# The most radical feminism

Radical feminism was a comparatively new arrival in Australia and many women in the Women’s Liberation Movement were not radical feminists – they were just women liberationists. But radical feminist ideology quickly became dominant. At the same time, the movement moved away from directly political activity. The idea of self help projects – halfway houses, rape crisis centres and so on – inspired many women who wanted to get down to the nitty gritty of helping those poor women out there.

With the ALP re-elected (for presumably 3 years) in May 1974, and then IWY in 1975, government grants helped realise many feminist dreams. Projects of all sorts nourished: novels, non-sexist children’s school books, historical research, women’s refuges and health centres. Nobody was too worried about theory when things seemed to be working out so well in practice.

Suddenly, November 11, 1975 and the world would never look the same again. For the first time, many women’s liberationists realised that the political situation had to be dealt with, and the WLM couldn’t do it on its own.

The political scene darkened during 1976. IWY was over and many grants dried up. Fraser made cuts in many areas affecting women and the women’s movement. At the same time problems began to surface in the halfway houses and health centres. Rosters broke down, personal conflicts broke up collective projects, and government funding was questioned.

Today the WLM has entered a slump. And although there has been some re-evaluation, the tragedy has been the continued dominance of radical feminism.

A glance at Women’s Liberation publications over the past year shows how widespread is the malaise. Vashti’s Voice thinks that «the WLM has arrived at an impasse in activity and interest» and that «there has been a drought period this year in political discussion and thinking around directions for the WLM». Anne Summers, a Sydney WL activist, comments after looking at the state of the movement around Australia, that «many activists are disillusioned and self critical.»

The problem is not lack of activity in itself. For those who want it, there is endless activity in staffing 24 women’s refuges. 3 working women’s centres, 5 rape crisis centres and at least 6 women’s health centres around the country. Quite aside from at least 14 newspapers and magazines, and many other projects.

WL activists seem to think that where these projects fall down isonpoliticisation. Women use services, but don’t understand the ideas behind a rape crisis centre or a women’s refuge. For instance, in the Melbourne Women’s Centre, «there were women seeking abortions and crisis accommodation, but there wasn’t one call to find out what WL is on about … We are not winning women on politics.»

The general feeling is that the WLM has been co-opted by concentrating on reforms and band‑aids.

And yet no one wants to admit that those who criticised self-help strategies when they were first starting off were right. Radical feminists argue now that although self – help didn’t work out as a strategy it wasn’t a mistake.

In other words, to be a real women’s liberationist these days, you’ve got to be more feminist than ever before. Instead of reforms, you’ve got to «further revolutionary goals.»

Behind all this rhetoric is the social reality, the change that has occurred in Australian society in the last few years. Party due to the efforts of the WLM itself, WL ideas have become very widely accepted. Not by everybody of course, but they are no longer outside the mainstream of society, spurned by all «descent people» as extremes.

Anne Summers describes the widespread influences at government level, in the churches, and in the conservative organizations such as the NCC. Women in unions, professional organizations, political parties, the media, and in the suburbs are organising themselves.

The change hasn’t just been at the top level. Women in all walks of life have been affected, and the majority of ordinary women, in my opinion no longer laugh at WL ideas but take them seriously.

Of course, few accept the ideology behind WL demands, but there is no doubt that there has been a change in attitude to women as a social group. The society we are dealing with today is not the same as when the WLM just began.

Radical feminists usually recognize this.

Of course it is true that the new general awareness is not revolutionary (whether ‘feminist’ or socialist). But what the radical feminists don’t realise is the opportunities the penetration of WL ideas provides. Instead of going out into the real world and trying to build on this base, they retreat into vague theorising. The door stands open but they won’t walk through.

The radical feminists retreat into their own ideology, their feminist purity. They are desperately afraid of contamination by the real world.

And so there is an obsession with finding a pure, ‘un-co-opted’ radical feminist strategy.

Many of the popular strategies and practices of the past few years have been well criticised in current WL literature. Kerryn Higgs and Barbara Bloch, for instance, talk about how the movement has developed its own orthodoxy. Instead of freedom and individual expression there has often been conformity and compulsive behaviour. They discuss various conformities, such as sharing, autonomy personal harmony, spontaneity and lesbianism. Their conclusion is depressing.

