

# The Liberal Takeover Of Women's Liberation

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It was just a little over five years ago in 1967 that the first independent women's liberation groups began to emerge. This paper is not so much concerned with the history of events that were to follow as with the history of the ideas, the ideology, the theory.

In those early days, caught up as we were in one of those rare moments in history when the truth shines through so brilliantly that it becomes the most moving and profound experience of our lives, we thought it would only be a matter of a few years before we would have male supremacy conquered. In retrospect that idea sounds a little naive—silly almost. But in those early days, still united in one group (New York Radical Women), we thought our differences could be worked out, that women would experience the same relief and excitement that we were going through and would unite in a force so strong that men wouldn't have a chance.

As we shared with other women the flood of our experiences as women and emerged with many of the lies about ourselves swept out of our minds along with the self-blame and guilt that had plagued us all our lives, we couldn't help but believe that all women (or most anyway) would come to the same conclusions that we were coming to. We shared the same experiences and on that fact we based our hopes. When others came to conclusions different from ours (upheld the current left/liberal male order), we thought they would be quickly persuaded as more women spoke out. It is here that we made our first significant error: we underestimated the *power* of male supremacy and therefore overestimated the readiness, willingness and ableness of women to unite, fight and win.

Today the women's liberation movement is in the hands of a group of liberal opportunists, and therefore in the hands of the left/liberal male establishment. These women—*Ms.* magazine, some of the *Village Voice* writers, and the "women's lib ladies" in communities all over the country—are scrambling frantically after the few crumbs that men have thrown out when we radicals began to expose the truth and demand some changes. These are the women who

have access to the press and money. They are supposedly "the leaders" of the women's movement, but they are leading us down the road to a few respectable reforms and nothing more.

How did these women get their power? The answer is twopronged. First, they do not ask for much and they do not really demand what they ask for. They refuse to name men as the enemy (oppressor) and talk endlessly about that vague monster "society," as being responsible for it all. To them there are no actual people involved and no conflicting personal interests. They claim that women are brainwashed and damaged and consent to their own oppression and that men, poor things, treat women badly because they have been socialized into a "role." As NOW states in a leaflet called NOW GOALS:

*Questions of rights and responsibilities are interwoven in the complexity of roles and divisions of labor imposed on men, as well as women, by upbringing, tradition, legislation and practice. NOW encourages consciousness-raising to the effects of sex-role stereotyping of both sexes.*

Further, they talk about women's oppression as a legal question, as if getting some legislation passed will solve our situation. For them it is always a social (societal) question or a legal question. Never is it a question of the realities of power, real power—economic (who owns), military (whose physical strength) and political (who rules). It is never a question of what it means to take that power and distribute it among us all.

These women have power within the movement because they do not seriously threaten the male powers that be. They are the right-hand women of the male liberal/left. Gloria Steinem, for example, writes in *Ms.* (Oct., 1972) how "one benefit speech in Florida on the Women's Movement could bring \$10,000 in ticket sales into (Democratic Party) campaign coffers."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It's one thing to support a political candidate because his or her election will give us certain reforms that are useful to our goal. It's quite another matter to raise money and support in the name of women's liberation and put our very limited resources into the *control* of the lesser of two enemies. That money (and other kinds of support) must be kept in our own control.

As uncomfortable as these women may be to men at times, they must sound great compared to the "female chauvinist boors," as Betty Friedan calls the women's liberation militants.

The other main reason why these opportunists were able to take over the women's movement was that they were able to divide and silence and/or drive out the pro-woman radical feminists. Their biggest tactic was to always make every discussion, every disagreement, every everything into one of *structure* as opposed to *content*. The real political questions that divided the movement since its earliest days were submerging in debates over structural problems. Structural change was put forth as both a long-range (abolish the family) and short-range (alternative life styles) *solution* to the problem of male supremacy. Structure replaced male supremacy as the problem, with new structures posed as the solution. Thus they never attacked the problem directly. Those who challenged these assumptions were subject to character assassination or attacks on their "bad personalities." Building the proper "non-structure" structure in the movement became the test of whether it was radical. Thus structure became an excellent tool for keeping certain people and ideas under control, for keeping them from going too far too fast.

