

Toward a Female Liberation Movement\*

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Woman's steady march onward, and her growing desire for a broader outlook, prove that she has not reached her normal condition, and that society has not yet conceded all that is necessary for its attainment.

(Introduction, A History of Woman Suffrage, 1889)

The Manifesto

For a middle-aged female accustomed to looking to militant youth for radical leadership it was a shock to read the Women's Manifesto which issued from the female caucus of the national SDS convention last summer (1967; Manifesto printed in New Left Notes of 10 July 1967). Here were a group of "radical women" demanding respect and leadership in a radical organization and coming on with soft-minded NAACP logic and an Urban League list of grievances and demands. One need only substitute the words "white" and "black" for "male" and "female" respectively, replace references to SDS with the city council, and remember all the fruitless approaches black groups made and are still making to local white power groups to realize how ludicrous this manifesto is.

To paraphrase accordingly,

1. Therefore we demand that our brothers on the city council recognize that they must deal with their own problems of white chauvinism in their personal, social, and political relationships.
2. It is obvious from this meeting of the city council that full advantage is not being taken of the abilities and potential contributions of blacks. We call upon the black people to demand full participation in all aspects of local government from licking stamps to assuming leadership positions.
3. People in leadership positions must be aware of the dynamics of creating leadership and are responsible for cultivating all of the black resources available to the local government.

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\*from Voices From Women's Liberation, compiled and edited by Leslie B. Tanner, New American Library, 1970.

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4. All University administrations must recognize that campus regulations discriminate against blacks in particular and must take positive action to protect the rights of black people.

And so on. The caucus goes on to charge New Left Notes with printing material on the subject, developing bibliographies, and asks the National Council to set up a committee to study the subject and report at a future date!

There is also a rather pathetic attempt on the part of the caucus to prove its credentials by mimicking the dominant group's rhetoric on power politics. Thus there ensues some verbiage about the capitalist world, the socialist world, and the third world in which it is implied that women are somehow better off under socialism.

It must have been disappointing indeed to the women who drew up the "analysis of women's role" and insisted it be printed verbatim in New Left Notes to find Castro quoted the following month in the National Guardian to the effect that he is assuredly grateful to the women of Cuba for having fought in the hills and otherwise aided the revolution, but now all that is past and women's place is once again servant to husband and children, in the home.

In a plea to the Women's Federation to hold down its goals of female integration into the greater Cuban society, he said, "But who will do the cooking for the child who still comes home for lunch? Who will nurse the babies or take care of the preschool child? Who will cook for the man when he comes home from work? Who will wash and clean and take care of things?"

The Women's Manifesto ends, and again we will substitute "white" for male and "black" for female:

"We seek the liberation of all human beings. The struggle for the liberation of blacks must be part of the larger fight for freedom. (A line which could better have been uttered by the city commission.) We recognize the difficulty our brothers will have in dealing with white chauvinism and we assume our full responsibility (as blacks) in helping to resolve the contradiction."

And lest the men get upset by all this wild talk, or even think of taking it seriously, the women add a reassuring note.

"Freedom now! We love you!"

What lessons are to be learned from this fantastic document, the discrimination which preceded it, and the unchanging scene which followed? I think the lessons are several and serious. I'd like to list them first and discuss each one separately.

1. People don't get radicalized (engaged with basic truths) fighting other people's battles.

2. The females in SDS (at least those who wrote the Manifesto) essentially reject an identification with their own sex and are using the language of female power in an attempt to advance themselves personally in the male power structure they are presently concerned with.

3. That for at least two reasons radical females do not understand the desperate condition of women in general. In the first place, as students they occupy some sexy, sexless, limbo area where they are treated by males in general with less discrimination than they will ever again face. And in the second place, few of them are married or if married have children.

4. For their own salvation and for the good of the movement, women must form their own group and work primarily for female liberation.

#### 1. PEOPLE DON'T GET RADICALIZED FIGHTING OTHER PEOPLE'S BATTLES

No one can say that women in the movement lack courage. As a matter of fact they have been used, aside from their clerical role, primarily as bodies on the line. Many have been thrown out of school, disowned by their families, clubbed by the cops, raped by the nuts, and gone to jail with everyone else.

What happened to them throughout the movement is very much what happened to all whites in the early civil rights days. Whites acted out of moral principles, many acted courageously, and they became liberalized but never radicalized. Which is to say, they never quite came to grips with the reality of anybody's situation. It is interesting to speculate on why this should be the case. At least one reason, it seems to me, is that people who set about to help other people generally manage to maintain important illusions about our society, how it operates, and what is required to change it. It is not just that they somehow manage to maintain these illusions, they are compelled to maintain them by their refusal to recognize the full measure of their own individual oppression, the means by which it is brought about, and what it would take to alter their condition.

