

# The Conservatism Of MS.

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August 1, 1975

On June 30 I resigned from my job as a part-time contributing editor at *Ms.* In response to many inquiries from feminists, I would like to explain why.

When *Ms.* hired me—at my own suggestion—over two years ago, I was openly critical of the magazine's politics. I was uneasy in what seemed to be my role as a token radical, but I was also excited by the idea of a mass circulation feminist magazine. I did not expect such a magazine, of necessity an expensive commercial venture, to be a spearhead of radicalism. I envisioned it, ideally, as a genuinely liberal forum for women writers who could not express themselves freely in male-controlled publications. I hoped *Ms.* would change and grow, that it would be open to new ideas, criticisms and suggestions—including mine.

Since then, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that *Ms.*'s basic priorities do not allow such openness. The problem is that *Ms.* is not simply a magazine, but a political organization. *Ms.* presents itself—and is seen by many women as a center of leadership for the women's movement. It has started and/or supported a variety of related organizations, projects, business ventures, political causes; there are *Ms.* books, a *Ms.* foundation, a *Ms.* TV show. Gloria Steinem is an influential public figure with close ties to outside organizations and politicians. In my view, *Ms.* functions primarily as propaganda for the political interests of its organizational network and allies. That is, its purpose is not to be a forum but to promote a specific ideology. *Ms.* editors deny that they intend to impose a "party line," but the content of the magazine shows that despite exceptions in individual articles, *Ms.* has a fairly consistent political viewpoint; to deny that it exists means only that it remains unanalyzed and unchallenged.

*Ms.*'s "line," as I see it, includes:

— An obsession with electoral politics, as if women's liberation will be achieved by integrating the ruling

class (or as if that's even possible); an emphasis on "successful women" (never mind successful at what, or at whose expense) as models.

— The continual implication that we can liberate ourselves individually by "throwing off our conditioning," unilaterally rejecting our traditional roles, etc.; the same philosophy applied to "non-sexist" child-rearing; the patronizing implication that some women are "liberated" and some aren't, and that it is up to the former to enlighten the latter. This denies the reality—that men have *power* over women, and that we can only liberate ourselves by uniting to combat that power.

— A mushy, sentimental idea of sisterhood designed to obscure political conflicts between women. Anything a woman says or does in the name of feminism is okay; it is unsisterly to criticize or judge; disparities of power, economic privilege, political allegiance are politely glossed over.

— Emphasis on attacking sexual *roles* rather than male *power* (changes in roles, in themselves, do not necessarily threaten the structure of male supremacy and may even make it stronger). Support for "men's liberation," which promotes the anti-feminist fallacy that men are simply fellow victims of sex-role conditioning. Another variant of this is the idea that our government makes war not because its function is to serve the rich and powerful, but because its leaders are acting out the male role (violence, machismo, etc.)

— Pervasive class bias. *Ms.* takes upper-middle-class privileges and values for granted. The concerns of non-affluent/educated/"successful" women are generally either ignored or written about in a "we, the real people, are reporting on the natives" tone. Basic economic issues are avoided.

The common theme is a denial of the need for militant resistance to an oppressive system. We don't need to fight men, only our conditioning. We don't need to attack the economic system; we too can make it. At best, *Ms.*'s self-improvement, individual-liberation philosophy is relevant only to an elite; basically it is an updated women's maga-

zine fantasy. Instead of the sexy chick or the perfect homemaker, we now have a new image to live up to: the "liberated woman." This fantasy, misrepresented as feminism, misleads some women, convinces others that "women's lib" has nothing to do with them, and plays into the hands of those who oppose any real change in women's condition.

Although Gloria Steinem does not, for the most part, make day-to-day editorial decisions, her influence on the magazine direct and indirect—is pervasive, and *Ms.*'s political stance to a large extent reflects hers. Partly this is a matter of filling a vacuum, since there is very little independent political thinking in the *Ms.* office. One would think that a new feminist magazine would be eager to tap the resources the movement uncovered—to recruit experienced feminist writers, theorists, organizers—but this was never done. There have been virtually no editors with independent reputations and constituencies and political loyalties. Most staff members were never involved in the movement and are by their own admission uninterested in politics. Nor have they made an effort to raise their consciousness on feminist issues or analyze the political content of the magazine they produce. Though I urged that we do this, the idea was rejected as too time-consuming—and ironically, on the ground that it would force people into a political mold.

