

The Retreat To Cultural Feminism

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Many women feel that the women's movement is currently at an impasse. This paper takes the position that this is due to a deradicalizing and distortion of feminism which has resulted in, among other things, "cultural feminism."

Cultural feminism is the belief that women will be freed via an alternate women's culture. It leads to a concentration on lifestyle and "personal liberation", and has developed at the expense of feminism, even though it calls itself "radical feminist."

The phrase cultural feminist was originally used to attack radical women who were exposing the allegedly personal issues like sex and housework as political, women's liberation issues. I first saw the phrase used in an article in *Women: A Journal of Liberation* (Volume 2, No. 4), by Elizabeth Diggs, who calls herself a "socialist feminist." Socialist feminists coined the phrase, and used it interchangeably with "radical feminist", in their effort to characterize feminism as non-political. The term cultural feminism, and radical feminism along with it, was then adopted by women who actually do have a non-political view of feminism.

DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL FEMINISM

Cultural feminism really got going in the women's movement with the breakup of the new left around 1970, and reflected the New Left's decreasing political emphasis. Similarly, the "counter culture", which flourished throughout the '60's, got a boost out of the New Left crackup. Cultural feminism is a direct descendant of the counter culture, embracing the dope and back-to-nature trends so prevalent in the latter.

Existing tendencies within the women's movement helped this along. Feminism has been continuously and deliberately deradicalized. This has been done in several ways: through changing the definition of radical feminism; through censoring out the early, militant feminism in the press; and through curbing militant feminists, mostly by indirect means, such as personal attack rather than political attack.

The militant women who created the Women's Liberation Movement based their organizing work and theory on the premise that all women are oppressed as women and that personal liberation was impossible. The concept of "the liberated woman" or "the liberated

lifestyle" was disproved by the radical, feminist analysis of the common oppression of women as a class. The locus of women's oppression, therefore, is not culture but power, men's class power. Since women's oppression is a political matter affecting all women, it is necessary for women to create a mass, political women's movement to overthrow male supremacy.

Another theory, increasingly pushed as feminism itself grows, absolves men from any but psychological responsibility (if that) for the oppression of women and blames it all vaguely on "sex roles" or "society." The idea is that our oppression is purely psychological and the way to get out of it is to develop a "sense of self" and see how "men are oppressed too" by sex roles. This theory, by promoting a "Sex Role Revolution" instead of a real feminist revolution papers over the class antagonism between men and women and substitutes cultural change for power change. It has generally replaced radical feminism as the ideology of most of the women's movement, while itself adopting the name radical feminism.

The feminist media reflects movement opinion. It also helps form it, however, and this is where media depoliticizing comes in. The early (1968-1971) issues of women's movement periodicals are full of news of actions and new ideas, giving a sense of dynamism that is conspicuously lacking in later publications (with a few exceptions).

By 1972, the radical ideas of feminism were almost nowhere in evidence. The *phrase* radical feminist was everywhere, however. Radical feminist is widely used as a descriptive term—but it is used to describe cultural feminism. (Occasionally socialist feminists apply the term to themselves as well.) In most articles purporting to give ideological overviews of the women's movement, three categories are listed: reformist feminism (NOW-type politics), cultural feminism (frequently called radical feminism), and socialist feminism (male left). Genuine radical feminism is entirely left out. A censorship of radical feminist ideas is coupled with mystification by calling things radical feminist when they aren't. Thus radical feminist phrases such as consciousness-raising and "the personal is political" are used, but the original radical definitions and source papers are not. Both terms, in fact, have been distorted beyond recognition.

Women become involved in cultural feminism through four general motivations, which of course overlap. Most cultural feminists were never very political to start with. Many of them are in the women's movement because it has become fashionable and cultural feminism is the easiest thing to get into. Women become involved who are burned

out in (mostly male left) groups, and retreat into cultural feminism. Lesbians reeling from a hostile society and a hostile women's movement retreat into cultural feminism because at least *here* they can be accepted. Some women become involved because the only other women's groups in their area are groups like NOW, and cultural feminism seems more radical (more radical being equated with less reformist).