Kathie Gleeson criticises the way the movement ignores its development out of the left, and the refusal to see how all our personal life is influenced by the political and economic reality around us.

Lesbianism is no longer regarded as a strategy for all feminists.

Barbara W. and her friends also make a number of specific criticisms of the movement’s practices in their long article, which I have already quoted.

But radical feminism today is no closer to providing workable strategies than it was in 1974. The women who so well criticise and analyse past problems either admit their impotence, or have nothing to suggest but more of the same.

Barbara W. ends her article with 16 «practical and organizational» proposals. But looking closer it is dear that they are really nothing more than a statement in point form of the need to deal with the problems set out in the article. There is only one actually concrete proposal –to change the name of the coordinating committee!

With all the detailed analysis of mistakes and problems, there is no real attempt to work out why there were such problems. To the radical feminists they are simply the result of being «misguided», having the wrong «attitude», or «understanding». Over the years, «many of our fine original insights have become distorted (and) our practice has ended up conflicting with our theory.» Why? Because of «errors in judgement»!

Is it simply the result of a few errors of judgement that «we keep making the same mistakes over and over again»? Why is it that so many women find that after 6 years of the movement it gets harder and harder to reconcile their theory with their practice? Surely at this point there should be some questioning of radical feminist theory itself.

«The idea that sexism is the basic oppression, that the basic class system is one between men and women.» This is the fundamental idea of radical feminism. In the article reprinted here, I have shown what happens if you follow this idea through to its logical conclusion. I hope it will be of use to radical feminists who do want to start questioning the theory itself.

NOTE: In the original article, and in this new introduction, I haw concentrated on quotes and examples from the Australian movement. This is not because I think Australian radical feminism is different – quite the opposite. I believe radical feminism is pretty similar everywhere, and I could have written a similar article based on literature from Britain or USA. But this way there is no copout for Australians; no one can say, «Radical feminism is different – we haven’t made the same mistakes as overseas.»

Radical Feminism, a comparatively recent trend in the Women’s Liberation Movement in Australia, is based on the theory that women’s oppression is the fundamental political oppression, that women are a class and that they are «engaged in a power struggle with men». Furthermore, according to ideas of radical feminism, the purpose of male chauvinism is primarily to obtain psychological ego satisfaction and is only secondarily found in economic relationships.

This article will attempt to show that defining women as a class brings the Radical Feminists back to affirming the one thing all women do have in common – the female role; that the a-historical approach of personal politics is part of this female role, and that the lack of a strategy has meant the movement has reverted to those activities traditionally open to women – for example «self-help» which is no more than charity dressed up.

AFTER the initial stages of consciousness-raising, after the first rage had died down, the Women’s Liberation Movement had begun to question, to ask where the oppression had come from, and try to work out the wax forward. Radical in its belief that a new society was necessary, the movement was strongly influenced by the New Left with its emphasis on conscious and experience. The social group of which the New Left was composed – white, middle class, students and the intellectually inclined – had weighed the «affluent society» in the balance and found it wanting. The housewife epitomised this affluent world of gadgets, and in fact was one herself. As Betty Friedan put it, she found herself with a vague, inexplicable feeling of «Is this all?» Alienation and feelings of powerlessness provided the impetus for the growth of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

Consciousness raising groups were therefore the first tasksof the movement. Women came to understand that personal feelings of inadequacy and helplessness were shared, that they were related to the social situation of women. Alienation was discovered to be a result of lack of control over the conditions of your life. In Women’s Liberation terms this meant no abortion or childcare centres, restricted job opportunities and low wages, and above all the role expectation that whatever the individual propensities or talents, all women must become wives, mothers and housewives.

Betty Friedan’s organisation, N.O.W., had little trouble establishing a strategy consistent with its limited aims of improved status for women within the system, and followed the standard pressure group tactics. However the Women’s Liberation Movement, with its aim of fundamental change, required a strategy broader in scope. When the momentum of the movement slowed after the initial burst of enthusiasm, the movement had to face its own lack of social power, which is essential for change. In the absence of a strong and clearly radical working class movement, the movement turned inwards.

The movement at this stage had an extremely emotional, tense atmosphere. Many women, discovering the oppressive nature of the role with which they had always identified, suffered an identity crisis, and sought support and identity in the movement, in sisterhood. Many turned to the movement as if to a lover, seeking from this new relationship the fulfilment promised but never provided by the traditional role. In its inability to find a strategy, the movement rallied its one obvious strength – unity.

