

ON PRIMARY RELATIONSHIPS

When we started talking about dependence in the gay women's group, couple quickly became a bit of a dirty word. A closed circuit, a mutual admiration society. We were all aware - and talking together how could we not be? - that our most important relating wasn't just with one person. And yet it seemed absurd to think we could fuck with all of each other, as things were, or to think that there wasn't some kind of difference with the woman or women we were fucking with. So the term primary relationship replaced the term couple.

A primary relationship doesn't imply property rights. Therefore it doesn't imply that you have to do everything together - like in the 'ideal' long-lasting heterosexual couple the wife is always advised to get in on her husband's activities. It means that each woman has her own autonomy. But we still assumed that primary relationships were inevitably fucking relationships, forgetting that we relate to every one at all times. We redefined sexuality as the energy in all our actions, so that communicating - touching, working together, listening to music together, understanding each other - was the most important thing, and yet we still took it for granted that genital sexuality was somehow the culmination/touchstone/final test of all these things.

At least this is what the woman I'm fucking with and I found. We've known each other for three months, been fucking for two. The idea of a primary relationship seemed to fit what we felt about each other. We accepted intellectually that we could fuck with other people, but that a primary relationship does take work and so time. The most important thing is the development of trust, and this is also very hard, given that we have to shake off patterns of dependence, dominance, withdrawal, unquestioning commitment. Therefore, at least in the initial stages of the relationship, when there is more intensive working out taking place, we felt it was unlikely that we would be able to develop other relationships.

However we started to feel very hassled. We couldn't think of why: we considered spending more time together, spending less time together, talking about it, letting things go their own way, we wondered whether we were being too dependent or playing it too cool. Nothing we said worked - we just felt a big communication gap.

Then we spent a day in the country and discovered: We were putting expectations on ourselves. We were assuming that the relationship already was what it could be. We realised that for both of us there were people we'd known from long before we ourselves met

who were just as important to us as we were to each other, and that a lot of our hassles had come from trying to balance what we saw as opposing claims on us. So weren't these primary relationships too? That started to make nonsense of the whole term "primary relationship". At what point does a secondary relationship become a primary relationship? It started to seem just another way of categorising. We'd been taking it for granted that we should not have ideas based on past patterns or expectations of the future; that we should be living in the present - "This moment is different from any before it." But at the same time we were seeing our relationship as something greater than the sum of our moments of relating. We were assuming that something was created that carried over into the moments when we weren't communicating, either because we weren't in the same place, or because we were hassled. That is, we were hassling ourselves.

So why had we assumed that a fucking relationship had to come first? It was dismally clear that in couple type relationships a woman is expected to leave all others and cleave to her man. Only in this way - by having so many extras built into the sexual relationship - can men keep their unpaid housekeepers, egoboosters, doorsteps, child nurses, table decorations, without any questions being asked. "Being in love", as opposed to loving, is in fact a nice form of slavery. So we'd got rid of the need for role playing, power games etc, but we were still imitating this irrelevant way of acting.

We didn't change what we were doing at all, but our heads definitely changed. We have to break down the sanctity of relationships which involve genital sexuality. We are responding sexually to everyone, whether this involves fucking or not (and indeed between two women it's hard to say exactly what is fucking.) We still have hangups about fucking deeply conditioned into us, but we believe that the primacy of genital sexuality, the idea that it is a consummation, is a male trick. And believing this, jealousy begins to be truly meaningless, precedence in relationships begins to be truly meaningless, fucking begins to become a real part of our lives. There's a lot about these ideas that's a bit terrifying to us. There's a lot more understanding involved.

Jenny & Sue

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THE RADICALESBIAN CONFERENCE - TORONTO 1973

'What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion'. (The Woman Identified Woman)

The radicalesbian is a woman who seizes upon that rage, that point of explosion, and throws it back in the face of society. The radicalesbian is, of course, much more than this. The radicalesbian is also a woman who -

- no longer accepts society's stigma
- no longer internalizes feelings of guilt
- no longer believes that all she has done is bad, perverted or unnatural
- no longer represses her lesbian experiences
- no longer 'conceals' herself
- no longer wastes time with psychotherapists (cultural policemen)
- no longer accepts the myth that she is a lesbian 'only in bed'
- no longer plays a role in order to appease heterosexual fantasies

The radicalesbian realises that her life has simply been different and, for her, beautiful. The radicalesbian sheds her old feelings of guilt, secrecy, anxieties, fears. She realizes that all of that shit belongs to the past and that now her mind is in a different place. Where is her mind?

