

Separate To Integrate

Barbara Leon

With the resurgence of the women's rights movement in the middle 1960's the question of female separatism quickly came to the fore. The critical issue was the demand for groups both *of* and *for* women.

Of course, there had been groups of women long before this: in the political spectrum these ranged from Women's Strike for Peace on the left to the League of Women Voters in the middle to the Daughters of the American Revolution on the right. In addition, there were myriad non-political women's organizations—ladies' auxiliaries, women's clubs, women's colleges, the YWCA, etc. The exclusively female composition of these groups alarmed no one because their goals, no matter how much they differed from group to group, were the same in the one crucial respect of not addressing the question of women's rights.

Given the conditions of male supremacy, these women's groups were often the only places where women could work at all freely on what interested them. At best they represented an attempt to survive under male supremacy, but certainly not to end it. Given women's demands to get out of the house, men allowed this form of woman's group as a preferable alternative to having women in the ranks, and especially in the leadership, of their own organizations.

In the early and mid-1960's, women active in the radical movement were beginning to take actions which confronted male supremacy in their organizations and the question of how to work with men on an equal basis. In 1964, for example, SNCC women held informal meetings to deal with their position in the movement. At one point they presented these issues to a SNCC staff meeting, an action led off by Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, a SNCC founder. It was in these meetings that the phrase "women's liberation" began to be used. Later efforts included the demand for a women's plank at the 1966 SDS convention and the 1967 National Conference for a New Politics where women attempted to put women's issues on the agenda and paralleled the demand of black people for 51% voting power at the Conference. During this period the women who were raising the slogan "women's liberation" and the radical ideas behind it were still trying very seriously to work within the "integrated" radical movement. Independent women's liberation groups did not yet exist.

In June 1966 the National Organization for Women was

formed. As its title indicated, this was not to be an organization *of* women but of women and men *for* women. The first paragraph of the NOW Statement of Purpose reads:

We, men and women who hereby constitute ourselves as the National Organization for Women, believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America. . .

Although questions could be raised about either the extent or the effect of male participation in NOW, the group clearly rejected female separatism as a tool for winning women's rights on the grounds that to exclude men would mean to acquiesce to segregation. They presented themselves as idealists in this respect—they would not be guilty of the same bigotry as men—although one always sensed an undercurrent of fear: fear of being called man-haters, of turning off other women, of confronting the reality of men's power over women and deciding what actions would be necessary to end it.

From the statements and oral arguments of many NOW representatives, it would seem that the strategy behind NOW's membership policy was that of standing up for a principle, "living" a principle, making a "model" of it as the way of actually implementing it. It was assumed, on superficial moral grounds, that a group fighting against the exclusion of women on the basis of sex could not itself exclude on the basis of sex. But a look at the actual history and events shows that NOW's integrated feminist efforts remained virtually invisible until the radicals began separatist organizing.

From 1967 onwards independent women's liberation groups—groups both of and for women—began to form. The early founders were responding directly to the failure, and sometimes ridicule, which met their early efforts to raise the issues of women's liberation in integrated movement groups. Their experience of working with men, both men who claimed to be sympathetic to women's liberation ideas and men who claimed to be unsympathetic, combined with the explosive contribution of ideas from the black power movement, left few in doubt that women would have to meet alone, without men, to begin to really do something about women's liberation. Though their reasons varied, by the time the radical women were ready to try to start an independent women's liberation movement, they had already come to the conclusion that some form of separatist organizing was necessary.

Nevertheless, in their early actions these radical women clearly differentiated their idea of separatism from the old

concept and practise of sexually segregated groups. The separatism they espoused was to be only a means for ending the age-old problem of sexual segregation and the inequality it spawned, a distinction which was emphasized in the very first demonstration of the early independent women's liberation groups. In a joint action of New York and Chicago Radical Women in January, 1968, New York Radical Women called upon the women at the Jeanette Rankin Brigade, an all-woman peace group, to stop organizing on the basis of their traditional female roles—in this case as wives and mothers for peace—and to start organizing for women's liberation. They were in effect calling for an all-women's group to end all-women's groups. At the core of feminism, after all, was the demand for the integration of men and women in society and an end to the artificial division of labor and of power based on sex.