Radical feminism grew out of this search for a theory to unite all women, a search for a «female» culture to replace the «male» culture which was seen as being the main enemy. All those social realities which do divide women were ignored by the simple expediency of relegating them to the male domain, whereby they were made unimportant.

From the beginning, the movement had argued that many «female» characteristics such as emotions were in fact good and necessary for all humans. This gave way now to an advocacy of the female culture, which in turn amounts to the only thing that does cut across all class, race and national lines for women: the female role.

As Radical Feminism has grown and developed it has retreated more and more into the female role.

Just as so many men have told us in the past. Radical Feminists now tell us that women are earthy, un‑aggressive creatures, who think differently and whose sexuality is different – more diffuseandromantic.

Thus the constant pressure in the movement to be «sisterly», to have no disagreements, and to relate totally to everybody. Articles are written attacking thought and theory as «male». Women, «suddenly» develop an interest in crafts, particularly those not exactly traditionally regarded as unsuitable for females, e.g. weaving or crocheting. When an action is not completely successful the response of many Women’s Liberationists is to blame themselves.

It is extraordinary that Radical Feminist women, while complaining that males have written women out of history, will unflinchingly make these generalizations. To ignore politically powerful (and warlike) women such as Scrimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir; or even the hundreds of women psychologists and sociologists who have studied sexuality – among them Margaret Sanger, Helene Deutsch, Margaret Mead; to ignore these women is to deny that women do have a history.

Furthermore, to maintain that women have been successfully and totally suppressed to the point where they have been completely unable to participate is to accept the idea that women are passive; and it is to deny that women have repeatedly been able to overcome theirconditioning so far as to break through to real activity.

The exceptionally elitist attitudes to their less famous contemporaries who participate in «male dominated» left organisations is not only insulting; it is inconsistent with any ideas of sisterhood to have such contempt for the sincerely held beliefs of socialist women.

The reaffirmation of the female role is taken to its logical conclusion by Jane Alpert. Her theory that women should rule and be worshipped by virtue of their potential motherhood brings us full circle, back to the gilded cage from which we have so desperately been trying to escape. But this time the purpose of the bars is not to keep women inside – instead the radical feminists waul to keep the world out.

The radical feminists have contributed important insights into what is wrong with capitalism. One of the most sophisticated radical feminist writers. Shulamith Firestone, analysed important questions, such as love, children, and the relationship between sex and racism. But Firestone, as do all the others, continued to suffer from the lack of a strategy. They had no idea of what to do. In the search for something to do, for social power, radical feminism looks towards models in past societies, where women ruled, or female groupings were powerful. Alternatively, the «key» is thought to lie in lesbianism, vegetarianism, or the occult.

In «The First Sex», by Elizabeth Gould Davis, the idea of the «noble savage» is given a new twist. This book very popular with Radical Feminists, advances the theory that the prehistoric matriarchies were ruled by physically and psychically superior, vegetarian women. Unfortunately, meat‑eating, lustful men took over, and today we see the consequences.

Medieval (and modern) witches and midwives are idealised, with their «great healing powers of skill in midwifery – (they) obtained skills through inborn psychic gifts, generations of experimentation – or perhaps being attuned to their natural instincts by living a quiet life in the woods.»

Again we find the Radical Feminists arguing that women are closerto nature!

The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world!

Short cut theories, proposing a single universal key to open the door to feminist heaven, abound.

Last year the key was Lesbianism. A large number of Radical Feminists became lesbians, not out of sexual interest, but as a point of political principle. It was argued simply that «feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice.» Lesbians maintained that they were the real revolutionaries, being women who had refused to submit to the female role. The realization was, however, not long in coming that relating to a woman can still be highly role-defined.

This year the key is fashion has been the question of health/nature healing/vegetarianism. Alienation, or lack of harmony between mind, emotions and body can be overcome by the amazing healing qualities of food. Furthermore, «Meat eating and male violence seemed locked together.» Institutional medicine will be superseded by astrological birth control, female nature healers and the healing crisis (or in more female terms, suffering).

The theories of matriarchy and witches, of lesbianism and nature healing lead naturally into an ideology enjoying growing popularity – female superiority. This is a very convenient solution to the searchfor power, since it suggests women are in fact powerful now.