FACT AND FANTASY

The radicalesbian refuses to accept the false assumptions that:

- (a) because she is not playing her socially assigned sex role that she is not a 'real woman' - whatever that means.
- (b) she is some kind of freak; 'a man trapped in a woman's body' - the most common and oppressive put-down of the lesbian.
- (c) she should be freaked out by the word lesbian. She recognizes that the word has been used and abused by men in an attempt to put down any woman who refuses to suck up to the male ego.
- (d) she is not a person in her own right but simply a sexual being. She understands fully the male myth that the function of all women is that of receptacle; a vessel for babies and penises. She also understands the lie that says that all a lesbian really needs to be made into a 'real woman' is to be fucked by a 'real man'. The radicalesbian refuses to be dehumanized and treated as a sex object by men and sometimes by other women who, because of their own internalized guilt and oppression, play male roles.

The radicalesbian knows that to classify other women into roles (butch - femme) is simply to continue the male classification system of defining people as sex objects and prevents any real love and bonding between women. She understands that role terms are used by men to frighten women who are coming to a realization of their feelings of love and eroticism towards other women. She also understands that women who think of themselves as butch or femme have internalized the male system of classification and are still oppressed by male culture. The butch lesbian may think, for example, that a woman can only love her opposite - a man - therefore she will play at being one. The radicalesbian knows that she must help all women to understand the mechanisms of this male con. She feels that she must be supportive of other women and **GIVE TO THEM HER LOVE, ENERGIES AND COMMITMENT, for the revolution**

The radicalesbian is a woman who loves other women because they are women not because they are imitating the male or female stereotype. The love of the radicalesbian for other women surmounts all artificial boundaries because she knows, or is learning to understand, what all the shit is about. Loving another woman because she is a woman (and of course for other reasons) may sound sexist but until a society exists in which men do not oppress women and love and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, until a society exists in which labels such as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual & asexual disappear the radicalesbian will continue to love women because they are women. The radicalesbian has rejected all forms of male defined political and psychological thinking and who has freed her own psyche from the oppressive demands of patriarchy.

THE RADICALESBIAN AND HER BODY

The radicalesbian demands freedom over her own body. She refuses to be alienated from her own body and emotions. As with many feminists she is trying to 'get her body together' and not think of herself in terms of parts - a result of sexist advertising which dislocates a woman's mind into thinking that she might have a nice smile, for example, but wrinkly skin.

A radicalesbian is a sexually creative being. In his book, Homosexuality: The Psychology of the Creative Process, Rosenfels argues that 'each homosexual is a creator - to the extent that only he/she can determine the type of person he/she will eventually become'. The Body Politic, in a review of Rosenfels' book, wrote that 'the homosexual knows that the strongest weapon which society possesses to undermine the creative identity of each individual is to assign gender roles. The creative psychological growth that is based upon an inner identity, is, especially in modern society, most clearly visible in homosexuality. The homosexual psychic life is not adaptive to socially sanctioned roles but by necessity is, within a homosexually repressive society, creative and, as such, revolutionary'.

The radicalesbian challenges the idea basic to a patriarchal society that women exist for men and that their sexuality can only be defined in terms of response to a male's sexuality. (In this sense she is more of a threat to patriarchy than the male homosexual). She rejects completely the assumption that sexuality is the gift of the male and violates willingly the male-female social contract (nuclear family, consumerism etc.). She understands her own sexuality and sensuality: her clitoris her body. She is able to enjoy sexual relating with other women and should be able to discuss problems of sexuality with her lover - usually a silent topic between men and women. She also understands how to relate to herself - 'masturbation is better than oppressive mating'.

