

# Psychological Terrorism...

In a discussion in 1973, Claudine Serre, a militant in the French Women's Liberation Movement, illuminated certain patterns common to both the French and U.S. movements with the term "psychological terrorism." The papers that follow—"Psychological Terrorism" and "*Terrorisme Psychologique*"—grew out of that discussion. The tactic would appear to be a common obstacle to all movements against entrenched interests perpetuating exploitation and oppression.

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There is a tactic that has been wreaking havoc within the Women's Liberation Movement, a tactic we call psychological terrorism. It is the use of personal attack to prevent political issues from being clarified and acted on.

We call it psychological, even though it is really political, because its character is to deny the political by expressing itself perpetually in personal terms, often in moralistic or psychological jargon, and because it generates the psychological effects of confusion, guilt, fear, and despair among women. It takes advantage of these feelings to achieve a certain aim: to curb the action and power of the radicals of the Women's Liberation Movement. It is terrorism because it rests on intimidation rather than reason.

Psychological terrorism is fundamentally a liberal tactic of male supremacy used mainly by so-called liberal men and women to attack women who move for justice in their daily lives and inside the women's liberation movement. It is a liberal tactic because it does not employ direct physical force nor openly oppose women's liberation. Rather it works to trick, confuse, surprise and throw people off balance when they are facing the oppressor and need to feel secure in their approach and beliefs.

But psychological terrorism could not work so well if it did not also rely on fear. Behind liberalism rests the power and force of the oppressor; the economic, military, social, political power of male supremacy. Although liberals themselves do not control all this power, they speak for and are backed by those who do. Behind them lies the threat of real sanctions against women who step out of line. At any point when psychological terrorism no longer works, the oppressor has the option of switching gears.

Liberal leadership emerges whenever an oppressed group begins to move against the oppressor. It works to preserve the oppressor's power by avoiding and preventing exposure and confrontation. The oppressed is always resisting the oppressor in some way, but when rebellion begins to be public knowledge and the movement becomes a powerful force, liberalism becomes necessary for the oppressor to stop the radical upsurge. Although it is harmful to the oppressed as a whole, it is useful to some among them who are rewarded for denouncing and attacking the very militancy which is bringing people gains.

Goodwill, not power, becomes the issue. The oppressor offers his "goodwill" and uses reforms to make the liberation struggle appear unnecessary and unjustified. The possibility that his goodwill may turn to anger makes militancy—which might threaten the goodwill—dangerous. But it is the very militancy which threatens the goodwill which has produced it. The central issue is the oppressor's power and the central purpose of liberalism is to keep this invisible.

The liberal characteristically refuses to take a clear stand in theory or action and attacks those who do. The radical, by definition, strives for greater and greater clarity in thought and effectiveness in action.

There is always conflict between the vague and the clear, but it is conflict that can be antagonistic or not antagonistic. One can be vague and confused about something, but welcome clarity on it. Or one can resist clarity. The liberal resists clarity, as she resists radicalism, and makes a place for herself by fogging and diluting truth and hampering action. Moreover, she makes this a point of pride and an ideology. Vagueness and confusion are raised to a fashionable ideal, superior to the radical's. To seek clarity and truth is belittled as simplistic or attacked as dogmatic. Clarity is discredited, as is militancy.

The liberal fears and opposes clarity and effectiveness because she fears angering the powerful; she does not want to fight. In order to preserve peace, the liberal resists any idea that requires real change of the status quo, in action or in theory. The liberal wants to go easy, not to expose too clearly, not to attack too hard. A truth that exposes too clearly, attacks too hard.

Traditionally the liberal claims to be against violence as a means of struggling for freedom and justice. She is not tactically opposed to violence because of a present position of weakness. She opposes the use of force for any purpose on moral principle and libertarian theory. She remains pacifist even when acknowledging that one side, the oppressor, is already using force and violence to maintain his position. Hence psychological terrorism becomes the liberal, "non-violent" way of getting one's way on things.

The liberal attempts to use moral exhortation to stop the oppressor and oppressed from fighting with each other. If everybody could just do things right, love everybody, talk to each other, communicate, she exclaims. The trouble is, personal, moral attack works much better against the oppressed than the oppressor. When one side owns and controls the crucial resources and has an army behind it, moral exhortation does not have an equal effect and, in fact, can only intimidate the side without organized power behind it.

The oppressor wants to preserve the status quo and keep the lid on the liberation movement without showing his hand. Since it is the essence of liberalism to sit on the fence, avoid taking sides, to denounce polarization, confrontation and the use of force, it is the perfect tool for the oppressor's use. To evade taking a stand and without opposing an issue outright, the liberal attacks personally.