More recently, female superiority is advocated quite openly. One writer has only minor reservations «about saying straight out that there are important innate differences between men and women, that biology is destiny, and that biology has made women infinitely superior to men.»

The advocates of female superiority lend to hesitate because of one consequence – if men are naturally inferior, it gives them a cop-out – they can’t help being bastards. However there are more serious political implications than this. Advocacy of female superiority is no less sexist or potentially oppressive than male chauvinism. It is authoritarian, elitist and reactionary. Furthermore, one logical conclusion is inescapable: if the female role epitomises all that is good in human nature, and females are superior to males, then women are not oppressed. How long will it be before we see an article pushing this line?

Before the industrial revolution, the family’s economic function was conspicuously productive. The family farm was the fundamental unit for production of basic necessities. But with the industrial revolution, the point of production was moved to the factory, and the family, at least in urban areas, lost any obvious productive function. The only remaining one, the production of labour power (the production and maintenance of the worker him or herself) is invisible, disguised as a personal service a wife does out of love for her husband. The function of the family, apart from the economic one of consumption, became mainly political. Training in authoritarian attitudes and sexual repression, socialization of children into the competitive, super-individualistic psychology of capitalism – that is the major task of the family.

Based on the apparent divorce of the family from economic production, the myth grew of the family as «outside» society, as a refuge, where personal life is carried on and where the man may recuperate from the pressures of the world. Despite the large numbers of women (and children who worked, this theory was developed particularly during the Victorian period. The Englishman’s home was his castle – his wife, in her peaceful sanctuary, formed the basis for capitalism’s version of a woman’s place.

Thus women’s oppression today is based on the role of woman as the centre and lynchpin of the family. The apparently personal nature of the family, separate from society, has meant that women tend to see their problems in a personal, particularist way. During its early stages, the Women’s Liberation movement concentrated on breaking down this false consciousness and through consciousness-raising groups helped women to perceive the social nature of their oppression. Thus the concept: «the personal is political».

The catchword now amounts to: «the political is personal». Everything must be looked at in a personal subjective way.

The problem here is that the Radical Feminists fail to see that the personal, subjective approach is a historically conditioned part of the female role; instead they regard it as inherently female. This a-historical approach traps them into acceptance of the essentially bourgeois ideology that the family, and consequently women, are «outside society».

No doubt such enthusiastic protagonists of women’s liberation as John Ruskin would unhesitatingly agree with a theory that women remain untarnished by not being exposed to the world!

Seeing the family as outside society leads to the frequent attempts to change family and sexual relations by sheer willpower. Thus the Radical Feminist communes such as Amazon Acres.

Twist and turn as they might, Radical Feminists like everyone else are still unable to avoid the pressing question: «What to do now?» The answer usually given is simply do what you want.

Like all change-your-head theories, Radical Feminism is voluntarist and utopian. It upholds a vision of a new society, of fundamental change, «a female world based on love trust, freedom and humanity.»But this world remains a distant dream.

Radical Feminism either declares this world will spontaneously arise,or that if we try hard enough we’ll get it. Voluntarism, the idea you can do anything you want right now, is in the long run demoralising when disillusionment sets in. In the short run, the lack of a strategy condemns a movement to activity only around short-term objectives. A strategy, an understanding of how to build the movement and to bridge the gap between immediate actions and the eventually massive social change – this is an essential concept. Radical Feminism is lacking such a concept.

The movement, under the influence of Radical Feminism, has largely reverted to those immediately actionable activities traditionally open to women – good works. The present movement around self-help is little more than charity. Setting up child-care centres, halfway houses, health centres and rape crisis groups – while these may be necessary and useful, they do not help to build a movement capable of changing the nature of society. In fact, as charity organisations usually do, they excuse the government and the whole society from taking the responsibility. And such an isolated institution can even be co-opted into the governmental structure. This is evident from the dependenceof the Women’s Health Clinic in Sydney and the Women’s Centre in Berkeley, California on government grants.

This is not to say we should not act around short-term objectives. However while doing so we need to develop an understanding of how to build, a strategy that takes us towards our ultimate goals.

We need to really understand consciousness, which the Radical Feminists, for all their obsession with it, clearly do not. Consciousness is changed in the process of people struggling to change society … and themselves.