

8/16/70

I got somewhat drunk the other night and this is what came out. It's fairly loose and unstructured, but not—I hope—totally incoherent. I'm one of those people who think most clearly (?) in front of a typewriter—other people should feel free to reply in whatever form is most appropriate for them, but I hope there will be some form of response. To begin:

I had been reading the literature of the women's movement for a long time, but it wasn't until I hit upon NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR that I felt sufficiently moved to start making phone calls to discover what was happening in Berkeley. I read Shulamith Firestone and suddenly I realized that I wasn't some sort of freak—my anguish was real, and my reactions to the antics of the various men in my life had been fairly rational, after all—if I was a hysterical bitch, there must be others someplace. And so I went to an East Bay Feminists meeting, and there were more of us than I'd ever suspected. I wanted to join a consciousness-raising group, but I wasn't clear who was supposed to raise my consciousness, or whether I was supposed to raise it by myself.

And so we have stumbled along, with numerous additions and varying degrees of success. People seem to have very different ideas of what we're groping for. Beverly and Lynne stress relationships within the group; to some extent I tend to agree—I suspect that once we really feel we know one another a lot of new possibilities may open up. The danger of this emphasis is that we may simply amble along on a course of rather aimless rap sessions. I think it's important that people feel they can bring personal problems or situations to the group, but I also feel that we need considerably more structure and even discipline. It can only be self-imposed. No one is going to lead us by the hand. (One of the best things that has come out of the women's movement is the beginning of the end of the "star-system" among radicals—but where there are no leaders we all have to be leaders. There's a beautiful little piece about the IWW that goes—"When that boatload of wobblies come/Up to Everett, the sheriff says/Don't you come no further/ Who the hell's yer leader, anyhow/ Who's yer leader?/And them wobblies yelled right back—/We ain't got no leader/We're all leaders/And they kept right on comin'!")

I'm not certain why all of the others are here, but I believe people have good reasons for what they do. Coming to meetings has not made them sufficiently free to talk about their motivations. Probably in part this is due to the fact that people like me have talked too much, for varying reasons. When I worked in the South, we had the equivalent of Maoist self-criticism sessions (although obviously we didn't realize that at the time)—project meetings at which our deepest feelings came out into the open, in addition to the most private details of our lives. Our survival (literally) depended on trusting one another, and we became accustomed to speaking very openly about our emotions and relationships. For that reason it may be easier for me to discuss such matters now. And for whatever reasons, there isn't much about my life which I feel would be risky to lay on the table for dissection, including my rather staggering errors of judgment.

When I went to general meetings of the East Bay Feminists I felt like a flaming moderate. At our meetings I feel like the house radical at times. There are points at which I feel that people think I'm a man-hater—maybe we should talk about man-hating some time, because I'm not certain it's invariably a bad thing. I guess one alternative is not to hate at all, but I'm not a saint and I believe with Fanon that an oppressed people needs a certain amount of revolutionary hatred before it is possible to take risks and act. Hostility which remains mute and inarticulate is pretty sterile, but I think under the right circumstances it can be directed toward constructive ends. The worst alternative is to turn that hatred inward, toward ourselves and other women, which a lot of us (including myself) tend to do almost instinctively. We've been shat upon so long we believe that's all we deserve.

(And I also think it's counter-productive to blame women for being masochistic, for "taking it"--I think most women are reacting as reasonably as possible to a thoroughly unfavorable set of circumstances, but even assuming that we do co-operate in our own oppression--and what oppressed group in history hasn't?--you have to ask who runs the society that socialized us and who benefits from our masochism.)

I don't believe that women are either dumb or brainwashed. I think that we react quite predictably to a set of thoroughly depressing alternatives--we make the best bargain possible under the circumstances. I start from the basic premise that women are oppressed--as individuals and as a group--socially, psychologically, physically, politically, economically, sexually, and in virtually every aspect of our lives that I can think of. For women of different economic classes and nationalities that oppression takes different forms. We enjoy economic, educational, and white-skin privileges; that doesn't mean that we're not oppressed, it simply means that our oppression takes at times more subtle forms. People don't become radicalized by dealing with other people's oppression--I must confront my own oppression first--then I can go on to express solidarity with others. At this point I refuse to pass judgment on the tactics of others in attacking their oppression. Angela Davis is my sister. Kathy Boudin (a friend and college classmate who became a Weatherwoman and escaped from the New York brownstone that was blown up last March by explosives) is my sister. I've felt like blowing up buildings; I've just never had the guts. And I have to get myself together first.