The main bulwarks of cultural feminism are women's centers. Most have been formed as places for women to congregate socially, with little pretense of any political motivations. They are run by friendship groups and have social gatherings which are mostly attended by the friendship cliques who stay around the center. * Other centers of cultural feminism are universities (check out most campus women's groups), women's communes, and women's art (cultural) centers.

LIFESTYLISTS, OR "IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD, BABY"

Anybody who's had any contact with cultural feminists knows that how we live and who we live with is more important than any politics we may espouse. In fact, if we don't live the right way, we are looked upon as benighted and unliberated. Living the right way is the politics. The political position is that if our lifestyles are pure enough and we set up enough "alternative" situations, the revolution will magically arrive, and everything oppressive will automatically collapse through accumulated good vibes. In the meantime, post-revolutionary models must be provided for all the unliberated out there in the prerevolutionary society. The "liberated" lifestyle, and those women engaged in it, will be the model.

This theory relies on the liberal model of education and "changing image" (self and group-image) of social change, which also shows up in the male counter-culture and in sexism. It refuses to deal with the realities of male supremacy, which all women, including the lifestylists, have to do. Lifestylists deal with male supremacy by withdrawing from it and pretending it isn't there.

Setting up "alternative" situations doesn't really work. Most alternatives reach very few people. They have to struggle just to keep themselves afloat, much less reach out to others.

The recent rash of feminist businesses is similar. Although, depending on their situation and function, these businesses can provide useful services and support people financially, they cannot be seen as a solution to women's oppression. There is something disquieting about women promoting the idea of small shops as the road to liberation when the economy has long since outstripped them.

Concentration on "alternatives" causes a movement to renounce overthrow of the surrounding society for peaceful coexistence with it. And the probabilities of cooptation of alternate institutions are notorious.

There is a belief that the revolution will inevitably arrive

* The problem with women's centers is not simply who runs them. Their structures militate against political initiative. The typical women's center is a federation of loosely connected single issue (project) groups, which seldom, if ever, operate together on anything. The energies of those who work at women's centers are either taken up with keeping the center in existence or are siphoned off into project groups.

and all we have to do is sit back and wait for it. One thing I have found in common in *all* successful reformers and revolutionists in the past is that they worked hard to prepare a revolution. (If we don't do our work, someone else just might—and that someone else may very well be inimical to us.)

Many cultural feminists agree that revolution is necessary. "But," they say, "revolution comes as a result of small changes people make in their own lives, not in cataclysms." By "small changes" they mean individual changes, lifestyle changes. Our herstory does not lack for strong individual women who made pretty big changes in their own lives (and at times in others' lives) against all odds. But I do not know of one case where these individuals, without a strong feminist movement around them, changed the life patterns of the majority of women one jot, or even freed themselves. At most, they served as inspiring examples. Lifestylists see their main function as serving as inspiring examples.

At this point the argument comes up that if *every* woman would make these small changes . . . This argument shows a lack of understanding of the comprehensiveness of male supremacy. Individual changes, no matter how many people make them, cannot go beyond minimal changes unless the larger political and economic structures of male supremacy are changed, too. Their argument sounds like a nice way of saying go slow, don't move too fast. The cultural feminists are waiting for everyone to become perfect before they do anything, which of course guarantees they never *will* do anything.

If solutions to our problems could be found in individual changes ("getting our heads together"), we wouldn't need a movement. If we have a political movement, it's not there for small changes, but for big ones.

It is apparent that the emphasis on lifestyle goes with a de-emphasis on genuine social change. Despite their talk, cultural feminists do not believe in the possibility of a revolution or want one. Their political position shows a belief that revolution (or trying for one) is futile, and therefore they must get it where they can.

"AN ARMY OF LOVERS SHALL NOT FAIL" — TO LOSE

The rise of lesbianism as an issue within the women's movement coincided with the rise of cultural feminism. The two have had a mutual impact on each other's development, and have blended to some extent.