Any honest appraisal of their own condition in this society would presumably lead people out of logic, impulse, and desire for self-preservation, to shoot at the guys who are shooting at them. Namely, first of all, to fight their own battles.

No one thinks that poor whites can learn about their own lives by befriending black people, however laudable that action may be. No one even thinks that poor whites can help black people much, assuming some might want to, until they first recognize their own oppression and oppressors. Intuitively we grasp the fact that until poor whites understand who their enemies are and combine to fight

them they can not understand what it is going to take to secure their freedom or anyone else's. And no one seriously doubts that if and when the light dawns upon them collectively, it will be, in the first instance, their battle they will fight.

We understand this intuitively but white students in the early civil rights days would not have done so. They thought they were really getting a thorough education in the movement, that they were really helping, that they knew in what limited ways the society needed changing and what was necessary to obtain those limited changes, and they were thoroughly shaken by Black Power, which said in effect: you don't understand anything. They also thought in those dim days of the past, that they as white students had no particular problems. It was more or less noblesse oblige. Enlightenment soon followed, at least for some white male students.

One of the best things that ever happened to black militants happened when they got hounded out of the stars-and-stripes, white-controlled civil rights movement, when they started fighting for blacks instead of the American Dream. The best thing that ever happened to potential white radicals in civil rights happened when they got thrown out by SNCC and were forced to face their own oppression in their own world. When they started fighting for control of the universities, against the draft, the war, and the business order. And the best thing that may yet happen to potentially radical young women is that they will be driven out of both of these groups. That they will be forced to stop fighting for the "movement" and start fighting primarily for the liberation and independence of women.

Only when they seriously undertake this struggle will they begin to understand that they aren't just ignored or exploited--they are feared, despised, and enslaved.

If the females in SDS ever really join the battle they will quickly realize that no sweet-talking list of grievances and demands, no appeal to male conscience, no behind-the-scenes or in-the-home maneuvering is going to get power for women. If they want freedom, equality, and respect, they are going to have to organize and fight for them realistically and radically.

2. RADICAL FEMALES ESSENTIALLY REJECT AN IDENTIFICATION WITH THEIR SEX AND USE THE LANGUAGE OF FEMALE LIBERATION IN AN ATTEMPT TO ADVANCE THEMSELVES IN THE MALE POWER STRUCTURE OF THE MOVEMENT.

It is hard to understand the women's manifesto in any other way. It reeks of the bourgeois black who can't quite identify with the lame and mutilated casualties of the racist system; who doesn't really see himself as an accidental oversight but as a genetic mutation; who takes it upon himself to explain problems he doesn't understand to a power structure that could care less; who wants to fight for blacks but not very hard and only as a member of the city council or perhaps one of its lesser boards.

If the women in SDS want study committees on the problems of women, why don't they form them? If they want bibliographies, why don't they gather them? If they want to protest University discrimination against women, why don't they do so? No one in SDS is going to stop them. They can even use SDS auspices and publish the New Left Notes, for a while anyway.

But that isn't what they want. They want to be treated like "white people" and work on the problems important to white people like planning, zoning, and attracting industry, or in this case the war, the draft, and university reform.

The trouble with using the language of black or female liberation for this purpose--essentially demanding a nigger on every committee--is two-fold. In the first place it is immoral--a Tom betrayal of a whole people. In the second place it won't work.

There is an almost exact parallel between the role of women and the role of black people in this society. Together they constitute the great maintenance force sustaining the white American male. They wipe his ass and breast feed him when he is little, they school him in his youthful years, do his clerical work and raise his and their replacements later, and all through his life in the factories, on the migrant farms, in the restaurants, hospitals, offices, and homes, they sew for him, stoop for him, cook for him, clean for him, sweep, run errands, haul away his garbage, and nurse him when his frail body falters.

Together they send him out into his own society, shining and healthy, his mind free from all concern with the grimy details of living. And there in that unreal world of light and leisure he becomes bemused and confused with ideas of glory and omnipotence. He spends his time saving the world from dragons, or fighting evil knights, proscribing and enforcing laws and social systems, or just playing with the erector sets of manhood--building better bridges, computers, and bombs.

Win or lose on that playground, he likes the games and wants to continue playing--unimpeded. That means that the rest of the population, the blacks and females, who maintain this elite playboy force, must be kept at their job.

Oh, occasionally it occurs to one or another of the most self-conscious, self-confident, and generous white men that the system could be changed. That it might be based on something other than race or sex. But what? Who would decide? Might not the change affect the rules of the game or even the games themselves? And where would his place be in it all? It becomes too frightening to think about. It is less threatening and certainly less distracting simply to close ranks, hold fast, and keep things the way they are.

