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ON ACTIVISM AND THE MEDIA

Notes For A Longer Study Which Will Include Critiques Of Major WL Actions To Date

From the beginning the question of activism in our movement has been crucial; it is responsible for the division and dissolution of most of our groups. Yet because the question is such a sore spot evasion is the standard response. This is a dangerous situation for a young movement to be in.

We now seem to have two camps on this question. On the one side are the activist groups tied to the male left, such as Witch. On the other are the various talk and analysis groups, ranging from orientation and study groups to those with the strict consciousness-raising ("Speak from your own experience. Tell it like it is, Sister.") When the subject is debated at all, those with the first approach accurately point out that almost all the talk groups, despite their ideology, have gone stale, have begun to revolve in circles, and soon develop a stifling atmosphere. For a high consciousness of a situation with no alternatives is, in the end, worse than useless; after the initial flush of discovery of shared experiences, the situation becomes even more painful than before. To jar a woman out of her painful accommodations to her oppression only to provide her at best with a little company in misery is cruel and, finally, politically ineffective. And just how much introspection does she need before she can act? One year? Two years? In the meantime, members drop out by the droves and new ones come in only to start the same cycle all over again.

On the other hand, the talk groups are quite right to be suspicious of the politics of the action groups. How can women who have never really come into contact with their own oppression presume to 'organize' other women? Doesn't such presumption amount to a new kind of elitism? And isn't elitism antithetical to the establishment of a genuine grassroots movement? And unfortunately this kind of elitism comes out over and over again in the sorts of actions chosen, much as the group criticizes itself later for its anti-womanism. But it keeps happening for good reason. And that is that the whole foundations of our activism haven't been analyzed in terms of our special interests and objectives.

What the action groups have done is to jump off in a women's movement from where the larger left and the black movement are now at. What we have forgotten is that in any movement there is a time span and stages of growth to be gotten through, and that tactics and strategy must change accordingly. We are using the tactics of THE MOVEMENT 1969, when we should be using the tactics of THE MOVEMENT 1961, condensed, minus the mistakes, and adapted to our own special situation. THE MOVEMENT can

provide a good model, if we are careful not to imitate slavishly (one of the things we have been conditioned to do as women) and if we imitate it only when it was in a comparable stage of its own development. At the present time THE MOVEMENT is in a mop up stage. Thus the tactics employed by the larger movement are RESISTANCE tactics. Should we then lift this strategy wholehog without considering it in terms of our own selfish objectives? Should we go to jail with the others? But what if we are primarily interested in stirring up women, in building a mass movement? Will such painful sacrifice actually achieve any political objective? Not for us. Resistance type action done prematurely (much as I myself may be in a state of anger and outrage that almost prefers such sacrifice) can destroy our movement before it starts.

For we have as many women INDULGING in action as we have women INDULGING in 'therapy.' Guerilla 'zap' action modeled on the present urgent need for resistance and militance in the larger left does nothing but alienate us from average women; thus it is just as politically ineffective as doing nothing at all. The only thing it does do is to let off the feelings of oppression of the participants themselves, which is exactly what the 'therapy' accusation is all about. In both cases the only thing that is happening is that an outlet is being provided for working off frustrations, for relieving the pain we feel personally; but such a release is indulgent and antipolitical if it stops there. What we need now are CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING ACTIONS. We need action that raises issues, both to clarifying and strengthening our own consciousness about specific areas of our oppression, and starting heated debate about the issues across the country. We want to let women know there is a movement, that they no longer have to be afraid to speak up and organize themselves. We want to give them courage by showing them that others have already begun the struggle, rather than 'organizing' them (indoctrination). For if we truly believe that women are oppressed, then it follows that what holds them back from political consciousness most is fear; and that can only be alleviated by numbers, by sheer massive resistant strength. It may happen that later, after women's liberation is a household argument, that there will be a crack down. At that point we too can change our tactics a' la the left. But militant resistant styles of action now are ridiculous when women across the country don't even know that a struggle has begun, when they turn for advice to Ann Landers. What we should be doing now is thinking creatively of new action forms, forms which grow organically from our own objectives and needs (just as the sit-in sprang from the situation in the South at the time, and the teach-in from the needs of the peace movement), which in the most effective possible manner bring the issues out to other women, advertise the existence of a movement, and start whole new waves of rebellion and increased consciousness across the country.

We can do this better with the use of mass media. Yet without anyone having represented a good argument against its use, there is a subtle feeling that anyone who deals with media is a cop-out and not to be trusted. Words like 'egotripping' and 'opportunist' are thrown around like mad, easy smears for anyone you want to get, for whatever (usually genuinely power-hungry) reason. Once and for all we must discredit this discrediting tactic. Until someone PROVES in a very sound paper that use of the media IN THE WOMENS MOVEMENT is politically unsound at this time, there is no reason to accept this assumption and penalize anyone accordingly. For I maintain that the reason this prejudice exists is, again, that we have lifted wholehog from the left without reconsidering in terms of our own objectives. We are copycats.

Consider: The Movement is now anti-media. But the Movement is also ten years older than we are. Everyone knows through the media of the existence of the left. The left saved years by using the rapid diffusion techniques of the mass media. They milked it for all they could get before throwing it away. At this point in the struggle, 1970, the rate of distortion and smear may no longer be worth the coverage. Now it may be time FOR THEM to regroup, to start building up underground media (for which the mass media has created an audience) to start [illegible] in with grassroots organizing. But all this AFTER the media have done a heavy job for them.

But we are in no comparable position. Women's oppression is by no means even an accepted fact, let alone the struggle to correct it. Women's liberation is a taboo all over the country, and until only recently even on the left. Women who rebel against their roles in any significant way are smeared as sex freaks. Until this country is split wide open with hot parlor debates, violent marital quarrels, protest at campuses and employment centers on women's issues, until we don't have to justify working on women's issues by tying them in with other kinds of oppressions, we cannot afford to ignore the media. What we CAN do is to become superknowledgeable about what the media is up to; we can learn its intricate workings so well that we start using it at least as much as it uses us. Only then after we are a known hot issue, can we throw it away. We don't pretend it is clean. But to ignore will not make it go away. For ignoring is in itself a political statement. And the media will not be ignored. If you fail to feed it spokesmen it will create its own, opportunists with no political scruples, people infinitely much worse than ones we would have fairly chosen. If you make women afraid to go on television they will go on anyway, but they will go on politically crippled. Instead the group should counsel and support its members in any such confrontation.

We have spent a good year in a dangerous impasse, arguing the merits of an orthodox consciousness raising line with the merits of an orthodox (and false) activism; when in fact neither one is adequate because neither one is built on a solid analysis of our needs. I propose here a whole new action program based on a clear definition of goals. If we are indeed interested in building a mass movement (and anything less would be a waste of time, nothing more than a women's auxiliary of a left already floundering because of its need for a mass base) than activism and publicity of both our existence and our actions are of crucial importance. We need a program of consciousness raising action which answers two questions: Does this action further our own consciousness by clarifying our thinking and building solidarity against our enemies? and Does this action hit average women in their gut, does it make them want to join us, does it build consciousness of our oppression through the country at large?

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