

Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon

The following represents a compilation and expansion of text, notes and comments from a talk Kathie Sarachild gave on consciousness-raising to the First National Conference of Stewardesses for Women's Rights in New York City, March 12, 1973.

Sarachild outlined the original program for "Radical Feminist Consciousness-Raising" which was presented at the First National Women's Liberation Conference outside Chicago, November 27, 1968.

Kathie Sarachild

THE IDEA

To be able to understand what feminist consciousness-raising is all about, it is important to remember that it began as a program among women who all considered themselves radicals.

Before we go any further, let's examine the word "radical." It is a word that is often used to suggest extremist, but actually it doesn't mean that. The dictionary says radical means root, coming from the Latin word for root. And that is what we meant by calling ourselves radicals. We were interested in getting to the roots of problems in society. You might say we wanted to pull up weeds in the garden by their roots, not just pick off the leaves at the top to make things look good momentarily. Women's Liberation was started by women who considered themselves radicals in this sense.

Our aim in forming a women's liberation group was to start a *mass movement of women* to put an end to the

barriers of segregation and discrimination based on sex. We knew radical thinking and radical action would be necessary to do this. We also believed it necessary to form Women's Liberation groups which excluded men from their meetings.

In order to have a radical approach, to get to the root, it seemed logical that we had to study the situation of women, not just take random action. How best to do this came up in the women's liberation group I was in—New York Radical Women, one of the first in the country—shortly after the group had formed. We were planning our first public action and wandered into a discussion about what to do next. One woman in the group, Ann Forer, spoke up: "I think we have a lot more to do just in the area of raising our consciousness," she said. "Raising consciousness?" I wondered what she meant by that. I'd never heard it applied to women before.

"I've only begun thinking about women as an oppressed group," she continued, "and each day, I'm still learning more about it—my consciousness gets higher."

Now I didn't consider that I had just started thinking about the oppression of women. In fact, I thought of myself as having done lots of thinking about it for quite a while, and lots of reading, too. But then Ann went on to give an example of something she'd noticed that turned out to be a deeper way of seeing it for me, too.

"I think a lot about being attractive," Ann said. "People don't find the real self of a woman attractive." And then she went on to give some examples. And I just sat there listening to her describe all the false ways women have to act: playing dumb, always being agreeable, always being nice, not to mention what we had to do to our bodies with the clothes and shoes we wore, the diets we had to go through, going blind not wearing glasses, all because men didn't find our real selves, our human freedom, our basic humanity "attractive." And I realized I still could learn a lot about how to understand and describe the particular oppression of women in ways that could reach other women in the way this had just reached me. The whole group was moved as I was, and we decided on the spot that what we needed—in the words Ann used—was to "raise our consciousness some more."

At the next meeting there was an argument in the group

about how to do this. One woman—Peggy Dobbins—said that what she wanted to do was make a very intensive study of all the literature on the question of whether there really were any biological differences between men and women. I found myself angered by that idea.

“I think it would be a waste of time,” I said. “For every scientific study we quote, the opposition can find their scientific studies to quote. Besides, the question is what we want to be, what we think we are, not what some authorities in the name of science are arguing over what we are. It is scientifically impossible to tell what the biological differences are between men and women—if there are any besides the obvious physical ones—until all the social and political factors applying to men and women are equal. Everything we have to know, have to prove, we can get from the realities of our own lives. For instance, on the subject of women’s intelligence. We know from our own experience that women play dumb for men because, if we’re too smart, men won’t like us. I know, because I’ve done it. We’ve all done it. Therefore, we can simply deduce that women are smarter than men are aware of, and smarter than all those people who make studies are aware of, and that there are a lot of women around who are a lot smarter than they look and smarter than anybody but themselves and maybe a few of their friends know.”

In the end the group decided to raise its consciousness by studying women’s lives by topics like childhood, jobs, motherhood, etc. We’d do any outside reading we wanted to and thought was important. But our starting point for discussion, as well as our test of the accuracy of what any of the books said, would be the actual experience we had in these areas. One of the questions, suggested by Ann Forer, we would bring at all times to our studies would be—who and what has an *interest* in maintaining the oppression in our lives. The kind of actions the group should engage in, at this point, we decided—acting on an idea of Carol Hanisch, another woman in the group—would be consciousness-raising actions . . . actions brought to the public for the specific purpose of challenging old ideas and raising new ones, the very same issues of feminism we were studying ourselves. Our role was not to be a “service organization,” we decided, nor a large “membership organization.” What we were talking about being was, in effect, Carol explained, a “zap” action, political agitation and education group something like what the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.) had been. We would be the first to dare to say and do the undareable, what women really felt and wanted. The first job now was to raise awareness and understanding, our own and others—awareness that would prompt people to organize and to act on a mass scale.