The radicalesbian understands perfectly the miracle of Monique Wittig's hymn to women, The Guerilleres. The following is a brief extract:

The women say that in the feminary the glans of the clitoris and the body of the clitoris are described as hooded. It is stated that the prepuce at the base of the glans can travel the length of the organ exciting a keen sensation of pleasure. They say that the clitoris is an erectile organ. It is stated that it bifurcates to right and left, that it is angled, extending as two erectile bodies applied to the pubic bones. These two bodies are not visible. The whole constitutes an intensely erogenous zone that excites the entire genital, making it an organ impatient for pleasure. They compare it to mercury also called quicksilver because of its readiness to expand, to spread, to change shape.

FEMINIST CULTURE

Radical feminism stands so completely in opposition to all the male culture demands that it necessitates a whole new life style. It means changing the way we live and relate all day, every day.

Male culture has always demanded that we identify with men and exclude women. (Feminism means identifying with women and excluding maleness). Love between women is a real political force - untasted of massive implication.

And around that love we must build a way of life; a way of living out our primacy with women in our every day lives.

Ideology

The feminist movement is a political force. It has a comprehensive, coherent ideology - a body of ideas that analyses our oppression in all its ramifications - economic, political, social. But it is not an exclusive ideology. It grows as our feminist consciousness deepens.

Feminist culture is the working out of that ideology. Through it we can construct a way to end our oppression.

Love between women is "the cornerstone for this structure. It is the touchstone of our independence, self-image, creativity. It is the distillation of women's oppression and the crystallization of women's power. Without this as our base we are doomed to reformism and disunity".

As a radical lesbian I draw my strength, support, direction from and with women. Lesbianism, for me, is an attempt at a freer life-force moving towards a women's revolution.

Male culture

Male culture's definition of women is that we exist for men. That definition confines us and excludes us from defining and shaping the terms of our own lives. Men have always controlled, organised, ordered and ruled our lives.

Now we must control and regulate our own lives.
"For self regulation is the basis of freedom, and dependence the origin of inequality".

Male power is enmeshed in male culture - in all the institutions of the patriarchy. For centuries man's unknowledge of the female experience, and the conscious exclusion of women from any but the most purile spheres of activity, have made us invisible in male culture.

Because male culture and supremacy are so pervasive we can never hope to invade. To combat it we must create a female model. Just as it is important to create an image - a reality - of capable, strong independent feminist culture.

Human culture will exclude women until we refuse to be invisible. The necessary precondition is the creation of the female experience - the neglected half of human experience. Feminist culture must be researched, explored, recognised and publicised. By women.

Our History

Female culture is largely unrecorded. What is recorded is fragmentary. "I have to dig my identity out of a chaos of images. I am an archeologist".

Brilliant women, artists and musicians, did exist. But information about them is buried beneath the shit of male history, male dominance.

"Historically man's unknowledge of the female experience has made us invisible, mystic, not actual. We are invisible, unless we wear man made masks. We live invisible within male culture. We conform to male images of ourselves if we wish to survive and be seen at all."

Just one example is the 'witches' of the Middle Ages.

Witches

The oppression of peasant women in the area of the witch craze took at different forms at different times and places, but never lost its essential character: that of a ruling class campaign of terror directed against the female peasant population.

The real issue was one of control: male upper class healing under the auspices of the church was acceptable; female healing as part of the peasant subculture was not.

The witch was a threat to the Church/State. She was a woman, and not ashamed of it and she appeared to be part of an organised underground of peasant women.

In locale and timing the most virulent witch hunts were associated with periods of great social upheaval, shirking feudalism at its roots - mass peasant uprisings and conspiracies, the beginnings of capitalism and the rise of protestantism.

There is fragmentary evidence, which feminists ought to follow up, suggesting that in some areas witchcraft represented a female-led peasant rebellion.

There is evidence that women accused of being witches did meet locally in small groups, and that these groups came together in crowds of hundreds and thousands on festival days. The meetings were probably occasions for trading herbal lore and passing on the news. There is little evidence of the significance of the witches organisations, but it is hard to imagine that they weren't connected to the peasant rebellions of the time.