However, there were differences in the reasons radical women felt separatism to be strategically necessary and these were significant. Women like Shulamith Firestone, a founder of New York Radical Women, saw separatism as a way of building a power base for women:

We must not come as passive suppliants begging for favors, for power 'cooperates' only with power . . . Until we have united into a force to be reckoned with, we will be patronized and ridiculed into total political ineffectiveness. (Firestone, leaflet for Jeanette Rankin Brigade, January 1968).

Pam Allen, who was also a founder of New York Radical Women was representative of another prevalent view. She saw the reason for female separatism in terms of psychology, not power:

. . . women themselves don't feel up to filling leadership positions. They don't feel as qualified as men do, nor as competent or political. We found that there are very strong inferiority feelings amongst women and that it was very productive and positive to have women meet together and find out that it is not an individual problem . . . chauvinism is man's problem. We have enough to work out to begin to develop a sense of true identity.

Allen goes on. . .

I seem to be on one side of what may be a very basic difference . . . It has to do with whether or not one's goal is to attack men and push men into allowing us to be part of their society or beginning to define who and what we are in our own terms. (Allen, excerpts from WBAI interview with Pam Allen and Julius Lester, May 5, 1968).

The psychological and therapeutic analysis vs. the political analysis reflected very different feelings about oneself and other women. The women who took the political view of separatism did not feel themselves unqualified with respect to men and found themselves running into problems with radical and non-radical men alike just because they were qualified. They felt that the opposition and antagonism placed in the way of women who recognized their

equality and acted on it, were the essential problem for women as a whole, whether women felt inferior or not. The "inferiority feelings" described by other women, when correctly analyzed, would be revealed to be genuine fear, confusion, etc.—in other words, a logical outcome of having to cope with people with more power. The need to meet separately was due to a political conflict of interest with men at that point in social and political history. One could not organize against male power with men right in the room. To ask that women be able to do so was to demand some kind of mystical superiority, that they be better than the ordinary human beings both men and women are.

The two views also reflected different goals. According to Allen we had a choice of two goals—becoming "part of their society" or "beginning to define who and what we are." Left out of this analysis is the radical feminist goal of defining not who we are but what we want and in doing so shaping our—not their—society.

Generally speaking, whether the early women's liberation spokeswomen took a liberal therapeutic view or a radical political view of the solution to their problems as women, separatism was seen only as a necessary strategy. The purpose was always integration with equality. A look at the original use of the slogan "sisterhood is powerful" in the leaflet in which it was first raised shows this clearly. It exemplified the radical theory on which the women's liberation movement was launched. (see box)

The separatist independent women's liberation movement actually began to fight in many *concrete* ways to implement this kind of radical, feminist integration. The fight for the right to abortions, after all, was a fight for sexual relations with men—but on an equal basis. The fight to get men to share the housework was another essentially integrationist fight from a growing power base of the women's liberation movement, as was the fight for child care centers. The success of these fights would have the effect of freeing women further to assault the longstanding segregated bastions of work life and political life.

The response of the left to the radical women's groups changed when it became obvious that feminist ideas were catching on and spreading across the country. While the earliest responses had ranged from pure ridicule of women to a minimizing and individualizing of the problems of women, now some parts of the left began to express a seeming acceptance of the basic premise that women were an oppressed group and that the issue was an important one to be attacked right now. In fact, they continued to resist women's liberation by opposing the means of getting it—the independent women's liberation movement. They accused all-women feminist groups—the very groups which had forced this minimal recognition of male supremacy in left groups—of perpetuating the undesirable division between men and women. Like NOW, the left insisted that men and women must work together to change the system which oppressed them. It would seem that, where the position of women specifically was concerned, the left had finally caught up with, but gone no further than the "bourgeois" NOW for which it had such contempt.

