

## RADICAL FEMINISM 1

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Bonnie Kreps is a founder of the radical feminist movement in Canada. She has been involved in feminism for the past five years, having followed the historic pattern of the movement by starting in the New Left, becoming disaffected with the role of women in the Left and subsequently leaving in order to start a purely feminist movement. This article is based on a brief presented to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in June, 1968.

Put very bluntly, the traditional view of woman can be summed up in the words of Aristotle, "The Female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities; we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." This may be a rather crass overstatement of the male chauvinist attitude, but the philosophical assumption exhibited here lies at the crux of the problem at hand: that is, man has consistently defined woman not in terms of herself but in relation to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being: rather, he is the Subject, he is Absolute -- she is the Other. Simone de Beauvoir has argued convincingly that, throughout history, no group has ever set itself up as the One without at once setting up in opposition the Other; which then tends to become an object. Otherness, she argues, is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus, good-evil, right-wrong, nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, and male chauvinism.

In accepting the traditional view of herself as secondary and inferior, woman has provided justification for the charge of inferiority. We are all familiar with the contention that women are different in their nature from men. Biological differences which no one can deny are used with great enthusiasm by those who wish to justify the status quo vis-a-vis women, by those to whom freedom for women seems a profound threat to something deep in themselves.

Whatever biology may determine for us all -- and the question certainly is debateable -- I think it is an obvious truth that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman or a man. One is born a female or male child with certain given characteristics and certain potentials which are hereditarily and environmentally determined and must, therefore, be viewed developmentally. To understand woman's so-called "Nature", we must therefore, examine her situation: her history, the myths about her, her social environment, her education, and so forth. A look at history and mythology, for instance, will show that woman has been written out of history and represented from a male point of view in mythology. The great figures of history and mythology are always male; as de Beauvoir says, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."

Woman's immediate social environment puts enormous pressure on her to submit to male dominance. She is exhorted to play out the role of Cinderella, expecting fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming rather than to venture out by herself. Be pretty, be pleasant, use

mouthwash and deodorant, never have an intellectual thought, and Prince Charming will sweep you off to his castle, where you will live happily ever after. Such is the carrot, and behind it is the stick: "Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," "wall flower," "spinster", "old maid", "loose woman" ... the list goes on, and its message is: to have caught a man is proof of a woman's desirability as a human being; to be without a man is a social and moral disgrace.

The economic discrimination against the working woman is highly conducive to her seeing marriage as a liberation from ill-paid drudgery. She usually faces the prospect of being an underpaid worker in society's lowest echelons. She faces a discrimination based on sex, which racial groups no longer tolerate. So it is little wonder that her desire to find a husband is reinforced.

Society's most potent tool for making female human beings into dependent adults is the socialization process. We have a society which is based on arbitrary and strictly enforced sex roles. We may see a loosening of this condition with the next generation, but it is still unhappily true that a certain role is now ascribed purely on the basis of sex. And what does this mean for the female sex? It means that the essential characteristic of the so-called "feminine" character is passivity. Through her upbringing and education, from girlhood up, a girl's sense of self is progressively crushed. Whereas boys get experimental, control-oriented toys, girls get role-playing toys. Boys get tractors, rockets, microscopes, etc.; girls get dolls and vacuum cleaners. Whereas boys are dressed practically and are expected to get dirty, little girls are all too often dressed to be "lady-like" -- in other words, they are dressed to be pretty objects, like dolls. Whereas boys are encouraged to be rough, tough and aggressive, girls are trained to become timid and docile (put euphemistically): good listeners, feminine, real helpmates, etc. Whereas boys prepare themselves to become creators of their own future, girls are trained to relate through others and taught that to please, they must try to please and, therefore, renounce their autonomy.

To please is to abdicate. That is the lesson the young girl learns. It is the lesson which finds its apotheosis in a recent bestseller by the American movie star, Arlene Dahl -- its commercial success is redoubtable, its title totally indicative of its message: ALWAYS ASK A MAN.

As long as marriage and motherhood are conceived of as a woman's entire destiny and the fulfillment of her "nature", her lot will involve the acceptance of a situation imposed from the outside rather than a free choice according to her individuality. As long as woman accepts this situation, she will endanger her individuality and possibility for growth as a human being. She will in short, be abdicating the potential of her nature by giving in to the demands of her situation.

We all know about the alcohol and pill consumption of women, the large influx of female psychiatric patients with unspecified ailments and the myriad of symptoms which suggest that something is troubling a great many women.

When we add to that the enormous success of feminist books like *THE SECOND DEX* and *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*, and the rising waves of new feminists in Europe and America, I think it becomes apparent to all but the most pig-headed that the picture of the happy housewife, the fulfilled woman who has bought all the garbage of the "feminine mystique", that this picture is a gross distortion. The true picture spells out in large letters: **FRUSTRATION.**

For those many women who have acknowledged their sense of emptiness, their frustration, there has often followed a feeling of guilt. They feel that there must be something peculiarly wrong with them and that they should be able to somehow cope with their frustration. We are still the beneficiaries of Freud's claim that neurosis is a sign of sickness.