Back to us: My personal motive in being here is threefold. Through group discussion I would like to arrive at a deepened understanding of my situation and that of other women; beyond that, I would like to develop strategies for personal survival (meaning more than just staying alive) as a relatively productive human being, and ultimately strategies for social change. Some of the last-named are simply reformist: I think we/achieve the repeal of abortion laws (and that affects me directly) and I think we can get childcare centers if we fight. I honestly believe that, while personal/solutions may provide a measure of stopgap relief, our true liberation is only going to emerge from a radical re-structuring of society and personal relationships. That isn't going to happen overnight--it may not happen in the next century--but whenever I attempt to deal with my "personal" problems, that fact is there in the back of my head. In the long run, I identify with the struggles of other oppressed peoples; I can also accept the fact that a lot of heterosexual white men are oppressed too, but they're oppressed by their own kind, not by us--and they do benefit by the fact that we're kept down. They're the ones who will suffer most when we break the shackles.

I think that anti-intellectualism is rampant in Berkeley, and I think we've tended to drift along with that current. Using our heads doesn't mean losing touch with our feelings. I think that's a false antithesis, and the current plight of the radical left in Berkeley is a sterling example of where it leads. The answer lies neither in sterile dogmatism nor in blind spontaneity. I think we should begin by doing some reading together--the essays in NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR provide an obvious starting point--they're short and to the point (with several exceptions). Once we start dealing with the ideas presented there, perhaps our discussion of our own lives will achieve a new focus and direction. I don't think we'll get bogged down in an arid intellectualism--writers like Shulamith Firestone are far too personal and hit far too close to home. The other possibility at the start might be articles from IT AINT ME BABE--a lot of it is ^gubbish but some things aren't. If our meetings are worth three hours every week, they're worth some effort and commitment.

Mere contact with the women's movement has given me the impulse to deal fairly realistically with the fact that I'm probably going to be alone for a stretch, and that this period needn't be a moratorium--I feel as though I'm growing again, after months of virtual lethargy. A tremendous amount of rage has been liberated, and I think my rage is too precious to waste.

A quote from the "Organizing Principles of the New York Radical Feminists" (from NOTES) which roughly expresses my ideas:

We are committed to the building of a mass-based radical feminist movement among contemporary women which will both help individual women combat the problems in their personal lives as well as effectively direct their energy to the obliteration of the structures which create those problems. We are committed to a flexible, non-dogmatic approach and the encouragement of the growth and expansion of members of the group as individuals as well as the growth and expansion of the group itself.

To clarify a point: I DO NOT believe that every man is actively and consciously engaged in oppressing women all the time. I think we must distinguish between subjective motive and objective consequence. Men can be terribly well-intentioned and yet totally unconscious of the objective significance of what they are doing. Part of our task--since we do have to share the world with them--is to raise THEIR consciousness so that they will examine their motivations and the consequences of their actions and SO THEY WILL CHANGE. I DO BELIEVE that as a group and in the sum total of their actions, men--principally, in our case, heterosexual white men--do oppress women, as individuals and through institutions. Conscious malevolence is less our problem than naivete, callous indifference, and sheer ignorance. A quote from Carol Hanisch in NOTES:

As James Baldwin once put it, when asked "what Negroes want": "Negroes want to be treated like men," he said. "The request sounds simple enough. Yet people who have mastered Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx and Freud and the Bible find this statement utterly impenetrable."

I DON'T CARE IF YOU AGREE WITH ME--I JUST WANT YOU TO REACT. IS A SMALL GROUP WORTH HAVING IN THE FIRST PLACE? SHOULD WE BE SPENDING TIME WORKING ON PROJECTS AT THE WOMEN'S CENTER INSTEAD? SHOULD WE BE OUT ORGANIZING WOMEN INSTEAD OF RAPPING TO EACH OTHER? I DON'T KNOW.

Suggested topics for discussion:

- 1) Love: is there such a thing as "falling in love"? Or do women simply react to the fact that men are attracted to them? (i.e., is all the initiative on the male side?) Is there a difference between "being in love" and simply loving someone? Are sexual and nonsexual ^{love} really that distinct, or are we simply inhibited from realizing the sexual potentialities of the latter by social barriers? Is love possible without dependency? Can one maintain a loving sexual relationship with more than one person at a time?

- 2) Alternative life styles: co-ed communes; women's communes; group marriage; exclusive monogamy; nonexclusive monogamy. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Is monogamy basically isolating? Do co-ed (ugh--- I hate that word) communes, by the myth of sexual liberation, simply increase the pressure on women "to deliver" sexually? Are women's communes feasible? Would any of us be willing to live in one? Why or why not? Is group marriage a valid possibility? Would any of us consider entering into such an arrangement as individuals or as couples if the circumstances were appropriate?

- 3) Names--do we use our father's names? our husbands? Should everyone be allowed to choose ^{or} his own name when (he,she) reaches a certain age? Does it matter?