Though posing as nice, the psychological terrorism of liberalism isn't so nice. It opposes anger as violent and belligerent, but uses moral anger and intimidation. Though posing as libertarian, liberalism is not so libertarian; though posing as non-violent, it is a form of psychic violence which quite literally throws people off balance. What is more, these psychological techniques, however "peaceful" do have force behind them. They rely on invoking the fear of actual reprisals from established society— isolation, poverty, even physical violence. The names liberals call you are what male supremacy punishes women for. Opposing liberalism can bring punishment and embracing it can bring rewards. Real intimidation and bribery are behind the psychological tactics of the liberal.

In both areas—avoiding or resisting clarity and making pacifist claims—there is a tradition of what women should be like that appears to conform to liberalism. Women are not supposed to sound sure of themselves. Better yet, they are not supposed to *be* sure of themselves. But if they are urgently sure of themselves and feel that what they have to say is very important, they had best go about things in a way that does not reveal the full extent of their opinion.

Women have used moral exhortation (tears, appeals for peace) and other forms of psychological struggle (such as flattery, charm, seduction) against men, and with some success. But these efforts have no real power to back them up. They are limited to the permissible channels and the results have been as limited as the tactics.

Against women these tactics have more power. In this case, pacifism, promoting confusion, charm, appearing hurt, tearful, vulnerable can intimidate as well as trick and seduce. Such tactics play on the common sympathy women have for women and on the fear of invoking the social sanctions women face when they are honest and direct. But liberal women are not really allowed to share the power of men and so have it only so long as they are able to control other women, to suppress militancy and truth. It is as necessary to fight for truth inside the movement as it is to fight male supremacy outside the movement because political understanding is necessary in order to win. In the fight against the oppressor, the central issue is his power and eliminating it. In the struggle inside the movement, the central issues are truth and effectiveness.

#### HOW DOES IT WORK?

In women's liberation meetings, the psychological terrorist resorts to chilling forms of verbal personal attack and, at the same time, seeks to avoid at all costs a political critique. Sometimes the implication is that political critique itself is morally reprehensible, intolerant, undemocratic. More often, the "way" in which the critique was made is deemed to be the problem. In either case, debate over the issues themselves never sees the light of day. Instead, the person or group who has raised the issues is subject to a diversionary character assault: "Why are you attacking me? Why are you hostile to me! Why don't you trust me!" In addition to being diversions, these questions aren't intended to open up genuine areas of investigation themselves. They are final comments, indictments justified unto themselves. The possibility that mistrust or attack might in some cases be justified is never even on the floor. The liberal claims such violence in attitude as well as deed could never be justified. And what gets lost, too, in this trick of the psychological terrorist is who really made the first attack.

The first reaction of someone to the charge that she has "attacked" may be to the injustice of it. "But I didn't attack you! I was just questioning something you were saying. It was not a personal attack on you! An argument isn't an attack." An interchange then begins on whether or not an attack really occurred. When this has happened in enough women's liberation meetings, the person accused of such an attack may suddenly observe that what has actually just happened is that *she* has been the victim of an attack. The attacker is actually the one who accused her. And she may be tempted to put this realization to use and go on the offensive herself. "But I was responding to what you said about me. It was you who attacked me and I was defending myself, saying you were wrong about such and such and

then you accused me of attacking you." Although this counter-offensive may evoke acknowledgement and apology from the attacker, it usually just starts a new round of psychological questioning—"why this hostility?" etc.—rather than getting the discussion back to the issues in question when the diversion took place.

Correcting the accusation may be necessary just to set everybody straight on what really happened, but the effect of the charge is more important to understand and remedy than its intent. The important thing is to get the discussion back on the issue. The motive of the attacker will reveal itself over time. Such a diversion may either be due to genuine confusion or to the sneaky, self-righteous political assault we're calling psychological terrorism.

An attack may be couched in clearly personal terms. It may be directed towards your psychological behavior. It may be an innuendo that you have disguised personal motives for the position you are taking such as with lesbian-baiting or middle-class baiting (both commonly used against feminism). But you may also be attacked along what appears to be more political lines, in political terminology, as with red-baiting. You may be attacked either for being "too" radical or not "radical" enough. But whatever terms it is couched in, it is to discredit you personally, morally. The charge is supposed to speak for itself, as reprehensible by definition, and not up for political examination itself.