The decision to emphasize our own feelings and experiences as women and to test all generalizations and reading we did by our own experience was actually the scientific method of research. We were in effect repeating the 17th century challenge of science to scholasticism: “study nature, not books,” and put all theories to the test of living practice and action. It was also a method of radical organizing tested by other revolutions. We were applying to women and to ourselves as women’s liberation organizers

the practice a number of us had learned as organizers in the civil rights movement in the South in the early 1960’s.

Consciousness-raising—studying the whole gamut of women’s lives, starting with the full reality of one’s own—would also be a way of keeping the movement radical by preventing it from getting sidetracked into single issue reforms and single issue organizing. It would be a way of carrying theory about women further than it had ever been carried before, as the groundwork for achieving a radical solution for women as yet attained nowhere.

It seemed clear that knowing how our own lives related to the general condition of women would make us better fighters on behalf of women as a whole. We felt that all women would have to see the fight of women as their own, not as something just to help “other women,” that they would have to see this truth about their own lives before they would fight in a radical way for anyone. “Go fight your own oppressors,” Stokely Carmichael had said to the white civil rights workers when the black power movement began. “You don’t get radicalized fighting other people’s battles,” as Beverly Jones put it in the pioneering essay “Toward A Female Liberation Movement.”

THE RESISTANCE

There turned out to be tremendous resistance to women’s simply studying their situation, especially without men in the room. In the beginning we had set out to do our studying in order to take better action. We hadn’t realized that just studying this subject and naming the problem and problems would be a radical action in itself, action so radical as to engender tremendous and persistent opposition from directions that still manage to flabbergast me. The opposition often took the form of misinterpretations and misrepresentations of what we were doing that no amount of explanation on our part seemed able to set straight. The methods and assumptions behind consciousness-raising essentially grew out of both the scientific and radical political traditions, but when we applied them to women’s situation, a whole lot of otherwise “scientific” and “radical” people—especially men—just couldn’t see this.

Whole areas of women’s lives were declared off limits to discussion. The topics we were talking about in our groups were dismissed as “petty” or “not political.” Often these were the key areas in terms of how women are oppressed as a particular group—like housework, childcare and sex. Everybody from Republicans to Communists said that they agreed that equal pay for equal work was a valid issue and deserved support. But when women wanted to try to figure out why we weren’t *getting* equal pay for equal work anywhere, and wanted to take a look in these areas, then what we were doing wasn’t politics, economics or even study at all, but “therapy,” something that women had to work out for themselves individually.

When we began analyzing these problems in terms of male chauvinism, we were suddenly the living proof of how backward women are. Although we had taken radical political action and risks many times before, and would act again and again, when we discussed male chauvinism,

suddenly we were just women who complained all the time, who stayed in the personal realm and never took any action.

Some people said outright they thought what we were doing was dangerous. When we merely brought up concrete examples in our lives of discrimination against women, or exploitation of women, we were accused of "man-hating" or "sour grapes." These were more efforts to keep the issues and ideas we were discussing out of the realm of subjects of genuine study and debate by defining them as psychological delusions.

And when we attempted to describe the realities of our lives in certain ways, however logical—for instance, when we said that men oppressed women, or that all men were among the beneficiaries in the oppression of women—some people really got upset. "You can't say that men are the oppressors of women! Men are oppressed, too! And women discriminate against women!" Now it would seem to go without saying that if women have a secondary status in the society compared to men, and are treated as secondary creatures, then the beneficiaries would be those with the primary status.

Our meetings were called coffee klatches, hen parties or bitch sessions. We responded by saying, "Yes, bitch, sisters, bitch," and by calling coffee klatches a historic form of women's resistance to oppression. The name calling and attacks were for us a constant source of irritation and sometimes of amazement as they often came from other radicals who we thought would welcome this new mass movement of an oppressed group. Worse yet, the lies prevented some of the women we would have liked to reach from learning about what we were really doing.

THE PROGRAM

There was no denying, though, that we ourselves were learning a tremendous amount from the discussions and were finding them very exciting. From our consciousness-raising meetings was coming the writing which was formulating basic theory for the women's liberation movement. Shulamith Firestone, who wrote the book *The Dialectic of Sex*, Anne Koedt, who wrote the essay "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," Pat Mainardi, who wrote the essay "The Politics of Housework," Carol Hanisch, who wrote the essay, "The Personal is Political," Kate Millett, who wrote *Sexual Politics*, Cindy Cisler, who led the ground-breaking abortion law repeal fight in New York, Rosalyn Baxandall, Irene Peslikis, Ellen Willis, Robin Morgan and many others participated in these discussions. Most of us had thought we were already radicals; but we were discovering that we were only beginning to have a radical understanding of women—and of other issues of class, race and revolutionary change.