Another factor in *Ms.*'s lack of political diversity is the staff's inclination for smoothing over conflict and wherever possible denying that it exists. Political criticism tends to be viewed as personal attack, and strong argument as unnecessary belligerency (it has been suggested to me that I have a "confrontational" personality). Many staff members withhold their honest opinion in open discussion, preferring to get their way by quiet manipulation. This is a frustrating situation for anyone who is unhappy with the status quo. If basic issues are never confronted, no one has to take responsibility for the political decisions that are made or face the gap between what *Ms.* purports to be and what it actually is. It becomes impossible under these circumstances to fight for meaningful change.

A third consideration is *Ms.*'s attitude toward writers and writing. Good journalism, as such, has never been the magazine's main concern. There are few skilled journalists on the staff and even fewer writers. The atmosphere at *Ms.* is not conducive to stimulating writers and inspiring them to do their best work. Though the treatment of writers has improved over the past couple of years, the basic feeling the staff communicates is still that the editors are the important people, that writing is raw material for them to process. There is a reluctance to trust the writer's perceptions, an uptightness about ideas and language that are unfamiliar, idiosyncratic, controversial or extreme. The result is an editor-centered magazine that is, for the most part, politically and aesthetically bland and predictable.

Recent political events have increased my sense of estrangement from *Ms.* This is a volatile time politically. The conservative forces in this society are on the offensive against the remnants of sixties radicalism, including radical

feminism, and the backlash can be expected to intensify if hard times cause a resurgence of the left. Already battle lines are being drawn, in the women's movement as elsewhere. The Jane Alpert debate has brought into focus the current strategy of women who seek to define feminism as a conservative, anti-left movement. In essence, they are attempting to exploit women's rightful anger at the sexism of the male dominated left to discredit the very idea of leftist politics—i.e. economic class struggle—as a "male trip" irrelevant to women. For a radical feminist analysis of women's concrete, material oppression they substitute fantasies of lost matriarchies, female superiority and "mother right." They defend themselves against criticism with an appeal to a phony concept of sisterhood that stigmatizes disagreement as "divisive" or "anti-woman" or "self-hating." Some "feminists" have actually suggested that it is okay for Jane Alpert to inform on the Weather Underground because she is only betraying the male left (there are women involved too, but never mind). The fact that she is collaborating with the male government, and assuring that government that feminism and radicalism are incompatible, is somehow overlooked.

Gloria Steinem, as one of Alpert's chief defenders, has clearly identified herself with this anti-left position. Last spring, after a bitterly argued editorial meeting, it was agreed that *Ms.* would publish a report on the Alpert controversy and the political issues it has raised. This article has not yet materialized. In contrast, an article by Robin Morgan on the state of the movement that epitomizes the anti-left line I have just described—among other things, it attacks radicals as bitter, divisive and defeatist, praises liberals as optimistic and effective, and endorses Jane Alpert—was recently accepted and rushed into production in record time, before everyone who wanted to had a chance to comment.

I had already decided to leave *Ms.* by the time the Redstockings made their charges. But *Ms.*'s reaction to those charges reinforced many of the misgivings that led to my decision. Though I would quarrel with some aspects of the Redstockings statement and with the way it was presented, it raises serious criticisms and questions that deserve a serious response. To dismiss the statement as "crazy," to say that Gloria Steinem should not waste her time reading it, to accuse Redstockings of "McCarthyism" (as if they had McCarthy's power to ruin lives), to question their legitimacy because not all the members of the original group (which broke up in 1970) were involved in their action, is not a serious response. Nor is Steinem's refusal, so far, to discuss her past association with a CIA front. The fact is that Steinem has never repudiated that involvement, and that—especially in light of her support for Alpert—feminists have a right to know where she stands on the issue of cooperation with the state.

In short, I feel that *Ms.* is moving in a conservative direction, and that this is unlikely to change. I still hope I turn out to be wrong.