Perhaps they were the first feminists - slaughtered in their millions by the male ruling-class.

Our Present

To paraphrase Valerie Solanas - life in this society is, at best, an utter bore, with no aspect of society being at all relevant to women.

A radical feminist can't take part in any aspect of the existing culture without having to compromise somehow. In a job, in education, in almost every interaction she is treated not as a person but as a woman.

So it is important to create a 'liberated territory' within which we can grow in the recognition of our personhood, in which our toughness can be forged into constancy by the love and support of our sisters in struggle.

The Vision

More than words, more than action, the creation of a feminist culture can generate an atmosphere where women can feel free enough to struggle to be free.

And the effort to create this culture itself is part of the vision. "The vision must be so powerful, so urgent, so compelling, so immediate, so utterly convincing that women can no longer stand living the way that they do." Which is only the way they have been expected to, and afraid not to.

"We must use the magic of poetry and music to create the vision of a society which embodies community, dignity, joy, knowledge, understanding, meaning and love."

A society in which enjoyment will spring directly from living itself, the process of experience, rather than from the quality of achievement.

This requires a new culture to replace male culture: where co-operation, love and life are the guiding forces of organisation rather than competition, power and bloodshed.

This concept will change the way we live. We must begin to build collectives where women are committed to other women on all levels - emotional, physical, economic, political.

"Women must grasp a sense of their power to change their own lives", and that can best be achieved by becoming actively involved in film groups, theatre groups, newspaper collectives, etc.

Never doing anything leads to a lack of confidence in your ability to do anything. Taking control of a media and working in it creates a sense of the creativity, energy, pride and power women are capable of.

The Direction

There are many areas of activity in which we can act out our feminist ideals.

In a woman's community we must attempt to meet the survival needs of women without economic privilege. This means co-operative child care, health clinics, abortion clinics, resources centres, information centres, switchboard referral centres, etc.

These require a large, effective, organised and dedicated women's movement.

Media

It is essential that we build our own media: newspapers, tapes, films, etc. Without our own media we are without a voice. We cannot rely on the communications of the oppressor. Past mass media distortions of Women's Liberation are ample evidence of that.

Film

In this medium women are beginning to create our own image of ourselves - instead of being defined by someone else's image or information. And film is so popular and subtle that it can often communicate in a way that written material cannot.

Women's Radio

In the U.S. there are dozens of women's liberation radio stations and programmes. They both give the woman the ear on their own valuable experiences and are an effective medium for communicating with women.

They report developments in such movement fronts as childcare, abortion and equal employment. They broadcast news of events in the women's movement, feminist poetry and interviews with women and air personal accounts of discrimination - as well as playing mainly music by women.

Television

A potent medium for communicating feminist ideals is television. Especially as so much of our oppression these days originates from TV.

In the U.S. cable television will soon open up vast possibilities - a women's station will be possible.

For us here, now: the ABC is soon to run a series of half hour programs made and controlled by different minority groups. Feminists must seize opportunities like this. Besides being a medium for our message it will create confidence and new skills for the women involved in making such a program. Eventually we will take over their media.

Sport and Self-defence

"The woman who has the continued opportunity to move skillfully learns that she, as an individual, is an effective action-producing agent within her life-world."

All sports invented so far emphasize the aspects of physiology in which males excel.

Women have been conned into believing they are weak. But women are strong. Most women have internalized the male image of us as weak and helpless. We must destroy that in ourselves, in our heads, before we can become strong. It is essential that through sport, exercise and self-defence courses develop our latent strength and self-confidence.

Men see feminism as a joke, because they believe we are too weak to be of any real danger. They are not prepared to face strong, angry, defiant women who are not intimidated by their power.

Women's Studies

At the moment there are various women's studies programs at different universities. I believe it is very important to have courses like these in which we can study women's history and women's oppression.

But we must be careful of being fobbed off with separate women's studies courses, run on comparatively small budgets, that allows the universities to avoid confronting the sexism and ignorance of feminism in their own departments and courses.