Our group was growing rapidly. Other women were as fascinated as we about the idea of doing something politically about aspects of our lives as women that we never thought could be dealt with politically, that we thought we would just have to work out as best we could alone. Most of these issues the National Organization for

ROOTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

But why should I in so vast an ocean of books by which the minds of men are troubled and fatigued . . . expose this noble philosophy to be damned and torn to pieces by the maledictions of those who are either already sworn to the opinions of other men, or are foolish corrupters of good arts, learned idiots, grammatists, sophists, wranglers, and perverse little folk? . . . But to you alone, true philosophers, honest men, who seek knowledge not from books alone, but from things themselves have I addressed these magnetic principles. . . .

William Gilbert
Preface to ON MAGNETISM, 1628

We had to adopt the method which physicians sometimes use, when they are called to a patient who is so hopelessly sick that he is unconscious of his pain and suffering. We had to describe to women their own position, to explain to them the burdens that rested so heavily upon them, and through these means, as a wholesome irritant, we roused public opinion on the subject, and through public opinion, we acted upon the Legislature.

Ernestine Rose, 1860
HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE

All knowledge originates in perception of the objective external world through man's physical sense organs. Anyone who denies such perception, denies direct experience, or denies personal participation in the practice that changes reality, is not a materialist.

Mao Tsetung
"On Practice", 1937

You can't give the people a program until they realize they need one, and until they realize that all existing programs aren't . . . going to produce . . . results. What we would like to do . . . is to go into our problem and just analyze . . . and question things that you don't understand so we can . . . get a better picture of what faces us. If you give people a thorough understanding of what it is that confronts them, and the basic causes that produce it, they'll create their own program; and when the people create a program you get action.

Malcolm X, 1964
MALCOLM X SPEAKS

Women (NOW) wouldn't touch. Was it because these subjects were "petty" or really hitting at the heart of things—areas of deepest humiliation for all women? Neither was NOW then organizing consciousness-raising groups. This

only happened after 1968, when the new and more radical groups formed, with a mass perspective. Our group's first public action after putting out a journal was an attempt to reach the masses with our ideas on one of those so-called petty topics: the issue of appearance. We protested and picketed the Miss America Contest, throwing high heels, girdles and other objects of female torture into a freedom trash can. It was this action in 1968 which first awakened widespread awareness of the new "Women's Liberation Movement," capturing world interest and giving the movement its very name.

Our study groups were radicalizing our own consciousness and it suddenly became apparent that women could be doing on a mass scale what we were doing in our own group, that the next logical radical action would be to get the word out about what we were doing. This kind of study would be part of what was necessary to achieve the liberation of women on a mass scale. The pattern of obstacles to consciousness-raising was also getting quite clear. And so I outlined a paper talking about this—about how very political these so-called bitch sessions could be, suggesting what important information for our fight we still had to get from studying the experiences and feelings of women, describing some of the obstacles, and proposing that women everywhere begin.

SIX YEARS LATER

Since 1967, consciousness-raising has become one of the prime educational, organizing programs of the women's liberation movement. Feminist groups and individual women who at first didn't think they needed it are all doing it. As consciousness-raising became popular, many other groups and individuals have become involved in it and its nature has been changed to suit various purposes. The term consciousness-raising has become widely used in contradictory contexts. A recent *New York Times* article referred to a meeting called by Henry Kissinger to talk to the executives of the major television networks about the content of their programs as a "curious 'consciousness-raising' session with a Secretary of State."

Even in the women's liberation movement there are all kinds of proponents of consciousness-raising, people who are looked upon as "experts in the field" and people who are drawing up all kinds of guidelines and rules for its use. In all of this, the original purpose of consciousness-raising, its connection with revolutionary change for women, is all too often getting lost. This is why a look at the origins of consciousness-raising provides such an important perspective.

The purpose of women's liberation was to defeat male supremacy and give women equality. We felt this was such a monumental task. How to approach it? Consciousness-raising seemed to be what was needed.

The male supremacist Establishment and its forces of discrimination against women that consciousness-raising set out to critique have rolled with the punch. Now the opposition to consciousness-raising frequently comes under the guise of support or partial support. The Establishment

is trying to change consciousness-raising, weaken, dilute, and take away its strength so it won't cause any more changes.