It wasn't that the pro-woman radical feminists were opposed to structure per se. Structure was seen as necessary to accomplish a goal. What they objected to was that it became a dogma, an ideology, a goal in itself. Structure must be flexible, used when necessary, discarded when necessary, changed when necessary—all to the purpose of achieving a goal in the best possible way.

### THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION

The major "structural" question has been that of leadership. The line that gained prominence in the beginning was that we should not have leaders. Who it came from, I'm not entirely sure. Different women meant different things by it and supported it for different reasons. I was one of its proponents at first. Along with many women, I was sick of the type of leadership I had experienced in other groups and organizations. I was particularly bitter about the "honcho" type leadership of the left which I had tried to work with for several years. No leadership, no spokeswoman, no votes, action by consensus. It sounded so good. But what started out as a utopian vision has ended in a nightmare. This line, along with its companion lines of equality, lot systems, and distorted sisterhood proved the vehicles by

which the radical feminists were divided and silenced and no new radical feminist leadership was created.

No doubt some women liked the "no leadership" line because the members of these early groups, despite basic agreements, had differing political positions on some crucial issues. Some said men were the enemy (oppressor); some said only capitalists or "the system." Some wanted to work within the left; some did not. Some blamed women for our oppression; some blamed men; some blamed "sex roles" or society. The no-leadership line therefore was a means of keeping each other in check to be sure that the group did not come out with a political position that was not yours. Thus New York Radical Women, for example, never really emerged with a clear cut political position as a group, though *Notes from the First Year* did represent some very important commonly held positions on some of these issues. By the time of the Miss America Protest it had become even more difficult to assert a clearly defined political position. Groups which had left NYRW over some of these issues joined the Protest, bringing to it their positions in a confusing maze based on the popular "do your own thing."

The no leadership/total equality line had damaging effects on the women's liberation movement. New York Radical Women had grown to about 20 to 30 women who came regularly, our weekly meeting reaching 50-60. Some women thought the group unwieldy, (uncontrollable—we were actually discussing political ideas) and wanted to split into smaller groups by drawing lots (structure). Almost all the founders wanted to keep the large group, or split along lines of the people one wanted to work with, *if* such a split was necessary. It was decided by majority rule that the group would split by lot—in the name of democracy. People were afraid it was "elitist" to want to work with certain women with whom they shared a common political direction. The result of this was the first division of the original militants into several groups where they were less effective.<sup>2</sup> This was a temporary victory for the disconnected, random, small-group over the consciousness-raising cell as the organizing form of the movement.

One of the groups which formed out of this breakup of NYRW was not a random group, but an action group, later to take the name Redstockings. It led some major innovative actions that put consciousness-raising principles and practice to use in a public way. It put out literature which reflected the development of a radical analysis of the condition of women—the pro-woman line—which had originated in NYRW. The group established a set of principles, a statement of purpose and orientation sessions, all in the hopes that only those women who were in political agreement would join. But those who disagreed came anyway. Once again the structuralists succeeded in imposing the confining structure of the lot system, etc., so that the pro-woman radical feminist politics that the group was formulating could effectively be kept from the public. Some of these structuralists joined Ti-Grace Atkinson who had left NOW on these same structuralist grounds to form The Feminists. This group operated strictly on these anti-leader-

<sup>2</sup>In the 1975 *Report to the President by the Commission on CIA Activities Within the U.S.* (the commission headed by Nelson Rockefeller) the Women's Liberation Movement is listed as one of several target organizations for the CIA's "Operation Chaos." (p. 144) FBI operations in the WLM, including its surveillance of Redstockings, are revealed in testimony released by the U.S. Senate in its *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* (Vol. 6; Nov.-Dec. 1975) pp. 98-103, 360-366, 540-585, Washington, 1976. These reports are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

ship rules and regulations plus several more (like only 1/3 of the membership could be married or in a relationship with a man) and from this position spent much of their time attacking Redstockings both in the group and publicly for its lack of "democracy," though by then Redstockings, too, had submitted to the lot system. Politics was always secondary to structure so that structure could control the politics.