Lesbians involved in cultural feminism who push the "Radicalesbian" line tend to come from two different places. Many lesbian separatists came directly from the male left and its colonies in the women's movement (anti-imperialist women, Bread and Roses, etc.) to lesbian separatism around 1971, without ever really passing through feminism. A majority of these women, before the Great Change, were heterosexual, anti-lesbian, and anti-feminist. They still are anti-feminist. They became anti-heterosexual as opposed to anti-male supremacist. Using a lesbian version of the male left line which stresses divisions among women because of women's relations with men, they concluded that women couldn't and shouldn't get together *as women*. These women are still acting as colonizers for the male left in the women's movement.

The other group of lesbians who became involved in cultural feminism are women who always have been lesbians (or bisexual), but who are not political at all, or if

they have been, in a civil rights (for homosexuals) direction. Many of these women have worked with Gay Liberation, and tend to identify more as homosexuals than as women. They, too, have bypassed feminism. Their lesbianism has always emphasized the personal solution, and they are primarily involved in cultural feminism for an improved social life and an alternative to the bar scene.

The lesbian version of cultural feminism has two sides to it: 1) Being a lesbian, is sufficient in itself for being a feminist. This is favored by the more social-life-oriented women. 2) One has to be a lesbian in order to be a feminist. This is favored by the male left-oriented separatists. Lesbianism is either confused with feminism or placed above it.

At best this is apolitical cultural feminism, passing itself off as radical feminism. At worst it is an anti-political elimination of feminism with the goal of universal lesbianism substituted for the goal of women's liberation. It can become openly anti-feminist as with Jill Johnston's "Feminism is the complaint, and lesbianism is the solution." Or the *practice* of feminism becomes identified with lesbianism as with "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice" as both Ti-Grace Atkinson and Rita Mae Brown have suggested. Political thought is avoided, replaced by an emphasis on lifestyle and social life. The function of feminism is to create social change, not social life. Friends, etc., may be an outgrowth of feminism, but not its purpose. Such use of the women's movement is opportunist and corrupt.

Currently, actual lesbians make up a minority of lesbian cultural feminists. Heterosexual women, discouraged from being honest about their sexual orientation, wanting to be "in" with the in-crowd, finding what they feel to be the outlaw element in lesbianism attractive, and trying to avoid real feminism, have made miraculous conversions in droves. There are so many fad lesbians running around, it isn't funny. These women have used, hurt and driven many serious lesbians out of the women's movement. Many heterosexual women (who are too honest and not easily intimidated) have also left the organized women's movement. (A few bigots have gone, too.) Current movement writings on lesbianism concentrate on how great it is, not on objective, honest, political analysis of lesbianism. The lesbian movement (such as it is) is now totally corrupt. Speaking as a lesbian, I would rather see women go honest than go gay. Speaking as a woman, I would rather see a woman go feminist than lesbian.

THE SISTERHOOD MAFIA

—"THOU SHALT RELATE OR ELSE"

In the early stages of the women's movement, sisterhood meant that we recognized that women are a class and that gave us common ground and reasons to unite politically. Flower power has come to the women's movement, and what started as a political slogan now means loving everybody. And "loving", in the new vocabulary, means "relating." Since relating frequently implies sexuality, this feeds into the lesbian cult, and vice versa. At any rate, we have to "relate" to every woman (actually every cultural feminist who has the urge) who ever crosses our path.

The communal situations pushed by many cultural feminists strongly encourage "relating." The lack of allowance for mental and physical privacy seriously hampers work. It's impossible to devote time to serious work and "relate" too.

The insistence on "sisterhood" provides powerful social and political sanctions against disagreement (with cultural feminists!) or taking initiative. Male left women use the rhetoric of sisterhood a lot to mask political differences and infiltrate feminist groups. Opportunists use it for pretty much the same reasons.