Going to the sources, the historic roots, to the work that set the program in motion, is one of the ways to fight this process. The wellspring of consciousness-raising's power is the commitment to a radical approach, a radical solution. What actually went on in the original consciousness-raising program which turned out to be so provocative, the thinking behind it, the literature which the original group produced, form the kernel experience from which all other lessons grew. From it we can also discover what may have been wrong in the original thinking that allowed some organizing to go off the track. But any corrections in the original idea must be done to make the weapon of consciousness-raising in the hands of women sharper, not duller.

CHECKING OUT THE ORIGINAL SOURCES

The people who started consciousness-raising did not see themselves as beginners at politics, including, in many cases, feminism. Yet they intended consciousness-raising as much for themselves as for people who really were beginners. Consciousness-raising was seen as both a method for arriving at the truth and a means for action and organizing. It was a means for the organizers themselves to make an analysis of the situation, and also a means to be used by the people they were organizing and who were in turn organizing more people. Similarly, it wasn't seen as merely a stage in feminist development which would then lead to another phase, an action phase, but as an essential part of the overall feminist strategy.

To get consciousness-raising started we, as organizers, gave it priority in our actions and outreach political work. In that sense we saw it as a first stage—to awaken people, to get people started thinking and acting. But we also saw it as an ongoing and continuing source of theory and of ideas for action. We made the assumption, an assumption basic to consciousness-raising, that most women were like ourselves—not different—so that our self-interest in discussing the problems facing women which most concerned us would also interest other women. Daring to speak about our own feelings and experiences would be very powerful. Our own rising feminist consciousness led us to that assumption by revealing that all women faced oppression as women and had a common interest in ending it. Anything less than a radical approach to feminism wouldn't interest other women any more than it did us, wouldn't seem worth the effort. We felt that other women, too, would respond to what was radical, although they perhaps would not think of themselves as "radical" due to widespread distortion of the meaning of that word.

From the beginning of consciousness-raising—as you can see in the first program outlined in 1968—there has been no one method of raising consciousness. What really counts in consciousness-raising are not methods, but results. The only "methods" of consciousness-raising are essentially principles. They are the basic radical political principles of going to the original sources, both historic and personal,

going to the people—women themselves, and going to experience for theory and strategy. Experience in consciousness-raising can't be judged by expertise in any alleged methods but by expertise in getting results, in producing insights and understanding. It is striking how many people in the right circumstances can suddenly become experts by these standards! One of the exhilarating and consciousness-raising discoveries of the Women's Liberation Movement has been how much insight and understanding can come from simple honesty and the pooling of experience in a room full of women who are interested in doing this.

The paraphernalia of rules and methodology—the new dogma of “C-R” that has grown up around consciousness-raising as it has spread—has had the effect of creating vested interests for the methodology experts, both professional (for example, psychiatrists) and amateur. There have been a number of formalized “rules” or “guidelines” for consciousness-raising which have been published and distributed to women's groups with an air of authority and as if they represented the original program of consciousness-raising. But new knowledge is the source of consciousness-raising's strength and power. Methods are simply to serve this purpose, to be changed if they aren't working.

RADICAL PRINCIPLES BRING RESULTS

For instance, the aim of going around the room in a meeting to hear each woman's testimony, a common—and exciting—practice in consciousness-raising, is to help stay focused on a point, to bring the discussion back to the main subject after exploring a tangent, to get the experience of as many people as possible in the common pool of knowledge. The purpose of hearing from everyone was never to be nice or tolerant or to develop speaking skill or the “ability to listen.” It was to get closer to the truth. Knowledge and information would make it possible for people to be “able” to speak. The purpose of hearing people's feelings and experience was not therapy, was not to give someone a chance to get something off her chest . . . that is something for a friendship. It was to hear what she had to say. The importance of listening to a woman's feelings was collectively to analyze the situation of women, not to

analyze *her*. The idea was not to change women, was not to make “internal changes” except in the sense of knowing more. It was and is the conditions women face, it's male supremacy, we want to change.

Though usually very provocative, fascinating and informative, “going around the room” can become deadening and not at all informative, even defeating the purpose of consciousness-raising, when it is saddled with rigid rules like “no interruptions,” “no tangents,” “no generalizations.” The idea of consciousness-raising was never to end generalizations. It was to produce truer ones. The idea was to take our own feelings and experience more seriously than any theories which did not satisfactorily clarify them, and to devise new theories which did reflect the actual experience and feelings and necessities of women.