Sisterhood

Meetings, discussions, Consciousness Raising Groups, conferences etc. are probably the best way to spread the feelings of feminist community. Personal interaction between women can counteract the traditional alienation of women from each other.

Printed leaflets, articles, newspapers, journals are also important. All drawing women together into a shared experience of feminism, of togetherness, of sisterhood, of cultural revolution.

The Erotic

"The point of Women's Liberation is not to stand at the door of the male world, beating our fists, and crying "let me in, damn you, let me in!" The point is to walk away from that world and concentrate on creating a new world, a world who will make that world fall merely by refusing to populate it, a woman who will remake herself."

The destruction of the patriarchy lies at the core of a community of women who, by the indestructible nature of their creative feminism, are in the process of destroying Maleness.

But they will not quietly sit by and let us create a new woman or a new culture. They will attempt to destroy us. They will use the most effective weapon they have always used on women - male disapproval. It has always been effective before because women have been dependent on them. But we have severed our dependence. Now we must become strong in our independence.

And women are stronger people. We have born hardship, taken the beatings and ropes men vent their frustration in, and yet continued to feel love and compassion. We have always coped with the worst.

And who is stronger than the woman who knows and feels the vast pain of women's oppression and yet copes with it, struggles against it every day.

Men, trapped in their egocentricity, arrogance, power and cold greed cannot empathize with our pain. They cannot feel in their gut the torture of our oppression.

So it is up to we women, we feminist women, to build a revolution. A vast feminist, cultural revolution.

(This paper was developed out of many conversations with feminist sisters and from reading and lifting ideas from several feminist articles, books and journals).

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THE RADICALESBIAN MANIFESTO

Lesbian. We do not accept the word in the sense that it is traditionally used to describe, explain and limit us. Through our experience we have come to see its political significance. "Lesbian is the label which holds every woman in line." It's a fear word that says a woman has stepped outside her sex role - when that's what we want to do, the label loses its bite.

Conditioning as a woman begins early. Women are deluded into thinking that they are getting as good a deal as a man, just different. Lesbians are not conned into accepting their situation but are taught that lesbianism is a product of penis envy, arrested development, personality inadequacies, hormones. Society expects concealment of us. To the oppression of being a woman is added the oppression of concealment. This is why coming out is important. While we continue to hide from society we are accepting our own oppression. To become visible is the indication that we no longer accept their terms. We widen the range of our honesty with each other and all we meet. We break down our isolation. We recognise our oppression and refuse to internalise it. To say that Gay is Good is divisive but is necessary in our reaction to conditioning. We will not let society rest. Anyone who wishes to disapprove will be obliged to do this to our faces.

We want to overcome the division between women - to touch, relate, to give strength and validity to each other. We want women to be able to relate to women on all levels. We want to relate as individuals, not as elements in a correct ideology. Fucking with another woman just removes one more barrier in our minds, enables us to learn to love our woman-selves in another woman. It is another eradication of oppression. But every woman who likes and works with other women is "gay" by society's standards. For us, gay consciousness is feminist consciousness.

We want a genderless society, that is a society that doesn't differentiate on the basis of sex, where people relate to each other irrespective of gender. But we recognise that at this time and in this place women are just more likely to be able to form relationships with other women than with men, if our criterion is warmth and honesty. We know our relationships are natural. "The only sexual perversion is a relationship based on exploitation and dishonesty."

We understand that our oppression stems from a sexist society. We recognise our oppression as women. We understand the specific threat

that our living without men poses to the institutions of monogamy and the nuclear family, institutions which are the basis and the training schools of the patriarchy. This is why we organise as gay women apart from our gay brothers. Gay men, though still oppressed, do still receive the automatic benefits of being male in a patriarchal society. Lesbians can only receive the automatic oppression of being female in a patriarchal society. There are professions traditionally allotted to gay men, but there's not even a paternalistic hand to women. Gay men have their heroes - Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde - while ours are suppressed - who knows that Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc related to women? Homosexual men have always had the option of compromising, of receiving approval by being worthwhile citizens. Women aren't supposed to act for themselves, they are the power behind the man. So a lesbian, logically, has no place at all in a patriarchal society. At the same time this makes us freer to act against it.