No more sex arranged on the barter system, with women pretending interest, and men never sure whether they are loved for themselves or for the security few women can get any other way. (Married or not, for sexual reasons or social ones, most women still find it second nature to Uncle Tom) No more men who are encouraged to spend a lifetime living with inferiors; with housekeepers, or dependent creatures who are still children. — *Gloria Steinem, TIME essay, 8/31/70*

Having one's traditional role questioned is not a very comfortable experience; perhaps especially for women, who have been able to remain children, and to benefit from work they did not and could not do. — *Gloria Steinem, NEW YORK, 4/7/69*

It might be helpful to men—and good for women's liberation—if they just keep repeating key phrases like, "No more guilt, No more alimony, Fewer boring women, Fewer bitchy women, No more tyrants with all human ambition confined to the home, No more "Jewish mothers" transferring ambition to children, No more women trying to be masculine because it's a Man's World. . . ." — *Gloria Steinem, NEW YORK, 4/7/69*

There is still the assumption that a woman is not a complete human being herself. We have to consider the ways in which we are man junkies. — *Gloria Steinem, NEW YORK TIMES, 8/11/74*

And you mock us with dependence, too. Do not the majority of women in every town support themselves, and very many their husbands, too? What father of a family, at the loss of his wife, has ever been able to meet his responsibilities as woman has done? When the mother dies the house is made desolate, the children forsaken—scattered to the four winds of heaven—to the care of anyone who chooses to take them. Go to those aged widows who have reared large families of children, unaided and alone, who have kept them all together under one roof, watched and nursed them in health and sickness through all their infant years, clothed and educated them, and made them all respectable men and women, ask on whom they depended. We need not wait for one more generation to pass away, to find a race of women worthy to assert the humanity of women. — *Elizabeth Cady Stanton in a letter to Gerrit Smith, 1885, HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE*

Although woman has performed much of the labor of the world, her industry and economy have been the very means of increasing her degradation. Not being free, the results of her labor have gone to build up and sustain the very class that has perpetuated this injustice. — *HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE, Stanton, Anthony and Gage, 1881*

Dr. (Judith) Walzer (of Harvard) defended women's nagging, explaining it as "a result of her life situation and not the cause of it . . . an adaption to the unmitigable circumstance and it helps both her and her family to survive." . . . The villain was the man, she insisted, a very absent help in trouble and how ignoble in reason, how small in faculty, taking refuge in subterfuge to escape the unholy presence, or bowing under her strictures with meekness, resignation, plaintive rejoinders, daydreams, villainies, sometimes even humor. — *NEW YORK TIMES, 7/25/75*

So what do we do about our longings for love with a man? I don't think we should try to "force our desires to go away" or try to lie to ourselves that we don't have them. We should see that our desires are correct (fair and just). They are not "hung up" or signs of emotional "dependence." When we see that our desires are correct . . . then we also see the full injustice of what men have done to us by denying us love. . . . By trying to convince ourselves that we no longer feel it, we are . . . lying to other women, making other women feel "weak" and inferior by denying them information about what we are really like. — *Kathie Sarachild, 1970*

... the great majority of women don't have the training or opportunity or courage to get and use power on their own. Probably, they've been brought up to believe that such ambitions weren't feminine. (And if any group is told its limitations long enough, pretty soon they turn out to be true.)— *Gloria Steinem, NEW YORK, 12/23/68*

... the rejected group, through continued deprivation, is hardened in the very shortcomings, whether real or imaginary, that are given as the reasons for discrimination in the first place.— *A REVIEW OF NEGRO SEGREGATION IN THE UNITED STATES, Independent Research Service for Information on the Vienna Youth Festival, 1959, Gloria M. Steinem, Co-Director.*

Jill Johnston's book is honest, outrageous, stylistically unique, brave, vulnerable, and full of love. If you read it, you will never be sure of anything.— *Gloria Steinem, LESBIAN NATION, back cover, 1973*

I have met brave women who are exploring the outer edge of human possibility, with no history to guide them. . . .

— *Gloria Steinem, MS., Spring, 1972*

Herbert Hill, director of labor for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in a new study has condemned as failures federally funded training programs designed to put minority workers in construction jobs. . . . "Fundamentally, Outreach programs are a device used by the building trades unions to maintain their control of training and jobs while creating the illusion of compliance with the law," he said. "Furthermore, the Outreach programs accept the discriminators' description of the issue, that it is the inadequacy of the black population which is the root of the problem." — *NEW YORK TIMES, 6/4/74*

Confusion is the greatest enemy of revolution.— *Stokely Carmichael, "Pan Africanism," 1970*

When you deal with the past, you're dealing with history, you're dealing actually with the origin of a thing. When you know the origin, you know the cause. If you don't know the origin, you don't know the cause. And if you don't know the cause, you don't know the reason, you're just cut off, you're left standing in mid-air. So the past deals with history or the origin of anything—the origin of a person, the origin of a nation, the origin of an incident.

— *Malcolm X*