Consciousness-raising, then, is neither an end in itself nor a stage, a means to a different end, but a significant part of a very inclusive commitment to winning and guaranteeing radical changes for women in society. The view of consciousness-raising as an end in itself—which happens when consciousness-raising is made into a methodology, a psychology—is as severe and destructive a distortion of the original idea and power of the weapon as is seeing consciousness-raising as a stage. As one woman, Michal Goldman, put it, “I get tired of those people who are always experimenting, never discovering anything, always examining, but never seeing—always changing, always remaining the same.”

Nor does consciousness-raising, as some have implied, assume that increased awareness, knowledge, or education alone will eliminate male supremacy. In consciousness-raising, through shared experience, one learns that uncovering the truth, that naming what's really going on, is necessary but insufficient for making changes. With greater understanding, one discovers new necessity for action—and new possibilities for it. Finding the solution to a problem takes place through theory and action both. Each leads to the other but both are necessary or the problem is never really solved.

MINDLESS ACTIVISM

The purpose of consciousness-raising was to get to the

In my opinion, to search means nothing in painting.
To find is the thing.

— *Picasso*

Black poets should seek—but not search too much
In sweet dark caves, nor hunt for snipes
Down psychic trails (like the white boys do).

— *Etheridge Knight*

I get tired of those people who are always experimenting, never discovering anything.
You know, they're always changing, always remaining the same.

— *Michal Goldman*

A QUESTION FOR CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

This meeting was held . . . in an effort to educate the young revolutionary cadres in the fundamentals of class relations and class consciousness so that they could, as they themselves said, "get at the root of calamity." . . . The meeting lasted three days and three major issues were discussed: (1) Who depends upon whom for a living? (2) Why are the poor poor and the rich rich? (3) Should rent be paid to landlords? . . . When the meeting broke up on the third day the three main questions had been settled in the minds of most: (1) The landlords depended on the labor of the peasants for their very life. (2) The rich were rich because they "peeled and pared" the poor. (3) Rent should not be paid to the landlords.

— William Hinton, *FANSHEN*, 1966

most radical truths about the situation of women in order to take radical action; but the call for "action" can sometimes be a way of preventing understanding—and preventing radical action. Action comes when our experience is finally verified and clarified. There is tremendous energy in consciousness-raising, an enthusiasm generated for getting to the truth of things, finding out what's really going on. Learning the truth can lead to all kinds of action and this action will lead to further truths.

But no particular change in a woman's personal behavior, nor any particular action or strategy, are presupposed. By the very logic of the idea no action can be required ahead of time in consciousness-raising unless a group is using consciousness-raising specifically to brainstorm for an action. The idea is to study the situation to determine what kinds of actions, individual and political, are necessary. This is also true quite practically. If women fear they have to take action on what they are talking about, especially action alone, as individuals, they won't talk about anything they're not ready to take action on, or they won't be honest. In fact, part of why consciousness-raising is the radical approach is that women are not coming to take immediate action. We can't limit our thinking or our action only to that which we can do immediately. Action must be taken, but often it must be planned—and delayed.

Our idea in the beginning was that consciousness-raising—through both C-R groups and public actions—would waken more and more women to an understanding of what their problems were and that they would begin to take action, both individual and collective. And this has certainly happened—on an unprecedented scale. Of course, with greater unity and organization more can actually be accomplished and solved. But people have to learn this, and there is more and more to learn about which methods of organization and action we need. There is also more to do about clarifying our goals and defining the obstacles—making connections between the oppression of women and other systems of oppression and exploitation.

Analyzing our experience in our personal lives and in the movement, reading about the experience of other people's struggles, and connecting these through consciousness-raising will keep us on the track, moving as fast as possible toward women's liberation.

We have been often asked, "What is the use of Conventions? Why talk? Why not work?" Just as if the thought did not precede the act! Those who act without previously thinking are not good for much. Thought is first required, then the expression of it, and that leads to action; and action based upon thought never needs to be reversed: it is lasting and profitable, and produces the desired effect. I know there are many who take advantage of this movement, and then say: "You are doing nothing; only talking." Yes, doing nothing! We have only broken up the ground and sowed the seeds; they are repaying the benefit, and yet they tell us we have done nothing!

— Ernestine Rose, 1860
HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE

Kwame Nkrumah said, "Thought without action is empty and action without thoughts is blind." He says, "Revolutions are made by men who think as men of action and act as men of thought. These are the only people who make revolution."

— Stokely Carmichael
AKWESASNE NOTES, Early Winter 1974

SUGGESTED READINGS

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BACKGROUND

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