What brought about resistance by the left was the threat of real action on feminist issues. The firing of Carol Hanisch

TRADITIONAL WOMANHOOD IS DEAD!

Women of America can now unite for the real power with which to win peace, freedom, and justice for everyone . . . ourselves included!

TRADITIONAL WOMEN WERE BEAUTIFUL . . .

but really powerless!

Even when women were only allowed to define themselves physically, as mothers and sex symbols—even when we could only be a man's "better half" and not ourselves—even when we were taught that our *other* human qualities were either non-existent or unattractive—even when we thought it was "smart" to be "dumb"—even then, we women were complex and potentially beautiful human beings.

"UPPITY" WOMEN EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL . . .

but still powerless . . .

Even now when women are struggling individually in the man-made rat race or when we are grateful slaves to our low-paying jobs—even when we scorn other women and resent our own bodies, the bodies which once limited our lives—even when we are aggressive and pushy—we women are closer to being beautiful than traditional women because we *want* to be full human beings and are demanding our freedom.

SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL!

When we women begin to see the beauty in ourselves and in each other—when we realize that our resentments are natural, not unnatural—when we understand that our personal problems are social ones and must be solved together—when we ask a hearing in our own right as human beings, female people—then we will have the power to free ourselves and demand, not plead for, peace and social justice.

HUMANHOOD IS THE ULTIMATE!

ONLY WHEN ALL THOSE WHO ARE EXPLOITED—WHETHER AS BLACK PEOPLE OR AS WOMEN, AS THE POOR AND UNEMPLOYED, OR AS INDIVIDUAL WORKERS AND CHEAP ORGANIZED LABOR "THANKFUL" FOR OUR JOBS—ONLY WHEN WE SEE THAT OUR PERSONAL LIMITATIONS ARE REALLY PRISONS BUILT BY THE PRIVILEGED AND THAT THESE PRISONS ARE LOCKED BY BRAINWASHING AND GUARDED BY MILITARY POLICE POWER . . . THAT, THEREFORE, THE WEAK AND EXPLOITED MUST UNITE IN ORDER TO BREAK OUT OF THE PRISONS—ONLY THEN, CAN THERE BE INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM FOR ALL PEOPLE AND REAL LOVE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT INTEGRATION FOR FREE MEN AND WOMEN IS NOT A UTOPIAN GOAL BUT A BIOLOGICAL NECESSITY. INTEGRATION OF FREE PEOPLE WILL BE THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION FOR HUMANITY!

leaflet written by Kathie Amatniek (Sarachild) for New York Radical Women, Jan. 15, 1968

by the Southern Conference Educational Fund was a case in point. Hanisch, then a paid organizer for SCEF, wanted to organize women into women's liberation groups. SCEF responded that male supremacy should be dealt with in "mixed groups". But in "mixed groups" the men prevailed.

Yet SCEF supported all-women's groups where the issue was not feminist. A protest letter from New York Radical Women pointed out to SCEF that their position was directly the opposite of the organizing principles of women's liberation:

Forming separate women's groups on issues other than women's rights and liberation is reactionary. It falls right within male supremacist designs for keeping women segregated, excluded and 'in their place'. Only if the *stated* purpose of a women's group is to fight *against* the relegation of women to a separate position and status, in other words, to fight for women's liberation, only then does a separate women's group acquire a revolutionary rather than a reactionary character. Then separation becomes a base for power rather than a symbol of powerlessness . . . we are oppressed in other ways besides as women . . . we have to fight for other issues as well. When we organize on working class issues, however, we will be organizing as workers, not as women . . . unless, of course, we have to form women's caucuses in unions in order to win our rights in those unions. But that would be a women's rights issue and, therefore, would necessitate a separate women's group (and power base). If we cannot win our rights in general organizations, then we will form new general organizations open to men who accept our demands. Organizations like Women for Peace, Women for Schools, even a Women's Action Group which fails to deal *openly* and *directly* with the particular oppression of *women*, are basically 'ladies auxilliary' formations. The word radical when applied to them is a contradiction in terms. They serve to give women 'something to do' without rocking the male supremacist boat. We demand that SCEF stop organizing such auxilliaries, calling that 'women's liberation.' (Kathie Amatniek for New York Radical Women, NY Women's Liberation newsletter, 5/1/69).