This has also been related to the leadership question. Many women have seen the anti-leadership line that has come out of this as the cause of all the current problems of the women's movement. The leadership question is in fact academic. The whole point of the anti-leadership trend was to remove the original, militant feminist leadership, and replace it with cultural feminist leadership. In fact, now that the cultural feminists and opportunists are firmly in the saddle, leadership has become the vogue. Opportunists now manage to scotch any debate (and possible exposure) by proclaiming that those who disagree with them are either "leaders" or now, "anti-leaders." Once again, political issues are not investigated, and psychological motivations are imposed. If we want a political movement, we must judge our co-workers by their politics, and we'd better judge *everybody's* politics, including our own, if we want to win.

Cultural feminism, through the Sisterhood Mafia, changes the focus of the women's movement from winning our freedom to being a "good person." It promotes the therapy model of liberation (and just look at the spread of "feminist therapy"), and replaces political organizing with moral rearmament. The logical conclusion of moralism is the matriarchy trend.

MATRIARCHY

Matriarchy is popular, not simply because of its ties to cultural feminism, but because it recognizes the necessity of women taking power. However, it promptly mythologizes the idea of power, bases it on morality, and sets it in the past. It removes the idea of women's liberation from actual possibility to a mythic utopia, thus negating it. It draws from an unknown past instead of defining a real future. Its strategy and/or goal is to withdraw from the fight against male supremacy and set up a separate women's community, which will prove to men the error of their ways by shaming them with women's superior morality. This is another "alternate institution"—how long are we going to be given alternatives rather than the real thing?

Along with this goes the God argument. Matriarchy backtracks into religion. There are papers devoted to God as a female. In some of them, restoring mother goddess worship is made into the central theme of the women's movement. Jane Alpert's paper "Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory" is most notorious, but Robin Morgan's "Lesbianism, and Feminism: Synonyms or Contradictions?" is a close second. The pure woman can concentrate on heaven and leave men to concentrate on earth. Heavenly matters, if indeed there is a heaven, should be left to those who are already there.

Mysticism and religion are based on fatalism. Fatalism sees change made by ourselves in concrete conditions as impossible. As such, fatalism is absolutely opposed to revolutionary change.

The matriarchy trend is very helpful to the forces of fascism, who promote the Big Rock Candy Mountain of some golden age (whether in the past or after death) for people to get hooked on, while they consolidate their

power here and now. I don't think it's coincidence that this patriarchy thing is being pushed now, with repression deepening.

THE FLIP SIDE—"SOCIALIST FEMINISM"

While countercultural chimeras have taken over the women's movement, the male left side of the movement has moved in "socialist feminism" to fill in the political gap—mostly through various "Women's Unions" around the country. Socialist feminism and cultural feminism, despite surface differences, manage to coexist very well. That is because they have very similar political views on feminism.

Since socialist feminists see women oppressed as women primarily in our private lives (psychologically) via sex roles, feminism is also seen by socialist feminists as a purely

lifestylist, personal, and sweet sisterhood phenomenon created to make life a little easier away from the barricades and to help women in self-development.

Socialist feminists see the only, or major, problem for women, as women, to be capitalism or "society", not male supremacy or even sexism. They don't really analyze the problem differently than that of the working class as a whole. Thus women should concentrate on fighting capitalism, alongside their "brothers." Feminism is pushed to the side, and in the interests of all those men on the left (the *real* "brothers"!), it wouldn't do to have the feminism too threatening and political.

Like cultural feminism, socialist feminism deradicalizes feminism by opposing its political element. They censor political feminism out of their publications as do the cultural feminists. (Socialist feminists also attack the ideas

TAKING POLITICS OUT OF THE ANALYSIS

SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Currently there are two ideological poles, representing the prevailing tendencies within the movement. One is the direction toward new lifestyles within a women's culture, emphasizing personal liberation and growth, and the relationship of women to women.

... The other direction is one which emphasizes a structural analysis of our society and its economic base. It focuses on the ways in which productive relations oppress us.

... As socialist feminists, we share both the personal and the structural analysis.

— "Socialist Feminism,"
Hyde Park Chapter

Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 1972

One premise of socialist feminism is that women are oppressed in two ways: economically, and psychologically or culturally.