- 4) Children: Do we want any? Why or why not? Would we prefer boys or girls? How do we deal with the question of sexual identity--do we attempt to treat them equally? Do we intentionally give little girls trains and trucks to play with, and dress them in pants all the time? Is the nuclear family the situation in which we would want to raise our kids? What are the alternatives? What role should men play in the process? Should wives go to work to allow men to stay home part of the time to take over child-rearing responsibilities?

- 5) Living without men--strategies for psychological survival: How does one live without men and yet not become isolated and lonely? What is our image of the independent woman? Should we attempt to raise children without fathers? How do we deal with the fact that the world in which we live is based on couples rather than single people?

- 6) The "couple thing"--if we are living with men, how do we ensure that outsiders view us as independent individuals, not halves of a couple? How do we deal with friends (male and female) who are single? How ~~we~~ we react if we suddenly were to find ourselves single again?

- 7) Birth control: Whose responsibility is it? How do we react to the general assumption that it is our responsibility regardless? How do we feel about fucking up our bodies with birth control pills? How do we feel about insisting that a man take the responsibility, either by using rubbers or by getting a vasectomy? Have any of us ever had an abortion? How did we feel afterwards? Do birth control methods affect our attitudes towards sex? Did we make provision for birth control the first time we ever screwed? Were we informed about birth control methods at that time? Have we ever had difficulty getting birth control information, equipment, pills, etc. because we were unmarried?

- 8) Sex (this could be subdivided many times over): What does sex mean in our lives? Has sex been oversold by the mass and underground media? Do women enjoy sex in the same way men do? Can a woman have a purely physical relationship with a man? Do we enjoy sex? All the time? Part of the time? Seldom? To what extent is intercourse simply part--not necessarily the most significant part--of a general pleasurable physical experience? Do we masturbate? If so, why? Are most men concerned with our pleasure during sex? If they are concerned, is it simply because our having orgasms is an ego trip for them? Do we have orgasms in the normal course of sexual relations? If not, do we enjoy sex anyway? What do we do when a man can't satisfy us? Complain? Be silent? Make constructive suggestions? Do we feel masochistic when we're having sex? Do we enjoy pain? What do we do when we're just not in the mood and the guy is? What do we do when we discover that we're not in the mood very often? Can we have good emotional relationships with minimal or no sex? Do we feel sexually exploited? What are the consequences of the fact that men have orgasms with little or no effort and women have to struggle in most cases? How do men feel about clitoral stimulation in the absence of vaginal orgasms? How do they feel about our inability to have orgasms all the time? Do we admit this to them? What do you do when you care about a man and he has serious sexual problems? Tell him to see a psychiatrist? What do you do when he doesn't even realize he has the problems? Do we feel physically attracted to men of other races? Why or why not? Do we feel contempt for men who are clumsy and inept in bed? Why? What do we do when we find that our sexual needs are greater than those of the man we're sleeping with? What are the consequences of the "sexual revolution" for woman? Is the "sexual revolution" a myth? How do we feel about extramarital sex?
- 9) Lesbianism: Do we feel sexually threatened by gay women? Are we physically attracted to other women? Now? Before we began having relationships with men? Are we all potentially bisexual? How would we feel if our (husbands, lovers) were having sexual relationships with other men? Do we still relate to gay women in terms of stereotypes? Are lesbians the only true feminists? Is lesbianism a realistic and significant alternative to living alone or without sex? Can we conceive of a lasting relationship with a woman? Do lesbian relationships simply duplicate the dominant/submissive pattern of man/woman relationships? Is homosexuality a good thing in communal or group marriage situations? How do we feel about gay liberation? How do we relate to gay men?
- 10) Jealousy: How do we deal with it? Can one legitimately insist on a monogamous relationship regardless? Are women more jealous and possessive than men? Do they deal with the problem differently? Do we also become jealous in nonsexual relationships--e.g., with female friends? How would we feel toward women who became involved with our (husbands, lovers)?
- 11) Growing old in America: Why are old people held in such low esteem in this country? Why is becoming middle-aged so much worse a "catastrophe" for women than for men? Why are relationships between older men and younger women so much more common than the opposite? How do we feel when men our age go after younger women? How will we feel about that when we're forty? Are we worried about losing our looks? If we don't marry, or if our husbands die or leave before we're, say, sixty, how do we avoid becoming isolated and lonely? What kinds of really desirable living situations for older people can we envision? How do we deal with the old people in our own lives? Why are we so queasy about discussing death?