There has emerged recently, however, a new school of psychology with a new definition of sickness and health. Called, loosely, "The Third Force", it contrasts sharply with Freud and the behaviorists. Some of its major tenets are these. Each of us has an essential core, a potential and personality, which tends strongly to persist. One might liken it to the body's drive for health. If this psychological drive for health is frustrated or stunted, sickness results. No psychological health is possible unless this essential core of the person is fundamentally accepted, loved and respected by others and by himself. And, they add, "adjustment is, very definitely, not necessarily synonymous with psychological health".

On this basis, it would seem that woman's present situation is not consonant with her optimal growth, further, that the frustrations engendered by attempting to force these disparities into consonance are a sign, not of mental sickness, but of mental health.

The most reasonable conclusion reached from the above arguments is, therefore, I would think, that the traditional view of woman and its attendant "feminine mystique" are a fraud. While they are to men's advantage in many (though ultimately not all) respects, they mean loss of growth, of full humanness, to the woman who submits to their edicts. Such a woman will risk a loss of identity, she will risk becoming a thing.

Modern woman is in the grip of a vicious circle and in urgent need of liberation. The more she resigns herself to the demands of her situation, the more she will stunt her human growth, and the more she will thus be unable to escape from her situation. The ultimate success of the slave system was, after all, that it ultimately convinced the slaves themselves that they were fit for nothing else but being slaves and that being a slave wasn't all that bad. We women can learn a lot from the emergence of black people who are fighting for black dignity. The question for women is, what are the mechanics of our particular kind of oppression and how do we best fight it?

First of all, we must recognize that the liberation of women must be collective, it must be aimed at freedom for all women. Our goal must be that any and all women who want to escape from the sex role foisted upon them will

have the freedom to do so. Therefore, no "token integration", no relieving of symptoms without getting at the causes. Secondly, we must get full economic rights for women, because only economic liberty can guarantee women that their theoretic civil liberties will provide them with 1 liberty in practice. We must to away with the women-as-economic-parasite notion. Thirdly, women must be freed from their present partial or complete slavery to the species. They must have the right to decide over their own bodies. Fourthly, and most generally, girls and women must be encouraged to seek self-fulfilment as human beings rather than merely as females.

The statement that girls should seek fulfilment as human beings rather than as females has enormous implications. It is the starting point for the very large philosophical and political area known as radical feminism.

To explain somewhat further: the women's liberation movement is a generic term covering a large spectrum of positions. Broadly speaking, the movement can be divided into three areas: 1) the largely economically oriented (usually Marxist) segment which sees liberation for women as part of a socialist revolution; 2) liberal groups like the National Organization of Women started by Betty Friedan in the United States. This segment is analogous to the NAACP in the black struggle; it is working for some kind of integration women into the main fabric of society; and 3) radical feminism, which chooses to concentrate exclusively on the oppression of women as women and not as workers, students, etc. This segment, therefore, concentrates its analysis on institutions like love, marriage, sex, masculinity and femininity. It would be opposed specifically and centrally to sexism, rather than capitalism (thus differing from the Marxists) and would not be particularly concerned with "equal rights", "equal pay for equal work" and other major concerns of the NOW segment.

The point I would like to make is that all three broad segments have their own validity, all three are important. One belongs in one segment rather than another because of personal affinity with the aims being striven for. Personally, I find radical feminism most congenial, because it seems to me to get at the fundamentals of the sexual oppression which is so prevalent in today's society. Most of the really important books, which recently have come out on the subject are written by radical feminists: Kate Millett's SEXUAL POLITICS, Shulamith Firestone's THE DIALECTIC OF SEX and the NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR.

In short, radical feminism is concerned with the analysis of the oppression of women as women. Its basic aim could fairly be stated as, "There shall be no characteristics, behaviour, or roles ascribed to any human being on the basis of sex". In other words, we must fight the myth of the so-called "female" character (men should fight the myth of the "male"); we must fight the corrupt notion we now call "love" which is based on control of another rather than on love for the growth of another; we must fight the institutionalization of women -- especially the institution of marriage.

Radical feminism is called "radical" because it is struggling to bring about really fundamental changes in our society. We, in this segment of the movement, do not believe that the oppression of women will be ended

by giving them a bigger piece of the pie, as Betty Friedan would have it. We believe that the pie itself is rotten. We do not believe that women should be integrated into the male world so that they can be "just as good as men". We believe that the male world as it now exists is based on the corrupt notion of "maleness vs. femaleness", that the oppression of women is based on this very notion and its attendant institutions. "Separate by equal" will get us nowhere; we must eradicate the sexual division on which our society is based. Only then do men and women have a hope of living together as human beings.



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