

III FOUNDING A RADICAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT:

ISSUES: THE LEFT DEBATE

Women and The Left

by ELLEN WILLIS

Ellen Willis is a founder of Redstockings and the author of several important pieces on women's liberation, notably "Up From Radicalism: A Feminist Journal," in *US* #2 (Bantam, October 1969). The present article, published in the *Guardian*, February 1968, was a cornerstone for the establishment of a radical feminist movement independent of the male-dominated Left.

The women's liberation movement was created by women activists fed up with their subordinate position in radical organizations. Their first goal was to take an equal, active part in the radical movement instead of being relegated to secretarial and other service chores.

This circumstance has led to certain assumptions about the women's movement. In the standard radical view, women's liberation is a branch of the Left and women a constituency like students or GIs. Granted that we suffer our own forms of oppression and that radical men have oppressed us as women, the emphasis is on contributing our special insights to the Left as a whole and using feminist issues as an organizing tool. In return, male radicals are expected to endorse women's liberation and combat their male chauvinism.

Many of us now reject this view of our purpose as anti-woman. We have come to see women's liberation as an independent revolutionary movement, potentially representing half the population. We intend to make our own analysis of the system and put our interests first, whether or not it is convenient for the (male-dominated) Left. Although we may cooperate with radical men on matters of common concern, we are not simply part of the Left. We do not assume that radical men are our allies or

that we want the same kind of revolution they want.

This divergence in outlook was apparent when several women's liberation groups met in Washington in January, 1968 to plan anti-Inaugural activities. The theme of the women's liberation was "Give back the vote." Since women's 80-year struggle for the vote had achieved a meaningless victory and vitiated the feminist movement, we planned to destroy our voter registration cards publicly as a symbol that suffragism was dead and a new fight for real emancipation beginning. Some women wanted to invite men to burn their voters' cards with us during or after our action. This idea was rejected on grounds that it would change the action from a repudiation of suffrage as a sop for women to a general protest against the electoral process.

There was also some wrangling over the speech we had scheduled. Some of us wanted to inform movement men that we were sick of participating in other people's revolutions and were working for ourselves. Others were horrified at the thought of criticizing the movement publicly. We decided on two short speeches—one a general statement of women's oppression, the other a militant declaration of independence from radical men.

Ensuing events bore out the separatist argument. The Mobilization Committee, supposedly

sympathetic, neither included women's liberation among the issues listed in its *Guardian* ad, nor mentioned our action in its mimeographed program. Mobe spokesman Dave Dellinger announced at the Saturday rally that the Mobe had come to demonstrate against the war and for black liberation. When some women on the stage yelled at him, he mentioned women's liberation as an afterthought. During our presentation—which began with the moderate, pro-movement statement—men in the audience booed, laughed, catcalled and yelled enlightened remarks like "Take her off the stage and fuck her." Instead of reprimanding the hecklers (as he did during an unpopular speech by a black GI), Dellinger tried to hurry us off the stage.

It is a mistake to think that education alone will change this. Radical men have a power position that they will not give up until they have to. They will support our revolution only when we build an independent movement so strong that no revolution at all is possible without our cooperation.

To work within the movement is to perpetuate the idea that our struggle is secondary. We will continually be tempted to defer to "the larger good of the movement" just as we have always deferred to "the larger good of the family." We must remember that women are not just a special interest group with sectarian concerns. *We are half the human race.* Our oppression transcends occupations and class lines. Femaleness, like blackness, is a biological fact, a fundamental condition. Like racism, male supremacy permeates all strata of this society. And it is even more deeply entrenched. Whites are at least defensive about racism; men—including most radicals, black and white—are proud of their chauvinism. Male supremacy is the oldest form of domination and the most resistant to change.

The radical movement has been dominated by men. Its theory, priorities and strategies reflect male interests. Here are some of the more obvious points radical feminists must consider:

Theory: An anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist analysis is insufficient for our purposes. Women's oppression antedated capitalism by some 2000 years

and has outlasted it in socialist countries.

Priorities: Women are the only oppressed people whose biological, emotional and social life is totally bound to that of the oppressors. The function of the ghetto, the army, the factory, the campus in reifying an oppressed group's separate existence must be assumed by women's liberation. We must provide a place for women to be friends, exchange personal griefs and give their sisters moral support—in short, develop group consciousness. Yet this function is often derogated by movement-oriented women—"How can we indulge in group therapy while *men* [my italics] are dying in Vietnam?"

Strategies: (1) In deciding what role, if any, confrontation and violence should play in our movement, we must consider that women are at a disadvantage physically and that our aggressiveness has been systematically inhibited. On the other hand, we must realize that one reason men don't take us seriously is that they are not physically afraid of us.

(2) We must admit that we will often have more in common with reformist women's organizations like NOW (National Organization for Women) than with radical men. Repeal of abortion laws, for example, is not a radical demand—the system can accommodate it. But it is of gut concern to radical as well as liberal women.

(3) We will never organize the mass of women by subordinating their concrete interests to a "higher" ideology. To believe that concentrating on women's issues is not really revolutionary is self-depreciation. Our demand for freedom involves not only the overthrow of capitalism but the destruction of the patriarchal family system.

It is not only possible but imperative for women to build a specifically feminist radical consciousness. As radicals we must do our best to foster this consciousness. But we should have the humility to realize that women who have never been committed to a male-oriented radical analysis may have clearer perspectives than we. Unless we shed our movement prejudices and help women's liberation go its own way, we will not be a revolutionary vanguard but reactionary obstructionists.



FEMINISM LIVES



Photo: Michael Hardy