumed that it is not known to be there. 'Speaking bitterness' is the bringing to consciousness of the virtually unconscious oppression; one person's realization of an injustice brings to mind other injustices for the whole group. Nobody suggests that this revolutionary practice could be imported wholesale from the conditions of peasants in pre-revolutionary China to Women's Liberation Movements in the advanced capitalist countries. But there is a relevance which doesn't insult the plight of the Chinese peasant. In having been given for so long their own sphere, their 'other' world, women's oppression is hidden far from consciousness (this dilemma is expressed as 'women don't want liberating'); it is this acceptance of a situation as 'natural', or a misery as 'personal' that has first to be overcome. 'Consciousness-raising' is speaking the unspoken: the opposite, in fact, of 'nattering together'.

Speaking the unspoken is, of course, also the purpose of serious psychoanalytic work. Unfortunately, it is not the prevalent purpose. The concept and practice of 'consciousness-raising' has suffered a debasement by its development in a country sold over to debased psychotherapy. The spread of the Esselin methods and of 'encounter-therapy' has had its effects on many aspects of radical politics. Ostensibly evoking the unspoken (more normally the 'unspeakable' in its restricted sense), provoking the unholy (enforcing taboo – sensual, sexual and soulful 'touching' between 'untouchable' strangers), this 'therapy' has taught us the scope of our inhibitions – but only for the sake of it. Brought up in a society that inhibits us,

as inhibited individuals we go to an encounter-therapy session to meet other inhibited individuals. We break out inhibitions, 'make contact' and... become uninhibited individuals? Maybe – for what? Do we thus gain inner peace, strength, 'togetherness'? For what? From inhibited individual, through the group, to the uninhibited individual. The circles of the mind. Revolutionary politics is linear – it must move from the individual, to the small group, to the whole society.

Some of the Women's Liberation 'consciousness-raising' groups have suffered the fate of the whiplash. Individual – small group – individual. Lonely women have left home and gone back home. Never moving out of the small circle, the fervour of the Chinese peasant has become the fashion of the middle-class American. Women's Liberation knows this, as it knows that the ability to articulate is a privilege that is easily abused:

Women in the group also felt that consciousness-raising should be a means to the development of a politics and not as an end in itself. Women in the group also felt that consciousness-raising was particularly suited to the highly articulate women of the middle and upper classes and that these women were able to gain ascendancy over the group through their proficiency in this central activity of the Group.⁶

(2) Male Chauvinism and Male Supremacy

'Male chauvinism' is being too much of a man. Either the male chauvinist has internalized the domination of men within our society and, in his individual actions and attitudes epitomizes this 'supremacy' or, as radical feminists believe, this attitude pre-exists any specific social formation:

... We believe that the purpose of male chauvinism is primarily to obtain psychological ego satisfaction, and that only secondarily does this manifest itself in economic relationships.... For this reason we do not believe that capitalism, or any other economic system, is the cause of female oppression, nor do we believe that female oppression will disappear as a result of a purely economic

6. Pamela Allen: *op. cit.*, p. 12.

revolution. The political oppression of women has its own class dynamic. And that dynamic must be understood in terms previously called 'non-political' – namely the politics of the ego... the male ego identity (is) sustained through its ability to have power over the female ego. Man establishes his 'manhood' in direct proportion to his ability to have his ego override hers, and derives his strength and self-esteem through this process. This male need, though destructive, is in that sense, impersonal. It is not out of a desire to hurt the woman that he dominates her and destroys her; it is out of a need for a sense of power that he necessarily must destroy her ego and make it subservient to his...⁷

The radical feminists postulate psychology as the primary determinant of male chauvinism. Socialists see the social formation as shaping individual behaviour and psyche. Which ever analysis is offered, the term, as it is descriptive and not analytical, has the same implications: it means a man who takes up a position, either consciously or instinctively, of domination (and egotism), over and against women, by virtue merely of his status as a man.

(3) Sexism and 'Patriarchy'

'Sexism', as a term, has gained increasing currency, as 'male chauvinism' (as a term) has somewhat declined. The concept is a clear analogy with 'racism' and indicates the inferiorization (attitudinal and actual) of one sex by the other. A society divided, divisively, along sex lines. Where male chauvinism is mostly used of individuals, sexism describes a whole society and social culture. One of the fullest explorations of the concept is Kate Millet's 'theory of sexual politics' or her 'notes towards a theory of patriarchy' in her recent book *Sexual Politics*.⁸ 'Patriarchy' is used – slightly loosely – to mean not the rule of the father but, more generally, the rule of men. Kate Millet establishes that 'patriarchy' is a 'universal (geographical and historical) mode of power relationships' and domination.

7. New York Radical Feminist Manifesto, Celestine Ware: op. cit., pp. 58–9.

8. Kate Millet: *Sexual Politics*, Doubleday Inc. 1970. See pp. 82–4, for a slightly fuller discussion of her thesis.

She establishes that within 'patriarchy' the omnipresent system of male domination and female subjugation is achieved through socializing, perpetrated through ideological means, and maintained by institutional methods. Men are dominant by habit (the effect of psychology, socialization and ideology) and when necessary by force (they control the economy, the state and its agents, e.g. the army, and they have a monopoly on sexual violence). According to this thesis 'patriarchy' is all-pervasive: it penetrates class divisions, different societies, historical epochs. Its chief institution is the family: having the shakeliest of biological foundations, 'patriarchy' must rely instead on 'inherited' culture and the training of the young. It endures as a power system because it is so well entrenched that it hardly needs to be visible, invoking the 'natural' it claims to be irrevocable. Different societies have never offered real alternatives: 'Perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. A referent scarcely exists with which it might be contrasted or by which it might be confuted.' Patriarchy endures because it endures.

'Patriarchy' then is the sexual politics whereby men establish their power and maintain control. All societies and all social groups within these are 'sexist' – not in the sense that one could maintain 'all societies are racist', but in the far more fundamental sense that their entire organization, at every level, is predicated on the domination of one sex by the other. Specific variations are less significant than the general truth.

(4) Feminism

Feminism has been variously defined and is currently loosely used to indicate anyone who strongly supports the rights of women – to emancipation, liberation or equality. A stricter definition is the one negatively postulated by Simone de Beauvoir in her autobiography *Force of Circumstances*.

I never cherished any illusion of changing woman's condition; it depends on the future of labour in the world; it will change

9. Kate Millet: op. cit., p. 58.

significantly only at the price of a revolution in production. That is why I avoided falling into the trap of 'feminism'.¹⁰

Today, it is, I believe, only 'liberal feminists' who 'cherish the illusion' that social equality can be achieved in a democratic capitalist country without a revolution; 'radical feminists' believe that it can be achieved nowhere without the feminist revolution being paramount. But liberal feminism and radical feminism do share the position that women's oppression can be fought independently of other oppressions, whereas Women's Liberationists who follow a materialist analysis, as does Simone de Beauvoir, believe it is a central, and yet intrinsic part of a larger revolutionary struggle for changing the dominant mode of production from capitalism to socialism and finally communism. Radical feminists are now inclined to re-establish this distinction as they establish their theory, so that we can say 'feminism' is the belief that women's oppression is first, foremost, and separable from any particular historical context.

10. Simone de Beauvoir: *Force of Circumstances*, André Deutsch, 1965, p. 192.