We see all oppression - capitalist/worker, white/black, imperialist/third world as sexist, that is, as based on male power. We identify with the struggles of all oppressed groups, not as different isolated causes, but as symptoms of a sexist world view.

We are going to fight our oppression on all levels. We refuse to regard ourselves as free while women are oppressed. We recognize the institutions which oppress us, and will not set up copies of marriage, of role playing, of power dominance. We are fighting our oppression with honesty, in ourselves and others. We will destroy the nuclear family in ourselves. We do not want equality, but liberation. We do not believe in individual solutions.

Our immediate aims and tactics are not fixed. Preconceptions affect tactics; we think that the whole society must change, and work at what comes, fixing at no one level. It is part of our oppression that we do not know how much we do not know. We cannot say what freedom will be like. We do not have a programme. A new society of aware people is very much a vision still. But we can say certain things. We do not condone any manifestation of the ideals of monogamy or the nuclear family within our own relationships. We believe that leadership is destructive, power is sexist, and as we aim for a leaderless society so we work in a leaderless group. And we attack the power basis of sexism in existing institutions. We work through consciousness raising to free our own heads. We work through zap actions and demonstrations to raise the consciousness of others, always bearing in mind that confrontations may open people's eyes, it may also alienate them. We do groove on militancy but adapt tactics to situations. But we do not shirk confrontations, knowing that our silence oppresses our silent sisters. Our existence is an argument in itself. Not only poofster bashers but a whole society oppresses us, so directness is the best tactic.

We want more than equality. We want Revolution. Male power, embodied in the male institutions of our present culture, is aggression. To ask for equality is only to get into that - into ruthlessness and non-caring. So forget about that concept of power and talk about collective feminist consciousness; about development as people in strength and love. "Lying in the arms of the individual solution," we won't get anywhere. So we want to establish our own alternative feminist culture. We want a distinct feminist community where we can learn to be/act ourselves as people. We are not going to be seen through the eye of male culture. And there's no point in conquering male culture when we can create our own.

N.B Everything is a paradox.

RULES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Since Radicalesbians first got going round Australia, a number of unwritten rules have been built up about how a lesbian feminist relationship should work. I wanted to write something about them, but all I got was either my life story or statements about love and work and economic bases that got too far away from the daily details I keep thinking about. So instead I've written down the rules about relationships that I collected by talking to women in Adelaide.

1. Feminist lesbians who are fucking together don't:

- push on in public places
- go everywhere together
- live together/sleep together every night
- say they want to be monogamous.

The reasons for this set of rules are something like:

- setting up a situation for yourself where you can't drift into making a fucking relationship your main security or interest
- making sure that other people can still get through to you.

2. Within the relationship there are other rules. Feminist lesbians don't

- fall in love
- feel jealous
- want to be monogamous

and do

- talk about what they are doing, not only with each other.

The reasons for this set of rules are something like:

- getting suspicious about the idea of love because it mainly seems to have worked to keep women out of action.
- getting suspicious about monogamy because it mainly seems to be there to make stable worker-producing families.

3. Then if you do get involved in multiple fucking relationships there are some other rules. These aren't quite as clear cut yet, but my random sample agreed that:

- you can't work on spontaneity e.g. if you all go to a party you need to know beforehand who goes home with whom
- some kind of balance of time has to be worked out
- you don't want to know either everything or nothing about your lover's other lovers.

The reasons for this set of rules are something like:

- since we have been trained to expect that we will get our main emotional security from one other person, we have to untrain ourselves. To demand of ourselves and the women we love that we act as if we were there already is silly.

These are the rules as far as I can collect them. I've written them down as dictatorial statements, but actually they aren't used as a great new way of conforming. Everyone who believes in them breaks them, but it means that we have to think about what we do, and not just drift along doing what we were always told to do.

Still there is a lot that the rules don't even take into consideration. Are we working out rules to change society or to make life easier? Is there anything in the rules that applies specifically to lesbian relationships? Is this etiquette or politics? And a lot of other questions.

Jenny.

A discussion on rules and relationships will take place at