THE NEXT STEP: A PROGRAM for WOMEN'S LIBERATION

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The most pressing need of the moment for women's liberation is building a national organization that can both rekindle a mass women's liberation movement and guide that movement in the steps needed to defeat male supremacy.

Women today, individually and as a class, are under brutal political attack. We are being assaulted on all fronts - in the courts, in the legislatures, on the streets, in movies and popular culture, in jobs and in personal relationships with a ferocity that can only be explained as a desperate attempt to stamp out the embers of the feminist rebellion of the past decade and a half. Most of us are fighting back only sporadically and in isolation from each other, rarely taking the offensive or breaking new ground. Often we are at a loss even to know what to do or where to begin - tired and demoralized.

Equally weakened are the other movements in this country, which, at their best, nourished the women's liberation movement with ideas and energy, just as they were nourished by us. The lack of a strong, fighting Left has had serious consequences for the women's liberation movement in another way: the cross-class nature of feminism, so necessary to identifying and combating the common oppression of women by men, nevertheless leaves the women's liberation movement vulnerable to co-optation even in the best of times. In times of reaction, opportunism on the part of the more powerful classes of women threatens to destroy the movement. Just as an independent women's liberation movement is needed to prevent the exclusion and exploitation of women and women's issues in even the most conscious of Left organizations, so too the class-consciousness and political power of strong movements of other oppressed peoples and of workers is necessary to keep feminism radical. History records numerous examples of once-vital feminist movements deteriorating into reactionary forces in periods of declining radicalism, working for the short-term interests of a minority of women and in the process destroying feminism's very reason for being.

And so it is today. Isolated pockets of radical feminists exist all over the country. But what little remains of the women's liberation movement that can be considered organized is no longer radical and has become the protected preserve of female academics (usually calling themselves "socialist-feminists") and alternative lifestylists (inhabitants of an illusory "women's community"). The reform-party of the feminist movement has its once-vital feminist movements deteriorating into reactionary forces in periods of declining radicalism, working for the short-term interests of a minority of women and in the process destroying feminism's very reason for being.

Building a mass women's liberation movement in this political climate is obviously an uphill battle. But there are some reasons for optimism. The very seriousness of the situation is forcing some in the Right to ask hard questions about how the trend can be reversed. And while the women's liberation movement in the United States is moribund, women in the Third World are now taking the lead in fighting not only for their liberation from economic and military oppression but also from male oppression. The liberation movement of women in Nicaragua and El Salvador are especially advanced in this respect, with these women explicitly recognizing the persistence of male supremacy in otherwise revolutionary countries, such as Cuba.

There are stirrings of new life in other U.S. movements: outbursts of rank and file worker militancy, including strikes by men and women for equal pay for women workers; organized Vietnam veterans taking public positions similar to those of the anti-war movement of the 1960's; a growing anti-war movement focused on U.S. intervention in Central America based-largely on an anti-imperialist consciousness developed over a period of years during the Vietnam War, to mention just a few.

There is also a positive side to the inaction and paralysis that seemed to plague us in recent years. Singer/songwriter Don McLean recently described the seventies as the only decade in history when the nation was absorbed in looking back at the decades that came before. Whether this observation is literally true of not, it does capture a characteristic of recent years. For many of us in the movement, a preoccupation with the previous decades has been necessary to come to an understanding both of what we did right and what was lacking. We must put to use what we have learned if we are to start moving forward again.

One of the biggest lacks we have come to perceive in the women's liberation movement of the late sixties and early seventies was an inadequate understanding of the need for central organization and for long-range planning. The movement was all do-your-own-thing and little unified activity, all "democracy" and no centralism. Its great advances in analysis and insight were unaccompanied by a well thought out, long-range program of action, of how to actually take power.

This is not to say we had no program at all. The main program of the early women's liberation movement was consciousness-raising - a method intended to insure that our analysis of the oppression of women and the steps needed to end it would be based on the concrete realities of our lives. The oppressive conditions of our lives as women give us a shared experience, though we often interpret that experience differently.

In the early days we were often asked, "What is your program?" In essence we said consciousness-raising was our program thus far, and through it we would come up with a more developed program. Through consciousness-raising we were able to unite our common experience into theory. Thus, consciousness-raising was the first program of the women's liberation movement, a program aimed at getting at the essence of our experience to build our theory.