The major effect of the no leadership line was to stop the pro-woman faction from continuing to take their politics to the masses of women. It simultaneously served the personal ambitions of some. But let's look more closely at this "equality" line and just how it operated.

1) **There should be no leaders or spokeswomen.** To some this generally meant that decisions should be made by everybody involved and not just a few people at the top and that no "superstars" should be allowed to be created by the press. To others, however, it was a denial that any leadership or the necessity for it even existed. Based on the dogma of exact equality among women, it denied the reality that some people are the first to dare and do, to provide clarity and insight, to teach others, to speak for themselves and for others who are not yet speaking for themselves directly. It further denied that some people actually know more because of the kind and combination of experiences in their lives and therefore have more to teach. This knowledge, because it is radical or new, is not normally accepted as knowledge by the Establishment.

Another reason some of us supported the no-leadership line was that we wanted all women to be leaders, to be spokespeople, because "It makes the movement . . . stronger (and) also guards against the time when such leaders could be isolated and picked off one way or another."<sup>2</sup> This too was a utopian denial of reality and further prevented the development of a means of protecting the radical leaders because they are necessary to the movement.

Two kinds of leadership emerged in the groups: 1) straight-forward people who became leaders by putting their politics out in the open and fighting for them. 2) sneaky "anti-leaders" who shouted loudest against leadership but maneuvered quietly to push the group in their direction by withholding information, not telling their politics and leading personality assassinations on those who did speak up honestly. Ironically, women have become leaders fighting for the principle that there should be no leaders. Further, these anti-leaders often are or give support to the superstars that are created by the press and male establishment.

2) **All jobs should be shared equally because all women are equal in abilities.** I am of the opinion that all women, like men, are *potentially* more or less equal in abilities, but whether this is true or not is not important to the immediate problem of *who* is going to do *what* in a political movement. The fact is that at this point in history, women do differ in skills and abilities and in political clarity, com-

mitment and understanding. It follows that if our major interest is to advance the feminist revolution, the person who does a job best should be in charge of it. Others will learn fastest by working with those who do things well. Anyone taking what she is doing seriously would prefer to go into battle with proven, experienced persons in the lead.

3) **If a sister has a particular skill, she should spend her time teaching other women that skill instead of using it herself to speak, write or whatever.** This line, too, was used to keep the pro-woman radical feminists from writing and speaking and bringing their ideas to more and more people. In so many of the early radical groups it was used against certain women on the grounds that "class privilege" gave them certain skills that other women didn't have; therefore they should hold themselves back until the other women "caught up." Interestingly enough, this line was put forward strongest by those women who had come from a "working class" background but who themselves had a college degree or the opportunity to work at professional or artistic jobs.

4) **Nobody talks to the media more than anybody else and only with the approval of the group.** I was a major perpetrator of this line. As a former journalist I was only too aware of what the media would do to our movement. They would put words in our mouths, make mountains out of molehills, name our leaders for us and assassinate the best of us, either by ridicule or pretending we didn't exist. This they did. But we should have been putting forth our best women and demanding to be heard. For while we were being held back and holding ourselves back, the lady opportunists were making hay without even a good fight.

5) **All leadership skills are the result of middle-class privilege.** The skills concerned here are the abilities to write and speak publicly. At least these were the skills that were purportedly being argued about. What was really being fought over was political insight and the willingness to take risks.

