

Consequences Of The Conditioning Line

Barbara Leon

The issue of psychological interpretations of behavior has been one of the major ideological divisions between Redstockings and other groups in the women's liberation movement. While other groups have argued that women submit to their own oppression due to past training, brainwashing or programming, Redstockings said:

We reject the idea that women consent to or are to blame for their own oppression. Women's submission is not the result of brainwashing, stupidity or mental illness but of continual, daily pressure from men. We do not need to change ourselves, but to change men."—*Manifesto*, July 7, 1969

What other groups saw as submissive behavior, Redstockings saw as ways women, when still struggling individually, fight for what they want given their situation.

Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, in their book *Rebirth of Feminism*, have asserted that it was this position of Redstockings, adopted as the "pro-woman line", along with an overemphasis on consciousness-raising, which led to the group's dissolution in 1970:

In the view of many feminists the 'anti-brainwashing'/pro-woman position leads not only to a paralysis of action—what external changes in behavior can a woman effect if her behavior is understood only as a rational response to the social system—but also to a paralysis of thought. Although Redstocking's rejection of traditionally-accepted psychological explanations of women's behavior does offer new insights, one former member of the group has argued, 'When you begin to believe the pro-woman line, it distorts your perception of reality. It's too simplistic.'—*Rebirth of Feminism*, p. 172)

Left out from the book was the pro-woman line's prescription for collective action and political strategy. Also wrong was its conclusion as to the harmful effect of Redstockings's anti-brainwashing theory on the history of the group. Redstockings was temporarily halted by the same problems

which Hole and Levine ascribe to other women's liberation groups, most notably attacks on leadership from within and without the group. In fact, the accuracy and importance of the pro-woman line has become more evident with recent developments.

What began, to some extent, as an analysis of women's behavior in our personal and emotional lives now appears to have even larger political significance as we see the active use of psychological theories to deny women jobs under capitalism and to explain away the continued oppression of women in socialist countries. In both cases, women are told, failure to advance is caused by women's lack of self-confidence and clinging to traditional roles. This blocks any real analysis of the roots of male supremacy and the continued use of power to keep women in a subordinate position. The capitalist's self-interest requires that he maintain segregation in order to pay women less and in this way depress the level of all wages. In the case of the socialist, there are conflicting interests. On the one hand, the unpaid services provided by women as wives and mothers have great economic value and raise the standard of living of male workers. On the other hand, men's opportunism in oppressing women detracts from the united power of the working class.

"Brainwashing and Women: The Psychological Attack", which I wrote in the Spring of 1970, outlined the basic position that the "new" psychological theories used in some parts of the women's liberation movement—theories that women are brainwashed or conditioned into inferiority—are just a more sophisticated version of the old theories of women's biological inferiority. As in the following quote from Marcuse, "nature" is simply replaced by "second nature":

... over and above the obviously physiological differences between male and female, the feminine characteristics are socially conditioned. However, the long process of thousands of years of social conditioning means that they may become 'second nature' which is not changed automatically by the establishment of new social institutions. There can be discrimination against women even under socialism.—H. Marcuse, lecture 3/7/74, Stanford University.

These theories shift the burden of blame from men to women, obscuring the power differences between men and

women, and preventing us from clearly seeing just what the barriers are that have to be overcome—barriers that exist not in our heads but in the real world. My article stressed the punishment given to women who step out of line. It did not go into another important way in which men exercise their power to enforce the status quo—rewarding women for good behavior. Nor did it go into the use of myth and lies promoted by the powerful to deny us access to real information and collective knowledge. This was not simply an oversight. At the time the article was written there was tremendous opposition to the idea that force was ever used against women at all.

Carol Hanisch's article, published in the July-August 1971 issue of *Woman's World*, introduces the idea that conditioning is seen as making women unqualified—an idea that has taken on great economic significance as the newest justification for keeping women out of jobs. She shows that "sex role" theory as well as "conditioning" is used as a cover up for oppression. She also analyzes why psychological theories are used by women in the movement, what they get out of defining the problems in this way. Thus, this article, written a year later, begins to take on the political problem of female opportunism and the interests and misconceptions behind it.

Colette Price points out how the conditioning arguments used in the women's movement are an ironic retreat even from the theories of establishment behavioral psychologists.

By the Fall of 1972, the situation in this country had changed somewhat. Women's liberation had become a mass movement and the establishment in this country was forced to change its words, if not its practices. In *Feminist Art Journal* Patricia Mainardi reported on a television interview with William Rubin, Chief Curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art, in which Rubin used the acceptable rhetoric of liberal "feminism" as an excuse for not recognizing and showing the work of women artists.