Events of the early 1970's effectively settled the argument over whether there should be all-female women's liberation groups. Such groups were in fact springing up all over the United States and in many other parts of the world. But, while the political assumptions of the early radical women were proving correct, much of their analysis of the function of a separate women's movement was lost. In an ironic throwback to the old days of the women's clubs, many women's groups began to be seen as ends in themselves—places 'for socializing, making friends and self-development.

Former opponents began to fight in a new way by accepting the ideas that had proven so popular and then revising them. Many women in liberal politics, for example, made use of the slogan Sisterhood Is Powerful to try to

organize women around non-feminist issues, forming groups of women against war, poverty, imperialism or consumer exploitation. Their argument, true as far as it went, was that women are affected by and must fight against all kinds of repression and exploitation. However, their use of the all-women's group to do this—rather than fighting for mixed groups around these issues with full and equal participation for women—was opportunistically based on the widespread appeal of women's liberation.

As revision of feminist theory has become more and more of a problem in the women's liberation movement, the separatist issue has been even further distorted. The last couple of years have seen the elaboration of an ideology which makes sexual separation not a tactic, not a strategy, not even a compromise with a bad situation, but an ultimate goal. Thus the rewriting of feminist theory and specifically of the separatist question has reached full circle back to the point where women are again to be eternally defined by their sex.

One of the most striking examples of this reactionary separatism is the praise given to Elizabeth Gould Davis' *The First Sex*. This book attempts to prove the existence and superiority of an ancient matriarchal civilization (rule based significantly on good old fashioned Motherhood) and calls for a return to matriarchy:

In the new science of the twenty-first century, not physical force but spiritual force will lead the way. Mental and spiritual gifts will be more in demand than gifts of a physical nature . . . And in this sphere woman will again predominate. She who was revered and worshiped by early man because of her power to see the unseen will once again be the pivot—not as sex but as divine woman—about whom the next civilization will, as of old, revolve. (Davis, *The First Sex*, p. 339).

One might ask what would happen to women in Davis' world who are tired of the pressure to be divine, to be Woman in her special "sphere", and who want simply to be accepted as human.

Jill Johnston's work is another example. She endorses Davis' view of a matriarchal future in her book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, a book which revises the definition of feminist to mean lesbian right in the title. She goes further:

The word lesbian is expanded so much through political definition that it should no longer refer exclusively to a woman simply in sexual relation to another woman . . . The word is now a generic term signifying activism and resistance and the envisioned goal of a woman committed state . . . The essence of the new political definition is peer grouping. Women and men are not peers and many people seriously doubt whether we ever could be. (Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, p. 278).

Johnston and others whose goal is *segregation* ("peer grouping") have attacked women who do not share this

goal and who are actively fighting against exclusions based on sex. They complain that feminists see themselves as women only in relation to men:

All the feminist issues—abortion, child care, prostitution, political representation, equal pay—are in relation to the man. In other words in relation to reproductive sexuality. (*Lesbian Nation*, p. 152).

Although it is difficult to see what political representation and equal pay have to do with reproductive sexuality, the general point about men and the specific point about issues concerning reproductive sexuality are true. But this is not a contradiction in feminism; rather, at its heart. Feminists see women as an oppressed class, a class which can only exist in relation to another oppressing class, men, and for a purpose—the exploitation of labor, which in the case of women also means reproductive labor. The only radical goal is the elimination of all classes.