When I was a teenager, I wanted desperately to be a writer and I constantly bemoaned the fact that nothing ever happened to me and I didn't have anything to write about. I never went to Europe or was caught in a flood. The real problem was that I was seeing the world only in terms of *events*, never in terms of *ideas*. I lacked an awareness or insight into my own life. Later, in the women's liberation movement, I could write, but I felt I could not speak well, especially in a "hostile" situation or in a situation where I had to "think on my feet." This was partially true. My mind would often either go blank or would have such a rush of ideas running around that I couldn't get hold of any of them. In the very beginning I thought I must be "damaged," but through consciousness-raising I learned that I was oppressed and I began to look for other explanations. Sometimes I was too worried that the words wouldn't come out right and I would be misunderstood. I was reluctant to take sides unless I could spell out exactly why to myself and to others. I thought if I only had had a better formal

education with more experience in public speaking and debating that I wouldn't be so slow to think on my feet.

It may be true that all that would have given me more self-confidence, but without the political insight into what I want to talk about, without a basic political perspective on the world and how it operates, I still wouldn't have anything to say. It was more knowledge and experience of a kind not usually found in formal education that gave me confidence. Five years in the women's liberation movement have taught me more than all the formal schooling in the world. Listening to others who have things more figured out than I do (and who I *feel* are right) has clarified my own thinking again and again. Through observation and my own experience of putting knowledge to use, I have learned how to survive in a confrontation. I can now often spot the little "debating tricks" (exaggerating, pretending not to understand, etc.) that people use. There have been times when I have *had* to think on my feet, when I have *had* to fight for what I believed, when I knew something *had* to be said and no one was saying it.

Of course, to the worst of structural opportunists, none of this was really the issue; the whole purpose of the arguments about "middle class privileges" was to shut up the pro-woman radical feminists and to advance themselves.

### CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUPS

Along with structuralism, liberals have also used revisionism to take power in the women's liberation movement. A case in point is consciousness-raising. This method of organizing women was originally perceived and advocated by pro-woman radical feminists as the ongoing basis for movement theory and action. In the beginning we had to fight the left and others who put down our consciousness-raising groups as therapy groups; unfortunately today the opportunists have perverted the original purpose of consciousness-raising until it is almost therapy. In many cases groups have become social gathering places where women get and give support for their immediate problems and try to "develop" themselves. Consciousness-raising for political action still goes on, of course, but among those who are in basic agreement that the purpose of consciousness-raising is for theory and action.

### SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL

There are those who even tried to revise sisterhood, again making it a means of control, and totally changing its meaning. For the record, the phrase "Sisterhood Is Powerful" was coined by Kathie Sarachild. As she herself said recently upon hearing the opening words to the Helen Reddy song, "I Am Woman," ("I am woman, hear me roar in numbers too big to ignore. . ."), "That's what sisterhood is powerful really meant!"

Today hardly anybody uses it that way. It has been changed from a means to power to a means to control

women, to keep them worried about how they relate to each other—looking for approval again rather than figuring out what can be done to eliminate male supremacy. To challenge another woman's ideas is "unsisterly." Hogwash! The only way that we are ever going to achieve real sisterhood so that we *can* roar in numbers too big to ignore is to challenge other women's ideas by putting forth our own and pointing out where we think others are wrong and having them point out where we are wrong politically. The internal struggle of our movement makes the external struggle with the real enemy possible. It's not easy and it's not pleasant, but it is necessary.

### PERSONALITY ATTACKS/ CHARACTER ASSASSINATIONS

Personality attacks/character assassinations have always been effective ways of shutting up an opponent or shutting off a movement. Again this was a tactic employed inside and outside the movement to keep the lid on the boiling cauldron of radical feminists who wanted to go all the way against male supremacy. The conflicts between political positions resulted in a torrent of personal attacks upon radical feminists. The most usual were that we were dominating, aggressive, masculine, power-hungry, manipulating, dogmatic, unsisterly, undemocratic, bourgeois, man-haters and intolerant. However, the reverse of these—passive, feminine, man-lovers, etc.—were used when they seemed more appropriate.