To describe women as culturally or psychologically inferior is untrue, as well as being an insult, as the early radical feminists discovered. To say that this alleged inferiority makes us unqualified for taking on jobs or positions of power is worse, because economic survival as well as respect is involved. This is the full significance of the "psychological attack". At every level of society it prevents analysis (contrary to the opposite charge of Hole and Levine) and in practical terms blocks the advancement of women. Within the movement, it can be used to discredit anything women say we want. It isn't necessary to argue over goals, desires or impressions if you can write off the "brainwashed" women expressing them. Women's legitimate demands for love and commitment from men, for example, have often been dismissed in this way. Outside the movement, in the job and educational world, real issues can be similarly avoided. It isn't necessary for an employer or a university to admit to excluding women if he can simply say that no qualified women have applied—or even that none exist at this point in history due to the past effects of sexism. It

isn't necessary for socialist governments to challenge their own backwardness and lack of class perspective regarding half their people if they can instead point to the "backwardness" of the female population.

Psychology versus power, then, is not an abstract intellectual argument. It is important because the content of your theory determines the content of your action. How you define what is wrong determines how you will try to solve the problem. How much you are allowed to question determines how much you will be allowed to change.

Following are excerpts from papers which reflect the development of thinking along these lines. The "opposition" that Ellen Willis describes below refers to Kathie Sarachild and Irene Peslikis who were the prime exponents in the N.Y.C. group of the pro-woman line.

from UP FROM RADICALISM, Ellen Willis, *US* magazine, October, 1969

1968 . . . December: "One night someone says the main obstacle to our liberation is that we've swallowed sexist ideology; we must stop feeling guilty about being 'unfeminine', refuse to play our traditional roles. This touches off an emotional argument. It's not a matter of brainwashing, the opposition insists. There are *consequences* for stepping out of our roles. If you refuse to be a domestic servant and your man calls you bitchy and unloving, the whole culture backs him up. It won't help to find another man. Most men won't accept our individual attempts at self-liberation—why should they? They are organized, we aren't. Names *do* hurt us; they're warnings. If we step out of line too often, the penalties are loneliness, sexual deprivation and in most cases the economic and spiritual dead end of menial jobs. . . .

So if women are 'brainwashed' it's because facing their powerlessness is too painful. If we can't change things, it doesn't help to stew about them. And we can only change things together. As we build a movement, as we organize to attack the institutions that keep us down, our psychic defenses will go too. Guilt is fear . . .

For the first time I understand what is ultimately wrong with the 'change your head' line. Up against the wall, Beatles.

from BRAINWASHING AND WOMEN: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTACK, Barbara Leon, *It Ain't Me Babe*, August, 1970

For centuries women have been the objects of a biological attack. Our oppression was rationalized by the theory that we were genetically inferior to men: incapable of thinking, doing hard work or making our own decisions. As women began to challenge this obvious sexism, it became necessary for men to devise newer, more sophisticated methods of control. Psychological theories were found to be a useful

weapon. . . . We now have the theory that women are "brainwashed" into accepting inferior roles by their early upbringing and by the mass media . . .

A truly political approach to women's oppression should focus on the external conditions we all must react to rather than implying that our fears of these conditions are imaginary. This approach does not deny that little girls are given a specific kind of education about how to behave and that the media presents certain images of what a desirable woman should be. These things do occur. However, they should be seen as guidelines to the way women are *forced* to act as long as we are in a powerless position. Nor does such a political approach deny that women have real emotional needs. The failure to have these needs met is another result and not a cause of our oppression. . . .

In order to see how the psychological attack works, we should look at a number of the examples commonly found in the "brainwashing" literature.

There is a frequent put-down of women who wear makeup and bleach their hair. According to the brainwashing theorists such a woman has blindly accepted the admen's image of what she should look like. She must "liberate herself" by learning to accept her natural beauty. Completely left out of the picture is the fact that a woman's appearance is her work uniform. If she shows up to work without the proper uniform her boss (or husband) can harass her or find a replacement.

A list of the ways in which the psychological attack is used against women could go on forever: when men make obscene remarks as we walk down the street that's not harassment, it's admiration, but we're too sick to appreciate it. The lack of women scientists doesn't mean we're excluded from that field—we just don't enter it because of inferiority complexes. There is one constant element in all these examples—everything is our fault.

The field of psychology has always been used to substitute personal explanations of problems for political ones, and to disguise real material oppression as emotional disturbance. Lacking a political analysis of their situation people often have no choice but to blame themselves for their unhappiness. Psychology perpetuates this self-blame by translating it into social science jargon and giving it respectability.