- 12) Our appearance: Do we worry about our appearance? Why? Do we read women's magazines? (I do, and I feel guilty about it. Why?) Do we wear makeup? Do we like to buy clothes? Do we dress for ourselves? for other women? for men? Is there anything wrong with caring about our appearance? How do we react when men criticize our looks? our clothes? Did our mothers nag us about how we looked when we were adolescents? Are men more superficial in their appraisals of women than vice versa? Do they look principally at the externals? Are we brainwashed by the media, or are we simply responding rationally to a situation in which a woman's looks can mean her future?
- 13) Us and other women: Do we feel competitive with other women? Do we become anxious when our (husbands, boyfriends) appear to be overly friendly with one of our friends? Do we immediately appraise our ~~standing~~^{status} with respect to the other women [in terms of appearance] the minute we enter a room? Do we envy women who are prettier than we? Why do we feel a degree of competition? When we married or began to live with a man, did we loosen our ties to our female friends? Are other women as important to us as men? Do we trust women?
- 14) Us and psychiatry: What have been our experiences with psychiatrists and psychologists? What are the relative merits of male and female therapists? Are our problems--for the most part--open to individual solutions? Is psychiatry basically elitist, in that it is accessible only to the few? What are the merits of group therapy and encounter groups? How can they help us deal with men and with each other?
- 15) Us and women's liberation: How do we relate to the women's liberation movement? Do we basically feel oppressed as women? If so, what can we do to change that situation? (!) How do we define the oppressor? Institutions? Society? Men? What kind of analysis is appropriate to our situation? Marxist? Anthropological? Psychological? What do Marxists have to offer us in terms of understanding? What do the various schools of psychology have to offer? Is female essentially the psychology of the slave? Are there specifically feminine qualities that we like and which we would want to extend to men? How do we feel about female separatism--i.e., avoiding any contact with men that is not necessary to survival? How can we constructively direct our hostilities toward men? Are there alternatives to the route that leads from consciousness-raising to analysis to action? How do we define consciousness-raising? How does our oppression as women relate to our oppression as powerless members of an incrasingly fascist society?
- 16) Us and radical politics: How do we relate to the male-dominated left? How do we relate to the Panthers and other third world groups? How do we relate to third world women? Do we need a politics of women's liberation? Do we consciously try to integrate ourselves into the political left? As individuals or as a movement? How much need is there for a women's liberation organization, as opposed to a movement? How can we use the Women's Center? Is there such a thing as a personal solution, or are there only collective solutions? Or is there something inbetween? How do we relate to welfare mothers? Do we involve ourselves in politics at all? What about electoral politics?
- 17) Us and racism: How do we work on our racism? How do we deal with the question of white-skin and middle-class privileges? Do we approach men of other races differently from the way we deal with men of our own race? Why? How have our relationships with men of other races differed from relationships with men of our own? How do we relate to women of other races? Do what extent have we shed our stereotypes?

Other possibilities:

Us and youth culture; Does hip culture exploit women? How do we feel about sexexploitation ads in the underground press? etc.

Us and ecology: Is ecology a real issue? What are our responsibilities with respect to population control? etc.

Books to read and talk about:

NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR

Poems of Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton

Alta's poems: Maybe have a potluck dinner and invite Alta to read her own poems afterwards.

Our poems.

Kate Millett's Sexual Politics when it comes out in paperback.

Eleanor Flexner - Century of Struggle

Aileen S. Kraditor - The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement

William O'Neill's book - I don't have the title, but it's quite recent.

Spring issue of Women, A Journal of Liberation on Women's history

Love and Will, by Rollo May - not specifically about women; by an existential psychologist who is concerned by the fact that people in this country seem

to be losing both the ability to love and the faculty of will

The Changing Nature of Man, by J. H. van den Berg, a Dutch psychologist who sees human nature as totally determined by culture--i.e., woman's current state is a cultural construct, not the result of biology.

Rosa Luxemburg, whom I've never read

Hannah Arendt, especially The Human Condition - I think she's probably the brainiest woman alive today. A friend in S.F. read this with her woman's group and felt they got a lot out of it.

I don't believe in reading as some sort of abstract intellectual exercise—
I think that what we read can affect our lives and our attitudes toward ourselves.

More: Doris Lessing - novels, especially The Golden Notebook, which I've never read, though it's been recommended over and over

The Second Sex - Simone de Beauvoir - an obvious choice, though when I read it years ago I found the first part pretty hard going

No More Fun and Games - women's quarterly from Boston; some of it is very good

Erik Erikson - He's bad, in that he places women in a special little category and is very reluctant to extend his more general ideas about post-adolescents to us. However, I found his approach to Luther in Young Man Luther very relevant to me. I haven't read Childhood and Society (his classic), Insight and Responsibility, or any of his others. These are books to read and talk about.

Anais Nin - diaries - she turns me off, but some people like her very much.