Related to this revision of the radical feminist theory of separatism has been the attempt to turn feminist strategy from political to personal action. It was radical feminism which pointed out the necessity for women to move from personal to political solutions to our problems. Separating from men in one's individual life was not part of this political strategy, falling in the realm of individual rather than collective action. The particular tactics for their liberation struggle that women used as individuals in their personal lives and particular circumstances could best be determined by women themselves. The current insistence in some parts of the movement that women prove their feminism by leaving their men, while viewed by some as more "radical", really represents a limitation of tactics and a kind of accommodation. To those who accept the idea that male supremacy is incurable and therefore permanent, there can only be two alternatives—living with it or withdrawing from it. They will then pressure women to accept that analysis and resign themselves to one choice or the other.

Fortunately, the acceptance of permanent sexual classes has not fooled the masses of women who have had access to real feminism for too short a time to give it up so easily. Action and organizing are still resulting from the energizing ideas of the pioneer radical feminists. But the weakening of radical feminism by the revisionist second phase of the movement has temporarily prevented the development of

Even in politics, women must make their contribution not as "housewives" but as citizens. It is, perhaps, a step in the right direction when a woman protests nuclear testing under the banner of "Women Strike for Peace." But why does the professional illustrator who heads the movement say she is "just a housewife," and her followers insist that once the testing stops, they will stay happily at home with their children?

— Betty Friedan
THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

new feminist theory and thus the breaking of new ground in the struggle for women's liberation.

This may be partly seen as a result of careerism in the movement. Feminists for a long time understood the importance of getting more jobs for women. But we didn't sufficiently differentiate between the progressive nature of breaking open fields in the job market and the danger of creating establishment-financed "movement" jobs (e.g. women's studies teachers, "women's liberation" writers, etc.) which would give women a stake in perpetuating the movement forever, changing it, in fact, from a movement into just another arena of established society.

There is a lesson to be learned from history here. The 19th century radicals of the women's rights movement set in motion a whole century of ferment and action. But the conservative suffragists who came later, the second phase of that movement, would not or could not provide the leadership necessary to focus all this action and keep it going—in fact, they were instrumental in bringing it to a halt. Interestingly enough, one of the areas where they went wrong was in accepting the idea of "woman's sphere"—in other words, reactionary separatism; they said, for example, that

women should have the vote not simply because they were people and just as entitled to vote as men, but because they had special feminine qualities which would make them tidy "housekeepers of the world" and guardians of political purity. A movement cannot be sustained on this kind of myth, on any new version of the old lies about women. The pedestal is still unreal, and, in any case, is hardly a substitute for liberation.

What are the implications of all this theory and experience for the present strategy of radical feminists? The goal set in the 1960's was to build a power base of women from which to attack the powerful segregated bastions of male supremacy. Women were fighting for a new society that guaranteed full integration on a basis of equality. There was tremendous resistance against our building a power base but the women's movement was nevertheless able to make enormous headway toward achieving this part of the goal. The problem now is putting the power base to use for the integrationist purposes originally intended, and again the resistance is strong. If there must be a women's movement, male supremacy would rather see it remain separate and unequal. The following story from the life of a

A REPORT ON SEPARATISM IN CHINA

It is true that women were encouraged to "... unite politically to attack the authority of the bureaucracies with which they had contact ...," but so was everyone else who fell into the broad classification of revolutionary masses. I at no time encountered or even heard of the concept of women "... participating in political action as women ..." nor of the women's collectives of which Salaff speaks, except in those instances in which women simply happened to be in occupational groups made up entirely of women—an increasingly unusual phenomenon affecting mostly older women—who joined together in "housewives groups." The vast majority of women assumed their natural collective to be among those with whom they worked and with whom they were in political agreement, and the women who rose to positions of mass leadership in the Cultural Revolution did not lead women, but women and men. To have suggested that it be otherwise (and once again, I never heard even a suggestion of such an idea) would, I'm sure, have been regarded as the most shocking form of male supremacy. . . .