This jargon must be reduced to its real meaning. To call a woman brainwashed is a subtle way of calling her stupid. It implies that we aren't capable of telling the difference between television screens and real life; that if our oppression were suddenly removed we wouldn't know it but would go on acting as if it was still there. It implies that there are enclaves in society where male supremacy doesn't exist, where women could act in a liberated way if we only understood we were free. It advocates individual psychological struggle at a time when collective struggle is essential.

from EDITORIAL, Judith Brown, *The Radical Therapist*, Aug. 1970

The basic radical idea of feminist groups is the Pro-Woman line . . . Radical women are saying that psychology must move toward materialism or it cannot move toward radicalism. Materialism is not the crudely painted anti-Marxist theory which liberals say posits an "economic factor" as the moving force in history. Materialism insists that all ideas have at their base an observable objective cause. A materialist approach to psychology would search for those objective relationships between men and women, worker and capitalism, or black and racism, which would cause an individual to behave in a particular way. Idealism, on the other hand—the great moving theory behind psychology—makes sweeping statements to the effect, for example, that worker rebellions are merely a reflection of antiauthoritarianism nurtured by restrictive parents. Idealism finds in real events a mythical, religious, or psychoanalytic cause.

from MALE PSYCHOLOGY: A MYTH TO KEEP WOMEN IN THEIR PLACE, Carol Hanisch, *Woman's World*, July, 1971

. . . . Sociology, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, etc., all talk about the male and female "roles" in society. They use a language that covers up what is really going on—that men dominate women for what men get out of it—and in most cases blame women for either "accepting her role" or for "fighting against it". They say that women are born equal, but along the way, because we are oppressed (socialized, damaged, conditioned, brainwashed, taught) by our culture and/or society, we still end up unqualified, inferior, subhuman, damaged. . . .

In men/women relationships, women do what we do to survive, to get what we need and what we want and deserve, and to avoid being punished. Men do what they do because they get some benefits out of it and/or avoid being harassed by other *men* for breaking the male code. . . .

Then why do (women) keep using all those social science words to describe what is happening? They must be getting something out of it! 1) It's easy. It's much easier to resort to this way of explaining things than it is to do the hard work of figuring out what is really going on. 2) It keeps them from admitting the awful truth that men are our class enemy. If men are just "taught" or "conditioned" to be male supremacist, then re-education alone would solve the problem. . . . 3) It gives them intellectual control of the situation. 4) It makes them look good in men's eyes, and they consequently get rewarded for it. 5) The woman who uses those words usually (maybe not always) believes openly or secretly that *she* has escaped most or all of that "conditioning" or "brainwashing" so she gets a false feeling of being better than other women. 6) She has a direct stake in these theories because her job or her man is in one of the fields that depends directly on maintaining these ideas. . . .

To say that women are damaged/brainwashed/conditioned/hung-up/dumb because of our oppression (the current male line) has the same practical result as saying women are inherently inferior, at least for the masses of women. In either case, we can be ignored, kept out of jobs, whatever, because they have the excuse that we are NOW STILL INFERIOR. . . .

from UP AGAINST CONDITIONING, Colette Price, unpublished, April, 1972

If you place a hungry little mouse in a cage with a lever, sooner or later, by random movement alone she will touch that lever. When she does, give that hungry little mouse a food pellet. She presses again—again give her a food pellet. Repeat this over and over again and that little mouse 'learns' that to get food she has to press the lever. To use that widely touted psychological term, she is conditioned. Of course this is the simplified version of the process. You can extend it into getting that hungry little mouse to ring bells, put on lights and a hundred other things. . . .

What's funny is that psychologists and too many women in the women's movement make such a big deal over this process and the word—conditioning—they have given it. Basically it's the process of knowing or finding out what you have to do in order to get what you want. It takes no special insight to know that hunger needs relief and I suspect most people would do a lot more than that little mouse to get some food if they were hungry. . . .

The relevant, necessary and conveniently overlooked condition basic to getting that little mouse to press the lever is her hunger. If you put a well-fed, just-fed mouse in that cage she won't keep pressing the lever. She doesn't need food so why would she waste her time, effort and energy. . . . You can't control an un-hungry mouse.