It took the experience of the great success of consciousness-raising and its later disintegration - the explosion and then fragmentation of the women's liberation movement itself - to teach us that we need a central organization to organize the raised consciousness and energy, and to work to defend the work, both practical and theoretical, that has been accomplished.

Consciousness-raising turned out to be the correct program for the first stage of the movement. But now we need a program that unites our activity and our theory, that allows us a common experience, not only of our oppression, but also of movement practice, if we are to carry out an effective offensive.

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We at MEETING GROUND see the development of a written program for women's liberation as a logical next step in correcting the mistakes of the early period, and have begun work on one. The transition from the anarchist, do-your-own-thingism of the early days to the kind of organized movement we need to win will not be an easy one. A program becomes a necessary part of this transition because it is a practical step in itself and puts forth practical steps that can help us achieve the unity of experience and thought necessary to such an effort.

Once written, we hope this program can be refined and adopted for use by a national women's liberation organization. What we envision is not only a statement of goals and demands, but also of priorities and plans, based on an analysis of what can and cannot be accomplished at different stages of the feminist struggle and the general movement for liberation.

These are some of the ways we think a program can further our work:

AS A GUIDE FOR ORGANIZING AND ACTION: On the most immediate and practical level, a program provides a basis to decide where to put our energies -what issues to confront and how they connect with one another and with our general goal of women's liberation; what tactics and strategies to use; when to unite with other groups and when to work separately; etc. It is hard to imagine beginning to rebuild, especially in times like these, without first coming up with a plan of action.

AS A MEANS OF HISTORICAL CONTINUITY: By putting into context where we have been and where we are going, a program lays the basis for historical and theoretical links with earlier phases of the feminist movement. In order to draft a program, we have to study the earlier statements of goals and demands set forth by our predecessors. The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention where the 19th century women's rights movement was founded, and the Declaration of Principles adopted by the National Woman Party in 1922, setting forth a list of "immediate objects" to be worked for as part of a campaign to end the subjugation of women, are two obvious examples of hard won knowledge that we can put to use. We can incorporate those goals that are still unmet (almost the entire 1922 list for starters, see page 8 of this issue), making changes or additions in the light of current conditions.

AS A WAY OF LINKING THE WLM WITH OTHER LIBERATION STRUGGLES: In addition to studying feminist programs, we must learn from the programs developed by revolutionary movements in this and other countries. We are finding the study of socialist/communist programs in particular to be especially fruitful in providing lessons applicable to the building of any revolutionary movement. In fact, Lenin's discussions of the necessity for a program (see page 5) helped clarify our own understanding of the need for one. This study can also help clarify unsolved problems in the relationships between feminism and socialism/communism, showing where our demands and the activities needed to achieve them coincide and where they differ, when common action is possible and when we must forge ahead on our own.

AS A MEANS OF POLITICAL UNITY: Disunity is so rampant in the women's liberation movement that some are bound to say this is not the time to propose a program that we will not be able to agree on it anyway. On the contrary, a program is necessary to unity. The polemics which now flare up in so erratic and often so damaging a way will have a concrete focus as we try to come to terms with our differences, to discover and uncover the roots of these differences and to find out just which differences can be overcome or lived with, and which are irreconcilable and will necessarily divide us into separate organizations. It will help separate the chaff from the wheat, isolating the unserious and opportunist elements. It will form the basis of an organization that can hold its members accountable for their action or inaction, at the same time making it harder for opportunists and non-feminists to represent themselves as spokeswomen for the movement. Anyone can claim to represent a movement; someone claiming to represent an organization, however, can be checked out.

AS A WAY OF LINKING UP WORK: A program can tie together the work not only of the organization that adopts it but also of women who for one reason or another cannot be part of the organization. It can reach places that a limited number of organizers cannot, breaking down isolation and putting theoretical tools into the hands of those who need them. It can help guide the steps of activists working on the local level, while providing connections with a national organized effort. In turn, local experiences provide crucial feedback on the program to the national organization.

AS A COMMITMENT TO ORGANIZING: The very existence of a program generates pressures on those who adopt it to work toward its fulfillment. At a time when forward movement is so difficult, such pressure can help prevent backsliding and negativism. For a national women's liberation organization to make such a commitment will in itself be a leap forward.