A final generalization demands comment. Just as it is not generally true that women were organized in women's collectives during the Cultural Revolution, it is equally incorrect to state that "... women were not organized as women during the revolutionary period." It was precisely during the long revolutionary period when the struggles of women often involved their specific problems as women that such

organization did take place. Any examination of instructions or policy documents will reveal that one of the first organizational tasks of the revolutionary army upon entering an unorganized village was to see to it that women's collectives were set up. It should be fairly apparent from Salaff's own discussion of the struggle for women's liberation during the revolution that the implementation of such radical changes in their lives as the Marriage Law and the distribution of land to women would have been impossible without women being organized into their own groups for discussion and action. However, at the present time, as women come to play an increasingly equal role in society, their problems become less specifically women's problems and their need for women's collectives becomes less. Nobody says that the problems of women as women have disappeared and neither have women's collectives, but certainly the trend is in that direction, not the other way around.

—Nancy Milton, in reply to
Janet Salaff and Judith Merkle,
Berkeley Journal of Sociology, 1971-72

EDITOR'S NOTE: We find this interesting because it sounds so much like our own approach. We're not sure it's the one that has prevailed in China (Certainly it hasn't prevailed here!)

There is also some evidence that Milton's assessment—that women's liberation groups and the need for them were withering away—was wrong.

pioneering woman orchestra conductor, Antonia Brico, illustrates the point:

One day, a group of women came to me . . . I think there were nine, and they wanted me to conduct them in some little ensemble. And I made the remark . . . oh what a remark . . . 'If nine women can play together, why not ninety.' And so I founded the New York Women's Symphony. So I got a group of key women together and said 'how many women musicians are there in New York?' 'Oh,' they said, 'there are stacks of them but they don't get any chance to play in orchestras.' I said 'We're just going to see about that.' Then I got the *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* together and said I'm going to form a Women's Symphony and we're going to announce it and see what happens. Well, they crawled out of the highways and byways and dusted off their instruments. They said you'll never get enough instruments, but I did. The whole full complement 100 piece orchestra—horns, trombones, everything.

They came from everywhere and we made the papers all over the place. We had our first concert in Town Hall and it was a gratis one, just to interest people and to get press. And then we got a committee together which was terribly excited and I spoke at this and that luncheon and everything else and Mrs. Roosevelt lent her name as one of the sponsors. . .

It was a great success and made a great sensation

and then committees got together and formed a Board of Directors and the New York Women's Symphony was in business for several years.

We had sponsors and we sold tickets and finally I said that's fine, however, I want people to mix in orchestras as they do in life—men and women mix in life and they should in orchestras. And so I changed it to a mixed orchestra. Then they said that was no sensation anymore—the Board of Directors wasn't interested. (from *Antonia*, a film by Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow).

Antonia Brico's efforts were acceptable as long as she confined herself to proving that women were qualified musicians. She had no trouble finding 100 women who could play in an orchestra or getting financial backing for them to do so. But finding the backing for men and women to play together in a truly integrated orchestra proved to be impossible. Fighting for integration proved to be more of a threat to male supremacy and, therefore, harder to achieve.

The women's movement is at that same point now. We can take the easier way of accepting segregation, but that would mean losing the very goals for which the movement was formed. Reactionary separatism has been a way of halting the push of feminism. Both building a separate power base and pushing for integration are necessary for the victory of women's liberation. Women's groups are progressive only if they exist for the purpose of making themselves unnecessary.

SUGGESTED READING *Stokely Speaks* by Stokely Carmichael, 1971. The original source writings on Black Power.



Women's Strike for Equality, New York City, Aug. 26, 1970.

Howard Petrick