The question of the accuracy of the charge is actually irrelevant because the personal charge and the question of its rightness or wrongness, truth or falsehood, is a diversion from the subject about to be exposed and evaluated. Dealing with the question of accuracy will be a way of playing into the hands of the diversion. True or false, the personal charge is designed to intimidate or divert you from what you are saying, intimidate others from associating with you, or divert them from hearing what you are trying to say.

But when a charge is totally inaccurate, and hurled with an air of deliberation and certainty, it has the power to stun. This is because there is almost as much power in a bold-faced lie as there is in the truth. A total inversion of events, spoken with utmost authority and righteousness, can be one of the most powerful and paralyzing forms of psychological terrorism. The daring violence it does to reality gives it an air of reality, at least temporarily, and allows it to pack the wallop it does. The arrogance and injustice of an outright lie can take the heart out of you momentarily: for instance, when a very open, honest comment is called "The most dishonest statement I have ever heard!" The success of such deceit depends on one's instinctive belief in truth, one's initial assumption of good faith and one's utter dismay when presented with an outright lie. It requires surprise for its effect—or social power, or greater control of established sources of information. But the very directness and clarity necessary to achieve this effect also leaves it open to direct exposure. So when the bold-faced lie no longer works, the next line of defense is confusion.

An alternative form to the usual psychological terrorism, and what we will probably face unless we're ready for it when psychological terrorism gets exposed, is *engaging you in endless debate*. This is a method which would seem to be the opposite because psychological terrorism usually takes the form of stopping discussion. But it is psychological terrorism for two reasons.

It still relies on confusion and intimidation. It holds a moral cudgel over you, rather than good reasons: "If you won't engage in debate with me you're not a nice, liberal, tolerant person, you're dogmatic, you won't explore ideas," etc. (Of course, there is a fine old democratic tradition of limiting debate.) The need for discussion is put in moral terms rather than simply deciding whether discussion is necessary or not.

Also, the liberal purpose of psychological terrorism is really to stop conclusions. The liberal, without admitting it, is actually trying to prevent the kinds of discussion that seem to be leading to conclusions and action. When it's time to investigate, the liberal will try to stop investigation. She may even try to do this by calling for action, and berating women for not wanting to act. When people are ready to come to a conclusion or take action, the liberal will suddenly want to investigate it and debate it.

The forms may vary, but the purpose of the bold-faced lie, the endless confusion, personal attack and all other psychological terrorism is always to stop the issues from coming out, to set aside some areas as not open to question or exploration. It is to prevent certain ideas from being investigated, the truth from being uncovered, interests from being seen for what they are, sides from being taken and confusion from being clarified—to keep things fuzzy, dim, unknown.

#### SIDES NOT METHODS IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

This is why psychological terrorism is so natural to the liberal. She above all doesn't want to take sides. And yet where there are opposing interests involved, short-term interests and long term interests, private interests vs. public interests, male chauvinist interests vs. the interests of women and humanity as a whole, taking sides is what it's all about.

To the liberal, the question is not one of good and bad sides, but of right and wrong methods. She will judge the side by the methods it employs and if both sides are using what appear to her to be the same bad methods, she will judge the sides as equally bad. She holds to methods, puts methods above all else. The liberal makes everything not a question of the issue but the way people are going about it.

Methods are important to the radical, too, but not for themselves—simply to serve the goals they are being used to achieve. To the liberal, the method must be ideal to fit her ideal goal.

The radical's goals have to do with the needs of real people, the necessities of humanity. Therefore, the methods of achieving them must be real. Her commitment is not to a particular method but to searching constantly for the most effective way to serve her purpose. To the liberal, methods are fixed and clear but purposes are unclear and elusive and always unattainable.

The fixed method of the liberal is peaceful negotiations. Because she is committed to this and opposes anything which interferes with it, in effect peaceful negotiation, manipulation or what not, becomes her goal. Thus she may claim that her only disagreement is with your methods; but these methods are her goals, so there is really disagreement over goals. Tolerance and peace are the liberal's main aims, rather than truth and justice.

The liberal has no trouble judging people, as we have seen; she only resists judging ideas. She judges people and methods (behavior, style, character) but does not judge according to ideas (truth) or results.

Since the radical's commitment is not to a method but to a side, she will use any method which serves her people. And her people are the people, the masses of people, the female masses. It is for the people as a whole that she judges results. She may use all the methods of the liberals—peaceful negotiation, for instance, when they seem necessary—and all psychological tactics in facing the enemy when a strategic retreat from clarity seems necessary. She may get very vague if she has to, and she will do as much as she can within the limits of vagueness. But she will move toward

clarity and revolution as soon as the opportunity arises. And she will use any means that make the advance possible. She does not limit her methods or her goals, whereas the liberal limits both. The liberal's goals are limited by limited methods, by a false morality. The radical's goals are limited by nothing but necessity, by what is possible, by what humanity can achieve within the confines of the universe. And to the radical, what people can achieve—and, in the case of the feminist, what women can, therefore, achieve—has fewer limits than all other political viewpoints are able to envision.