THE STATE OF MEETING GROUND

When we started MEETING GROUND in January 1977, we wanted to provide "an ongoing place to hammer out ideas about theory, strategy and tactics for the women's liberation movement and for the general radical movement of working men and women." MEETING GROUND was to be a place where activists and organizers could trade ideas and information.

In fact, with the decline of the women's liberation movement, many of our readers became less politically active, and the organizing experiences sent in were few and far between. MEETING GROUND's contents became more theoretical and less focused on organizing.

But there was another reason why MEETING GROUND did not completely meet the goals we set for it: the project itself had built-in contradictions.

When MEETING GROUND began publication, the editors were members of Redstockings. We explained in issue #2 that MEETING GROUND was begun independently of Redstockings because "not everyone in the group felt that Redstockings should take on such a project at this time." We began publishing MEETING GROUND in part as a way of keeping in touch with the many women (and a few men) who responded enthusiastically to the 1975 publication of Redstockings' FEMINIST REVOLUTION with hopes and pleas that radical feminists could get together for the renewed offensive FEMINIST REVOLUTION seemed to promise. But as long as MEETING GROUND limited itself to talking about organizing while its editors tried to do their feminist work within Redstockings, MEETING GROUND could only partially succeed in meeting its goals.

In fact, the publication of MEETING GROUND and the opposition by other Redstockings to our putting our energies into this type of work reflected a disagreement over the importance of organizing and of connection with a mass movement. The disagreements that surfaced in 1975 - which deserve thorough discussion in a separate analysis - have deepened with time. Redstockings has now constituted itself a "think-tank" for the women's liberation movement - a head cut off from and unresponsive to the body - thus formalizing its error of "all theory, no practice."

This may be an understandable reaction to the current state of the movement, in which much of the activity that passes for feminism is headless and mindless. But it is still a serious error. By 1975 it had become apparent that the movement needed to be pulled together by some central organization. Redstockings promised to lead this new offensive but did not.

After trying unsuccessfully to push Redstockings in the directions advocated in this editorial, we are going ahead with this work. Both editors of MEETING GROUND have resigned their membership in Redstockings, Barbara Leon in January 1979 and Carol Hanisch in September 1981.

We should emphasize that the separation from Redstockings in no way means disagreement with the basic political positions set forth in FEMINIST REVOLUTION, or for that matter in the Redstockings Manifesto adopted in 1969. (Naturally, our views on some aspects of both have been clarified with time and new experiences). Rather, it represents a commitment to turn that analysis into action, which will then be the source of further analysis and action.

Using MEETING GROUND as a resource in developing and publicizing a women's liberation program is thus a return to our original objectives in publishing MEETING GROUND. But we do not see MEETING GROUND merging into or becoming an organ of the women's liberation organization that may result from these efforts. Rather, we would like to try to keep it going to also meet its second purpose: exploring the common ground between the liberation movements of women and working people.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

The task of preparing a draft program for women's liberation is a large and difficult one and it is with no small amount of trepidation that we have decided to take it on. It is not something that can be done overnight. In fact, we figure it will take at least a year to get the first rough draft together.

We invite MEETING GROUND readers to send us suggestions, information, historical precedents and examples of programs you think your task is relevant. We intend to work closely with those who make real contributions to this effort. We welcome the assistance of men in this project as we realize they may have information and suggestions that can make this very difficult task a little easier. However, men must realize that the final decisions regarding the actual draft program of women's liberation will be made by the women involved. Some women are already hard at work researching and formulating this draft program.

The women's liberation movement has suffered a major defeat and it is only natural to feel some discouragement at the direction things have been taking. Many women, brave and important in the first round of the battle, have retreated in disillusionment to furthering their careers, devoting all their energy to their family or personal relationships, and in general dealing with their problems as women in an isolated way. Many of them will join us as we begin to move again, and as we fill our ranks with the young women who will help restore to the movement the militancy and vitality that we once gave it. In retreating, women are again learning that there are no personal solutions and that their only hope after all is to join together for the collective solution. It is time to throw aside our feeling of helplessness and the squelching of our anger and come together with a higher level of understanding of what must be done.

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