### THE INVISIBLE TREATMENT

As the liberals have obtained control of the women's liberation movement, their tactics have shifted. Rather than attacks, they now pretend that the pro-woman radical feminists and the politics we represent simply do not exist or do not exist *anymore*. We are not asked to speak or write for movement programs and journals and newspapers, now controlled by the pseudo-left liberals. We are not listed in most bibliographies of movement papers and publications and speakers bureaus. Our work was dropped from the recommended list of the Women's History Library. A book representing the radical feminist journal *Notes* left out all the pro-woman line and consciousness-raising articles which had originally appeared in that journal.

That they have attempted to bury us historically as well as shut us out from the present has become increasingly clear.

### IN CONCLUSION

The general success of the liberal takeover of the women's liberation movement has been dependent upon a convergence of their powerful backing and our mistakes, many of which are discussed in this paper and in this journal. A major problem was that it took a while to catch on to what was happening, and some of us caught on to some things and some people faster than others. As a result we were confused and divided from each other, each struggling in

her own dilemma, not seeing the necessity, or unable, to, operate as a group.

But the evidence is in. Now that we know more about what we are up against, we know better how to fight it. It has

become clear that the time has come to gather our forces for a new offensive for women's liberation.

— *The major part of this paper was written early in 1973.*

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

Some of the same organizational patterns that have emerged in the Women's Liberation Movement are also described in these books about the Black Liberation Movement and the Russian Revolution:

*What Is To Be Done* by V.I. Lenin (1901-2).

*The Making of Black Revolutionaries* by James Forman, 1972.

# MS. Politics and Editing: An Interview

This article was published originally in 1975.  
The following are excerpts.

In December, 1973, *Village Voice* writer Robin Reisig interviewed Patricia Mainardi and Kathie Sarachild for an article on *Ms.* magazine's editing policies and dealings with writers. The article had been assigned when a *Voice* editor learned that a couple of widely acclaimed articles in the *Voice* by women writers and feminists had originally been turned down by *Ms.*

*Ms.* had just published an article on quilts by Mainardi, author of "The Politics of Housework" and an editor of *Feminist Art Journal*, where a longer version had first appeared. Sarachild, who originated the program of consciousness-raising in the movement, had shortly before been asked to edit a book on consciousness-raising for them.

By the time Reisig had handed in her article, Clay Felker, publisher of *New York* magazine and long-time colleague of Gloria Steinem, had bought the *Voice*. The interview with Mainardi and Sarachild was deleted from the article after the author submitted it. The rest of the article, though accepted long ago, has still not been published either.

Mainardi and Sarachild were not the only feminists and writers who spoke out in that article against what *Ms.* was doing to their writing—and to the movement. What follows are notes of some of the comments Mainardi and Sarachild made in the interview. If the article is ever published, we will learn more from the stories of others who were interviewed. —THE EDITORS

**Mainardi:** *I couldn't write. I couldn't even write a letter. It's almost mystical. Ms. is screwing up writers. One friend of mine said everytime she has had dealings with them she feels like she's been kicked in the stomach. Another friend said she was frozen with shock. She used the word paralyzed. Ms. never admits what they don't like is content—they come back into phrases, get right into the mechanics of the writing.*

**Sarachild:** *Ms. exploits writers by a pretense of sisterhood and the movement. It isn't sisterhood and the movement. It's the publishing world.*

**Mainardi:** *Basically it's a labor issue. We're the workers. They're the bosses. . . . I always assumed Ms. never paid much so people tossed off their articles for them. Then my piece came back with the barbarous Ms. style. Jerky sentences, non sequiturs, Ms. words. They would use a bullshit word instead of a strong word. I had the word 'loved.' They changed it to 'had a fondness for.' I had the 'lie' women were not creative. They changed it to the 'myth.' I complained their rewriting was ungrammatical. So then we rewrote, line by line, back to the way I'd written it. But when the article came out they had changed the title. I had "Quilts, The Great American Art." They*