This is done by various techniques, some of which are: sprinkling the barest pinch of blacks and women over the playground to obscure the fact that it

is an all white male facility; making a sacred cow out of home and family; supporting a racist and antifeminist church to befuddle the minds of the support force and to divert what little excess energy is available to it; and most importantly, developing among white men a consensus with regard to blacks and females and a loyalty to each other which supersedes that to either of the other groups or to individual members of them, thus turning each white man into an incorruptible guard of the common white male domain.

The gist of that consensus which is relevant to the point at issue here is,

1. Women and blacks are of inherently inferior and alien mentality. Their minds are vague, almost inchoate, and bound by their personal experiences (scatterbrained, or just dumb). They are incapable of truly abstract, incisive, logical, or tactical thinking.

2. Despite or perhaps because of this inferior mentality women and blacks are happy people. All they ask out of life is a little attention, somebody to screw them regularly, second-hand Cadillacs, new hats, dresses, refrigerators, and other baubles.

3. They do not join mixed groups for the stated purposes of the groups but to be with whites or to find a man.

3. RADICAL WOMEN DO NOT REALLY UNDERSTAND THE DESPERATE CONDITIONS OF WOMEN IN GENERAL -- AS STUDENTS, THEY OCCUPY SOME SEXY, SEXLESS LIMBO WHERE THEY ARE TREATED BY MALES WITH LESS DISCRIMINATION THAN THEY WILL EVER AGAIN FACE

It may seem strange, but one of the main advantages of a female student, married or unmarried, with or without children, is that she is still public. She has in her classes, in her contacts on campus, the opportunity to express her ideas publicly to males and females of all rank. Indeed, she is expected to do so--at least in good schools, or in good seminars. Anyway, she has this opportunity on an equal basis with men.

Moreover, her competition with men, at least scholastically, is condoned--built into the system. This creates in the girl an illusion of equality and harmony between the sexes very much as a good integrated school (where students visit each other's homes even for weekends and are always polite) creates in the black the illusion of change and the faith in continued good relations upon graduation.

These female illusions are further nurtured by the social life of students. Since many live in dorms or other places where they can not entertain members of the opposite sex, most social intercourse of necessity takes place in public. I mean that people congregate in coffee houses, pubs, movies, or at parties of the privileged few with off-campus apartments or houses. And since most students

are unmarried, unsure of themselves, and lonely, they are constantly on the make. Thus they dance with each other and talk with each other. The conversation between the sexes is not necessarily serious or profound but it takes place, and, as we have said, takes place, in the great main, publicly. Each tries to find out more about the other, attempts to discover what future relations might be possible between them, tries to impress the other in some way.

So that the female student feels like a citizen, like an individual among others in the body politic, in the civil society, in the world of the intellect. What she doesn't understand is that upon graduation she is stripped of her public life and relegated to the level of private property. Enslavement is her farewell present. As things stand now, she is doomed to become someone's secretary, or someone's nurse, or someone's wife, or someone's mistress. From now on if she has some contribution to make to society she is expected to make it privately through the man who owns some part of her.

If as a secretary she has a criticism of the firm she works for and a money-making idea of improvement for the company, she certainly doesn't express her view publicly at the board meeting of the firm, though she may be there taking minutes. Nor does she speak to her boss about it at an office party or in any other public place. She is expected rather to approach him in private, in a self-effacing manner, indicating that she probably doesn't really know what she is talking about but it seems to her ...

He then proposes the idea to the board and receives both the credit and the raise or promotion. And the peculiar twist is that this holds equally true even if in passing he mentions that the idea was brought to him by his secretary. For in the eyes of the board, as in the eyes of all male society, the female employee has no independent identity. She belongs to the boss as a slave belongs to his master. If slaves are exceptionally productive, the slave holder is given credit for knowing how to pick them and how to work them. Slaves aren't promoted to free men and female secretaries aren't promoted to executive positions.

But slavery is an intricate system. As an institution it cannot be maintained by force alone. Somehow or other slaves must be made to conceive of themselves as inferior beings and slave holders must not be permitted to falter in the confidence of their superiority. That is why female secretaries are not permitted to offer public criticism. How long, after all, could the system survive if in open public exchange some women, even in their present downtrodden position, turned out to be smarter than the men who employ them?

What is feared most is that women, looking out at their natural surroundings, will suffer a reversal of perspective like that one experiences looking at optically balanced drawings where background suddenly becomes subject. That one day looking at men and women in full blown stereotype a woman will suddenly perceive individuals of varying ability, honesty, warmth, and understanding.