Why is psychological terrorism so important? When truth gets out, lies are no longer sufficient. Confusion can exist less easily. Psychological terrorism no longer works. When you know the truth, you want to fight and are able to. People need to be on solid ground in order to fight. You regain your major advantage against the oppressor, your stand on reason, truth and the common interest.

Like a bold-faced lie, the truth also strikes terror—in this case, into the oppressor's heart. The truth allows the oppressed to unite. The truth and the unity it brings about constitute the main source of the power the oppressed can bring to bear against the oppressor's established apparatus and power.

Truth is in the interest of the oppressed and against the interest of the oppressor. That is why all diversions from it, inversions of it, evasions and cover-ups of it are so important, and why he will go to such lengths to frighten people away from it.

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## ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL LINES

*Although liberalism has different purposes when it appears among those in power and the defenders of those in power, it expresses itself in virtually the same way, and with the same effect. A woman encounters many of the same psychological lines and attacks from liberal women that she does from men. (And often from bosses, tax collectors, auditors, policemen—all those in power whom she must confront.)*

### WHY DON'T YOU TRUST ME? YOU'RE A BAD UNTRUSTING PERSON.

I don't distrust you; I disagree with you. Why should I trust you? Have you given me reason?

### WHY ARE YOU GETTING SO EXCITED? or DON'T GET SO EXCITED, EMOTIONAL, UPSET, ETC.

Among other things, one of the things that has just happened is the person who's just said that is the one who has just sounded worried and "excited" or "emotional." As for why I am excited, we are discussing matters of serious concern.

### I FEEL HOSTILITY GOING ON HERE or WHY ARE YOU SO HOSTILE?

Whether there is hostility going on (or just disagreement) and, if so, whether the hostility—or anger—is

unjustified or understandable remains to be seen. The real question at this point is the issue, not the tone in which it is being argued.

#### WHY ARE YOU INTIMIDATING ME?

Often what has just happened is *that* person has just attacked you and you are defending yourself against her. Usually there is an issue that the attacker is pushing under the rug.

#### SHE'S A JUDGMENTAL TYPE PERSON or DON'T BE SO JUDGMENTAL.

The real question is what is being judged and why. Is the judgment based on trying to find the truth, on trying to make an accurate analysis, or is it on personal grounds of psychological reliability. One had better make judgments, first, about the truth of the issues and, second, about the reliability of the person one is going to work with, although, of course, one can and will make some mistaken judgments.

#### LET'S NOT GET INTO BICKERING OVER PETTY ISSUES.

The question is—is the issue really petty and irrelevant or is it really important. It could be either. Take this quote from President Nixon, for instance, when presented with Watergate evidence: "Let others spend their time dealing with murky, small, unimportant, vicious little things. We will spend our time building a better world." Similarly, men will call the housework issue petty compared to building a beautiful relationship.

#### YOU'RE BASICALLY A MASCULINE, DOMINATING TYPE, or, conversely A FEMININE, SUBMISSIVE (PASSIVE) TYPE.

The real error here is the classification of a "character type" as opposed to a particular kind of tactic being used for reactionary or revolutionary purposes. There is also the question of whether "domination" and "submission" is really going on or actually just agreement with a convincing argument.

#### SHE'S CRAZY

This is either a statement of opinion about someone's reliability as a person as opposed to the validity of her ideas; or, it is a trick, commonly played by men with women, of simply denying the reality of what you are saying.

MORE LINES: I'VE NEVER MET SUCH A MISERABLE TYPE PERSON IN ALL MY LIFE, WHY DON'T YOU LIKE US, YOU'RE SO OBSESSIVE, WHY DON'T YOU USE YOUR ABILITIES FOR GOOD ENDS, NOT BAD ONES, I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH NEGATIVE ENERGY, WHY ARE YOU SO PARANOID, BUT YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW ME, ETC.

The real effect of all this is to avoid the issues, to intimidate rather than argue and convince.

—K.S.

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#### SUGGESTED READINGS

"Combat Liberalism" by Mao Tsetung, September 1937.

*The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, 1961.

"Some Liberal Misconceptions" (unpublished) by Carol Giardina, Fall 1968.

"The Pitfalls of Liberalism" by Stokely Carmichael, January 1969.

"The Four Great Hang-ups," *The Enemy* by Felix Greene, 1970.