— Elizabeth Diggs,

WOMEN: A JOURNAL OF LIBERATION, 1972

RADICAL FEMINISM

After centuries of individual and preliminary political struggle, women are uniting to achieve their final liberation from male supremacy. . . . Because we have lived so intimately with our oppressors, in isolation from each other, we have been kept from seeing our personal suffering as a political condition. This creates the illusion that a woman's relationship with her man is a matter of interplay between two unique personalities, and can be worked out individually. In reality, every such relationship is a *class* relationship, and the conflicts between individual men and women are *political* conflicts that can only be solved collectively. . . . Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. *All men* receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. *All men* have oppressed women.

— Redstockings Manifesto,
July 7, 1969

The class separation between men and women is a political division.

— The Feminists,
July 15, 1969

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.

— Anne Koedt,
New York Radical Feminists Manifesto,
December, 1969

of radical feminism—such as an independent women's movement, men as the oppressors of women—through linking them with cultural feminism and never saying that these are two different positions in the women's movement. They use the obvious errors of cultural feminism to attack radical feminism. Another tactic they use, to compound the confusion, is to call *themselves* radical feminists on occasion.)

Since radical socialism is implicit in radical feminism (and vice versa), removing genuine feminism tends to negate genuine socialism. Socialist feminism not only has no clearcut definition of feminism, but no clearcut definition of socialism either. A socialist is defined by socialist feminists as someone who wants a better society with new relations between people, virtually a lifestyle definition. Socialism, like feminism, is "culturalized" and depoliticized by socialist feminism.

The combination of socialism and feminism, two of the most radical movements there are, should be a most potent force. It is not. Socialist feminists do not use the radical portions of either, and they end up with a liberal, opportunistic doctrine.

CONCLUSION

Cultural feminism, then, is an attempt to transform feminism from a political movement to a lifestyle movement. Its expectations of the "new" ideal woman mirror the old ones. Cultural feminism is an idealist trend and women have been oppressed in the name of ideals expected of us for too long. Cultural feminism sees

ideology as the cause of oppression. It avoids the whole issue of power, bases its thought on moralism, psychology, sex roles, and culture, and is fatalistic in its political views. It is therefore directly inimical to revolutionary change, since real revolution deals directly, and basically, with power (as does politics generally), and with real conditions.

The pivot of women's oppression does not lie in our stars, lifestyles, sense of ourselves, or sex roles. It lies in who has power and who doesn't. Men have power and the benefits that go with it, all at women's expense. Sex roles can be blurred or even switched with the actual power situation remaining the same.

Since cultural feminism has always emphasized process rather than content, and avoided looking at where we are going, it has made the women's movement into a goal-less movement, a place where radicals fear to tread. Cultural feminism has served as a diversion from our work and a smokescreen for our oppression. Individuals have been making considerable hay off cultural feminism—to the detriment of the women's movement.

There are two things that can happen. Radical feminism can evaporate, leaving a choice among reformism, an apolitical counter culture, or plain old male leftism. Or polarization can develop between radical feminism and cultural feminism, relegating the latter to the sidelines of the movement. At the same time, radical feminists can clearly state—and act on—our differences with reformism and "socialist feminism." It is the second possibility we must promote if we want the women's movement to be a viable force for revolutionary change.

I have extraordinarily little interest or taste for what is generally called the "final goal of socialism." This aim, whatever it be, is nothing to me, *the movement is everything.* (emphasis in the original)

— Eduard Bernstein, 1898

THE DILEMMA OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM:
EDUARD BERNSTEIN'S CHALLENGE TO MARX

Bernstein thus travels in logical sequence from A to Z. He began by abandoning the *final aim* and supposedly keeping the movement. But as there can be no socialist movement without a socialist aim, he ends by renouncing the *movement.* (emphasis in the original)

— Rosa Luxemburg,

REFORM OR REVOLUTION, 1900

Radical means "right-on";
not extreme, not severe but right-on.

— Kathie Sarachild