Her hunger is referred to as the stimulus, her lever-pressing the response. Psychology is notorious for its concentration on responses without looking at the stimulus evoking-provoking that response. Although they take great care in the laboratory to set up the necessary stimulus conditions (after all, their experiments wouldn't turn out if they didn't) they seem to forget in the field, in their theories, in their practice, that there even is a stimulus evoking the responses. They make observations about the behavior of women, attribute it to conditioning, and never once let on *what* it is we are responding to. . . .

from MALE CHAUVINIST EXPOSÉ, WILLIAM RUBIN, Patricia Mainardi, *Feminist Art Journal*, Fall, 1972

In the same way that chameleons change color in order to pass unnoticed in their new environment while going about business as usual, so men must make new masks for their sexism as the women's movement causes the old ones to wear too thin. Where once the sexist could openly

announce his bigotry with the most crude biological rationalizations, such as the Freudian "Anatomy is Destiny," now the growing strength of our movement, bolstered by the laws we have already obtained outlawing some of the more obvious sexist practices, have made it impossible, to say nothing of illegal, for all but the most powerless men to openly proclaim the inferiority of women. In fact, once laws have been passed, outspoken bigotry may remain one of the only luxuries of working class men—witness the Archie Bunker and hardhat images, which persist long after the men who really hold the power have by necessity developed a more sophisticated sexist theory, i.e. the 'psychological' justification for sexism. This new sexist theory, which says that women have brains, but they are damaged, together with a lot of cant about 'roles' and 'learning' and 'socialization' has replaced the earlier 'biological' theory (which said we had wombs instead of brains) as surely as the urban liberal sexist has replaced the Archie Bunker reactionary. But this is a change of style, not content, and so consequences for women have *not* changed. With this new ploy, sexist men hope to maintain their power and privilege forever—if we let them. In (his) remarks . . . on the television program WOMAN!, June 9, 1972, William Rubin (Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art) gives a superb demonstration of the male chauvinist in liberal disguise. . . .

On first encounter with this variety of sexist, one is tempted to think "Oh, he isn't so bad" remembering the outrageous sexist statements of the past. . . . For example, several years ago artist Juanity McNeely and myself approached Paul Mocsanyi, director of the New School Art Center about having a women's show. He turned us down with the statement that "women artists have always been inferior and I see no reason to expect that they will be any better in the future. There was only Mary Cassatt and she was fifth rate." Last year, in discussions with Duncan Cameron, director of the Brooklyn Museum on the same subject, he allowed as how he didn't think women artists were *inherently* inferior, however the *quality* of such an exhibition he said, would be very low due to all the regrettable sexism of the past which has produced the inferior women artists of the present.

. . . . It is a little disheartening to realize that all women's efforts to end sexism have forced men to give exactly one inch—they no longer say that we were *born* inferior, now they say that we got that way *after* we were born. This is supposed to make us feel better. To buttress this up they talk a lot about 'roles' and 'consciousness', about how women 'learned' to be inferior and were 'conditioned' to fall behind—and we end up just as 'unqualified' as the outright bigot would have us born. 'Role Learning' is used by the psychologist sexist as a grand filibuster, an excuse to delay change, since we were supposed to have learned to be less. Rubin, for example, speaks about how "it takes a long time for these things to be unlearned." By whom? Certainly not by women, since there were several hundred women outside his office not two months before, demonstrating that we haven't 'learned' any tripe about women's 'role'. So

he must mean that it takes a long time for *men* to 'unlearn' sexism. . . .

The real benefit to men of all this psychological and social science jargon is that it obscures the issues, it makes sexism, which is the material reality of a woman's life into something intangible, mysterious, mystical, and in the end mythical: "We don't *feel* there is" (any sexism) says Rubin, "and we can't know". Why not? Sexism doesn't exist on a spiritual level, but right here on earth, and MOMA's 2½% of painting and sculpture shows for women is good enough

evidence of its existence. Rubin's implication of course is that there might be *another* explanation for MOMA's sexist record. That explanation, which he is careful not to say, is that women artists aren't any good.

Perhaps the sexism of men like Rubin can best be understood, not by what they say, but by examining the relationship between what they say and their behavior—in the face of MOMA's miserable record, Rubin sits musing about whether the sexism is 'conscious' or 'unconscious'. Except for their psychiatrists, who really cares?

We resisted in every way you can point to. Take the English language. There are cats who come here from Italy, from Germany, from Poland, from France—in two generations they speak English perfectly. We have *never* spoken English perfectly. And that is because our people consciously resisted a language that did not belong to us. Never did, never will, anyhow they try to run it down our throat, we ain't gonna have it. We ain't gonna have it! You must understand that as a level of resistance. Anybody can speak that simple honky's language correctly. We have not done it because we have resisted.

— Stokely Carmichael, 1968
 "Free Huey"
 STOKELY SPEAKS

'The pro-woman line' says basically that women are really neat people. The bad things that are said about us as women are either myths (women are stupid), tactics women use to struggle individually (women are bitches), or are actually things that we want to carry into the new society and want men to share too (women are sensitive, emotional).

— Carol Hanisch, 1969
 "The Personal Is Political"
 NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR