Trouble and Strife

No. 3 a radical feminist magazine £1.50

Who's holding the test-tube? Reproductive Technology

Therapy: Underneath we're all lovable

The Origin of the Family, Private Property and Marxist Feminism?

Writing Our Own History: Storming the Wimpy Bars

Swallowing the Pill

Patients and Power

Fatherhood as control of women

What is lesbianism?
Write for "Trouble and Strife"!

So far, Trouble and Strife has received articles from women known to members of the collective. We hope many others will feel free to send us suggestions or outlines for pieces they would like to write. We need your contributions.

We do not want to limit the magazine to reflecting a narrow range of views, politics or experience. We are open to ideas from any feminists and are willing to help or make suggestions if you would like us to work with you on features or interviews.

We also need cartoons, photographs and drawings to make the magazine work visually.

If you are interested in contributing to Trouble and Strife, get in touch with us, and the sooner the better!

Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble and Strife, PO Box MT16, Leeds LS17 5FY, Britain.

Trouble and Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Janna Hamner, Liz Kelly, Sophie Lawa, Diane Leonard and Ruth Walsgrove, with help from Judy Stevens, Cath Jackson, Kate Taylor and Paddy Stamp (Illustrations), Alice Henry, Joyce Cunningham, Pauline Bart, Renee Prince, Vanessa Coode and Rose Kernochan.

Thank you to Spree Idub for the use of their space.

Although we take collective responsibility for the contents, we do not necessarily agree with every article we print – only that we feel it is interesting. Unsolicited articles are welcomed, please enclose a stamped addressed envelope. We do not intend to publish poetry or fiction.

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Letters

We would like the letters pages to be a forum for discussion. Not only do we encourage women to comment on articles in Trouble and Strife, but also to extend and develop the issues raised. We feel that for many women writing a letter may be less off-putting than writing an article, although we welcome both. If you have ideas or experiences you want to share about issues not so far covered in Trouble and Strife do write to us.

"Nit-picking, quarrelsome, intolerant"

I am busy trying to figure out what criteria you use for including letters. Are you so desperate for a response that you will print whatever rubbish you receive? It certainly looks that way from some of the self-opinionated claptrap written in response to issue No. 1. Since we are all affected to some degree by the liberal principle of a "two-sided debate" and the numbing confusion it induces, I read three of these letters before I realized what a waste of time it was.

The last thing I need when I open something claiming to be a Radical Feminist publication is a moral lecture in the guise of an academic letter (with argument, numbered and apparently counteracted) on the evils and horrors of war.

Judy Cavanagh who wrote the letter on Greenham says she defines Peace as freedom from oppression rather than the absence of war. My dictionary defines Peace as "Freedom from disturbance, confusion or war; ease of mind; quiet; stillness etc." and this is the definition I shall use. If the Greenham women were in a freedom from oppression movement instead of a peace movement, perhaps their understanding of the working of power would be different. They might then be able to produce more convincing and effective tactics than those of holding hands around a missile base.

We must get our politics right, so that we can create the conditions for revolution and women's liberation. And 'will we do as someone older and wiser and more famous than me once said, 'everything we try to achieve, must fail.' This is what I see as the real struggle, though of course it feels like an unreal struggle most of the time, precisely because it is not elitist and hierarchical.

*indicates letter has been cut

I certainly don't know anyone who wants to be in an elite with me. But I am not alone in my political unpopularity. There are others of us who will continue tirelessly (or tiresomely) to question and oppose other women's politics, especially when it is anti-feminist or so much of the rhetoric from Greenham Common has been.

What Judy Cavanagh dismisses as a narrow band of opinion is the product of a deep and unfounded consciousness of our lives as women oppressed by men. This understanding requires that we recognize cooperation for what it is, not above it under the carpet as she attempts to do when she says, "All women are feminists by experience."

We are not nice girls who think we "must be prepared to listen to other women's views". We are pick, quarrel and gossip. We are intolerant and angry. Especially when we realize that after reading all about the virtues of being a peace woman, we are now expected to middle through "Religion as a basis for Politics", Jill Chadwick's letter.

But enough of that, for the most enraged letter I came across and the one that finally prompted me to reply was Hillary Potts' "What is Class?"

What, indeed. You could almost be forgiven for thinking that you'd made the whole thing up, and the history of industrial capital society had been a bad dream, when you read that all she intends to mean by middle class is "educated, articulate and able to use the media."

She seems to want to confirm a romantic notion of what it's like to be working class, (which she says she learned from visiting her gran in Manchester) else why would she demand that working class women present a "less deferential" view of our position, than Marlene Packwood did in Trouble and Strife No. 1.

To say, as she does, that people don't have to deny their own backgrounds as they used to, is a blatant lie. It totally sidesteps and denies the reality of many women's attempts to bridge the gulf between assumptions that are made about who you are when:

1. you're an 'educated' woman with perhaps a well paid job, and
2. the woman that you know yourself to be irrespective of your financial circumstances.

It is not with nostalgia, or anger and pain, that you consider your ma's varicose veins and you dad's fascist or left-wing politics. Over the years you see your brothers and sistershosting become more and more limited. You watch them take their share of the wealth and privilege and goods, foisted on us all by the advertisers. They may gain their pride from a car, a felly or a garden full of 'builders' dirt that they've lucky enough to get one of those council houses on a new estate. And of course, a husband is one of the first items on the list.

Keeping body and soul together while working a lifetime away for these prizes is not easy task. Any passion for art (by which I mean painting, music, or books you may be moved to describe as literature, must be firmly contained if not suffocated, and your total energy channelled instead into the precarious business of staying alive. Of copulating. The fear is that if you relax this tight control, your spirit will scream with rage until they carry you off to the loony bin. And for many many working class women, this is exactly what happens.

It is not always long before you begin contemptuously about earlier dreams and ambitions. By this time you get career's advice (and among working class women, this is always the source of a good many laughs), you're probably already acknowledged the great myth that you can do anything if only you work hard enough, for what it is.

If you give up at this point the feeling of defeat may never leave you. If you fight on, the responsibility is enormous. What it must be like to struggle through the British Education System hanging on to a notion of 'bettering yourself', I can hardly imagine. But if I try to picture it, it seems to me like an unending diet. A constant curtailing of your needs to fit in with some square professor's notion of a broad-minded individual. O yes, Ms Potts, we certainly don't deny our backgrounds, and our whole lived reality as well. I mean 'successful' working class lesbians every day who testify to the harm this does us.

Ponder, if you will, the implications for us all, when working class women emerge out of what you call college, with sociology degrees (three years of middle class men's class analysis) and a brave new vocabulary with its carefully tailored yet inevitably ill fitting Queen's English accent. What are we to do with our dislocated histories... community work? Writers who struggle to reconcile this kind of experience are a brave few who truly need the meaning of integrity and offer it to us as a living word in a living language. As such, Marlene Packwood has my respect, even if I disagree with aspects of her politics.
How dare Hilary Potts bait her, and the rest of us, with suggestions that we cannot afford words like ‘catalyst’.

Despite platitudes about feeling a prisoner of middle classness, Hilary Potts’ complicity is apparent throughout her letter. She says that illiteracy is one of the things by which she defines class, not a shocking or new discovery, and goes on to suggest that Marlene change her writing style. She says it might be a more effective way of making them listen. I say that this attitude betrays her patronising arrogance. My mother would say it reflected on her upbringing, and I suppose that just about sums it up.

Kate Monson,
London.

Absorbing and excluding working class women

I would like to reply to the letter from Hilary Potts in your last issue of Trouble and Strife to clear up some misunderstandings. Firstly she seems to feel that I wrote my article to get at middle class women. This was not nor ever has been my intention. The reason I write what I do is for the benefit of working class and middle class women alike. I wish to expose and explore differences in order to eradicate or at least greatly reduce the class bias which exists, quite openly.

Through working class women (or men) do well, achieve scholarships or mobility into the traditionally ‘middle class’ professions, those around them from middle class backgrounds and education attempt, whether consciously or unconsciously, and often succeed in influencing working class people with regard to values, lifestyle, language, accent, family life etc. These means that the dominant ideology, a middle class one,

exerts itself over one which it views to be ‘inferior’ and perhaps it is inferior on some levels. Certainly with regard to health and diet research has shown that working class people get sicker than middle class people and eat foods that are more carbohydrate laden. This is not the point though.

What is at issue is that working class women

must be able to decide for themselves what they want rather than having values and lifestyles which are assumed to be superior, foisted on them.

Exclusion is more obvious issue for me.

A dominant class of people simply excludes those it considers its inferiors from entering its ranks unless it is in its terms, as in Brideshead Revisited or The Jewel in the Crown, (I often use TV examples as they are available to all and so a much a part of the process of indoctrination). Thus the fine line of exclusion/absorption is the doorway to giving up your working class roots. Both operate on the level of ‘fear’ for the middle classes are not going to leave you alone if you succeed on their terms nor are they going to accept you if you don’t accommodate yourself to their values/lifestyle. I have spent years observing all of this and see little variation to this pattern.

Please don’t force me into the middle class would you be so happy if I fitted into. I don’t want to go into it nor do I feel a part of it either. In fact I am very much in limbo right now, with a working class background and lifestyle, retaining middle class absorption, trying to create a new space for working class women. I expect to be here for the rest of my lifetime. I can’t feel ‘guilty’ about what I’ve done as I honestly don’t know if it’s any good to me. I think enough to consider with right now with exploring working class women’s existence.

In sisterhood,
Marlene Packwood,
London.

What about mothers?

* The first thing I saw when I opened the magazine was Cath Jackson’s cartoon alongside the first letter – and that one with the worried face, the dishevelled hair and a bent back over the pushchair is me I suppose? It would take a real PR job to turn me into the cool, immaculate, expressively-voiced dyke on the opposite page – but I am a lesbian!

Since I left the (comparatively) safe haven of heterosexual couples 6 years ago (and of course I had particular pressures, anxieties, oppression to cope with there), I’ve felt as though I’ve been thrown to the winds. I have two children, a boy and a girl, and what I feel oppressed now. From each side I am watched – by the State, through its institutions, the custody courts, schools, welfare officers, doctors, concerned neighbours and relatives – they are ready to spring if I make too many false moves, radical moves. And these last weeks I’ve been thinking hard about the conflicts of being a woman with children who are seen to have other strong and meaningful relationships and how I end up walking a tightrope juggling with fifteen coloured glass balls. One false move . . .

I am not obsessed with my children – I want to live my life too. I do love them. I want to live with them – and the reality is that I must live with them and take responsibility for them, whatever the weather, the state of the economy, or my temper. Having had children I must settle on my bed because hardly anyone is going to share that responsibility without asking a very high price – as a lover once said when I complained that I could not make our to meet her, fifty miles away, because there was no-one to meet the children from school – “It was your choice to have children”. And it is my choice to be a lesbian – and I quite often feel bloody miserable because of it, and I’d better not complain because someone is going to say, “It’s your choice”. This is all rather garbled because of a weight of troubled feelings (and a horrible sense of knowing all the responses to what I say, which will leave me as powerless, if not more demoralised, as before). I’d like to write something based on my own experiences and those of other women I know, both with and without children and to try to face some of the realities of having children without prescribing limits, denying possibilities.

A lot of what I read in the feminist press would make it appear that women in the WLM either don’t have children, or wish they hadn’t, or are ageing children out. But many women I know either have children (and feel with the conflicts and dilemmas imposed on them because of it) or most children – even though this is meant to be a negative and soul-destroying experience – or have just lost custody of their children and are receiving no support.therapy or understanding because society they’ve got rid of the problem (but they’re feeling guilty, bereaved, spaced-out,
Lesbian radical feminism: the only radical feminism?  

These days in the liberation movement many feminists seem to be proving an old saw we once knew we had to disprove—that to complain, particularly against those with power, and certainly against those who merely work within the power structure, is terrible...unsenious?...crude?...insufficiently caring about how the accused feels?, too loud?...unreal?...unwomanly?...divisive?...shrewish?...unlikable?...demonic?...The women who call themselves 'Radical Feminists' in France (see last issue, 'What's the French for Political Lesbianism?') echo the limp liberal language of many women in Britain. What is this crap about 'closed' versus 'open', this blath about 'dogma'? Radical feminists become an identifiable political grouping, more than a decade ago, on the grounds that we understood that it was new women who oppressed women and that we were prepared to say so, and go on saying so, and act on that analysis. We're—lesbian radical feminists—are indeed 'open' to further political development, new thought on what we as lesbians can do together. Having realized that heterosexuality is one of the oppressions imposed upon us, it would be absurd to suggest we should be 'open' to reconsidering it, to stepping backwards. What is 'open' about the tedious traditional modes which keep us down? And what is 'closed' about focusing on women exclusively, trying to learn what we can be without the massive constraints that heterosexuality continues to force on all women (lesbians included)? Is it 'dogmatic' to state clearly and honestly one's actual thoughts and beliefs?  

Maybe some women who once knew that men are the enemy of women are now indeed 'collaborating'. In the Oxford English Dictionary 'collaborating' means to cooperate, as in work together. In second meaning, the one used in the article 'What's the French for Political Lesbian?', refers to working with the enemy. You can't cooperate with an enemy unless you recognise it's an enemy. There is an implication of choice, knowledgeable betrayal. Otherwise women are just being pleasant (to men) and getting on with life. The people who collaborate in France in WW2 were not actually performing sexual acts either, for the most part. They were merely buying, selling, cooking. If was for fun and with whom they did these things that was meaningful.  

The French 'Radical Feminists' not only suggested that women who knowingly co-operate with the enemies of women are traitors but also that the word 'collaborator' with a laddish abhorrence. Claire Duchen attempts to explain the refusal of the term by saying that in French it is 'heavy with the resonance of Vichy and Nazi occupation'. Well, yes, the term is heavy and not just for the French, as she implies. The reference to those non-Jews prepared to aid in some way in our common situation is not a term I use lightly either. Collaboration is not unique to France. To suggest that the use of the term should be avoided is somehow especially...what?, uncouth ?, is to me a way of not wanting to recall that WW2 did happen, that millions of Jews were indeed murdered and that millions of others, not Nazis, aided in that attempted genocide. Some anti-semitism today takes precisely that form of refusing to acknowledge the real situation of Jews both now and a mere 40 years ago and over a history of thousands of years of persecution. As a Jew I want it said, understood— not avoided. I am a lesbian radical feminist and a Jew who is now left wondering why 'Radical Feminists' on Nouvelles Questions Feministes are trivialising the situations of women, all women, somehow, bizarrely, in the name of an anti-semitic 'propriety'.

The anti-lesbians of this stance is similar to the current British version. We seem to have stepped back into a period when personal private sexual preference is the test of the validity of sexual orientation. Jews too are tolerated provided we don't go on about it.  

It's very painful when women who know men are the enemy consort with them. It makes me very angry, certainly. But these women are working not only with their enemies but with their own. I know that lesbianism is essential to the ultimate liberation of all women and it does not do a disservice to pretend I know or mean something else. The heterosexual feminists I know do not want to be patronised, do not want lesbians to treat them with kid gloves. I think we must demand rigorous thought and action of ourselves, of all women, and to demand approval of heterosexual feminism is hard that.  

After all, most heterosexual feminists already know what most lesbians think about heterosexuality. They're read Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence by Adrienne Rich and probably even Love Your Enemy? Some of them may be glad to be let off the hook, not challenged. Others feel justifiably patronised. If we can be all in this together, working to end our common oppression, then we have a responsibility to erase our feminism with the greatest sincerity we possess. I don't intend to soft pedal that I believe that lesbian feminism is one step ahead, that I know that all women would be better off if we were all lesbians. To say otherwise would be to lie to women whose energy I need, whose intellect I need and must respect. If the WLM is for all of us it must be for the truth in all of us, real dialogue, opinions truly spoken...not evaded; this sort of liberal banality which merely masks both old-fashioned anti-lesbianism and a snobbish patronisation of women in general.  

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?  

Rabbi Hillel, first century, CE.
I think women should have the option of being paid for writing for Trouble and Strife. The better-off among us can always refuse payment or give it back as a donation. What do other readers think?

Money is a subject that is rarely approached directly by feminists. But clearly it is necessary if women aren’t to be financially penalised because they put their energies into feminism. Middle-class feminists generally have more money than they need for day-to-day living, and the surplus is stock-piled for cars, holidays, trips abroad, etc. I’d like to see us putting our money where our mouths are — by denoting 10% of our income annually to the WLM, no strings attached. Then working-class women and women of Colour could have conferences, centres, etc., and contributions to publications and women doing ‘voluntary work’ for campaigns could receive some money, if not the going rate for the work involved. Realise that the organisational problems would be horrendous, and who decides where the money goes anyway, but I think we have to accept that in society at present money is power, and we’re not going to get very far, inside or outside the system, without it. Again, do any other women think this idea has possibilities?

The articles on WIRESS and the 1974 Lesbian Campaign both provided background information to the WLM, which I probably wouldn’t have learnt, even if I had stayed in Britain, and I think they are a valuable contribution to our History. How about something about the women who started Spoew? Risk? I’d also be interested in hearing from women who went to the 1978 National Conference in Birmingham, which I, I’ve heard, when women of Colour decided not to work with the mainstream movement. And I’d really like to read something by a working-class woman on the advantages of being working-class, and by a middle-class woman on her disadvantages.

Looking forward to receiving No. 3.

Yours in Sisterhood, Amanda Hayman, Tokyo.

NAC and SAC continue

• Behind the facade of objective journalism presented by Alice Henry in “Women Right to Decide” (Trouble and Strife No. 2) lies an attack on either women, by the use of innuendo, half-truths and distortions. Worse still, she uses the arguments and theories of the anti-abortionists in order to attack the National Abortion Campaign.

Let me make my own position clear. I am the Co-ordinator of the Scottish Abortion Campaign, a part of NAC. I am not and never have been a member of any political group. In stating the latter I may seem to give some legitimacy to the McCarthyite approach of the article, but the guilt by association technique is designed to entrap those who “abdicate the 5th amendment”, and I have nothing to be guilty about, and a lot to be angry about!

There is not enough space to cover every single distortion in the article, but I will pinpoint a few of the factual inaccuracies and omissions. The article states that the “Scottish NAC newsletter” did not report that NAC was splitting into two groups. We issued minutes of our meetings — not a news letter — and the minutes do make clear that 2 separate groups had been formed.

Also obscured is the fact that, in order to take the debate as wide an audience as possible, we arranged for two women who supported the ‘broadening out’ of NAC to put their point of view at a specially convened meeting in Glasgow. The vast majority of the 50 or so who attended from all over Scotland were from other women’s groups, and their decision was unanimously in support of NAC continuing to promote abortion. Does that raise the spectre that all Scottish feminists are controlled by the Fourth International?

For the specific smear embodied in the article, it is important to say that, yes, there are women in NAC who are members of the Socialist League. Does your contributor believe that women who are members of political parties should be excluded from participation in the WLM? All political parties are mixed sex, and on Alice Henry’s rationale many women must stand accused of bringing male politics into feminism.

Then we have the reference to two men at NAC Conference, and the ‘informal’ discussions afterwards, when men are supposed to have talked about ‘femin’ making a fuss. The two men at NAC Conference spoke for, and voted for the dissolution of NAC. It transpired afterwards that both were anti-abortionists, there to further their own aims. One in fact used the debate at the Conference to try to stop his union affiliating to NAC at their National Conference (National Association of Probation Officers) just two weeks later. He failed narrowly, but there is no doubt that the anti-abortionists are rejigging at the present situation, where NAC is under attack, not only from the establishment and the anti-abortionists, but apparently from a section of the Women’s Movement itself.

The anti-abortionists’ tactic of opposing abortion on pseudo-feminist grounds seems to be paying off. And the underlying suggestion in Alice Henry’s article is more dangerous than the open witch-hunt it promotes. Firstly, she poses the continuance of NAC as an abortion campaign as “the political line of a mixed-sex political party”. She leaves the reader with little doubt that she believes it is the men in the political party who want to have abortion rights promoted — she could hardly raise her hand in public — unless she thought it was the women. She shows very little respect for women in believing that they are so easily manipulated by men. But Alice Henry goes further. She openly suggests that Socialist League women might have wanted to support the dissolution of NAC, but did not dare say so at Conference! She also poses the question whether men would be more reluctant to support women’s rights to decide on child-bearing and sexuality, than the availability of abortion.

All this fits neatly into the anti-abortionists’ claim that women thern-
selves do not want abortion and that it is men who want it and who use it to avoid their responsibility. (It appears to have escaped their notice that men have been avoiding their responsibilities for centuries, and inevitably it is women who are left literally and figuratively 'holding the baby'.)

'Women for Life', an anti-abortion organisation, promotes this current theme in various leaflets, eg 'Is it really the woman who advocates abortion... or is it the pregnancy unwanted by the men?' (Your Body - Whose Choice?) and 'Next time you see a man with a banner saying 'A Woman's Right to Choose', think. Is he not rather promoting 'A Man's Right to Use'? (A Message to Men... from Women For Life). Speaking at a local meeting recently a (male) SPOC full-time described abortion as "a plot of the patriarchy", and Lord Robertson, moving a Bill in the House of Lords to curtail women's abortion rights, said he was doing so to protect women, as abortion gave men an escape route.

Both the explicit witch-hunting in Alice Henry's article and the implicit support it provides for the anti-abortionists are dispicable, and I trust that the sisters involved in the new Women's Reproductive Rights Campaign will dissociate themselves from such tactics.

Having made a number of essential points, I would like to turn from the negative approach, to a positive statement about the National Abortion Campaign—a campaign promoted and led by women to defend and strengthen women's right to choose on abortion.

NAC is not 'New NAC', but a continuing campaign in our fight for abortions. We have no objection to women forming a separate campaign to fight on the wider issues, and would like to work with them. What was always objected to was the attempt to dissolve NAC and prevent any women continuing to prioritise the abortion fight. No woman below the menopause can be certain that she will not some day face an unwanted pregnancy, and we believe that we must go on fighting until a woman's right to continue or terminate a pregnancy is established both in law and in practice.

Since the split, we have had no premises or workers, but our energy has carried us through. We have now produced two new leaflets, one on NAC's aims, and one on the anti-abortionists, and two more are in the pipeline, and we will almost certainly exist by the time you read this. We also produced a new badge, highlighting the demand for NHS facilities, to coincide with the Conference we organised on abortion facilities on 25 February.

The Conference 'Abortion Rights and Facilities - What Future?' was a great success. It covered a wide range of topics from anti-abortion activity, to NHS cuts, to the experience of black women in relation to the 67 Act.

Rita Goulding, a young black woman, exploded the myth that black women do not want to have abortions, and went on to explain the two-way pressure they often encounter. She said that within their own communities black women are often stigmatised into having children, as if their right to exist is proved by motherhood, and at the same time white doctors and councillors try to push them in the opposite direction.

The attention of the Conference was focussed to a large extent on the Report of the Royal College of Obstetricians, which proves conclusively that a central reason for late abortions is the failure of the NHS to provide adequate facilities. The anti-abortionists have seized on a 2½ line reference within the 100 page report which indicates the possibility of a foetus surviving at less than 28 weeks. They have used this to fuel their latest attack, an attempt to reduce the time limit within abortion is legal in England and Wales.

Women at the Conference decided that we must seize the rest of the Report to fuel our attack on the shocking lack of NHS facilities available to women, and that we must go on the offensive to change the practice which allows us to become landmines to exist throughout the country. The way in which the present law can be manipulated is underlined by the fact that abortion law in Scotland is more liberal and there is no legal time limit for abortion, but the practice is less liberal, and thousands of Scottish women have had to travel to England to obtain abortions.

What we must do now is to expose and campaign against the prejudice inherent in the system, and the deliberate under-funding of the Health Service by the Tories.

Any woman who wants to work with us to fight for women's abortion rights is more than welcome — whatever your political background, party card or lack of one! Yours in sisterhood, Carol Thomson.

As we said in our first issue, Trouble and Strife makes no claim to be 'objective' in our reporting. We do not 'regret' publishing Alice Henry's account of the National Abortion Campaign split, and welcome Carol Thomson's writing to us to put across her views to our readership.

We do not think that publicly mourning the political commitments of those involved in a political struggle is witch-hunting. McCarronism is unwarranted. There is a long history of women from socialist organisations working in an organised way within feminist groups — and whenever other feminists refer to such organisations by name, they have been met with this sort of accusation. If a woman belongs to a group which has a policy on the issue being debated, surely her membership of that group is relevant to her part in the debate? Why is there always this claim that it is unfair to expect women to acknowledge when from which group political beliefs which they are presumably happy to pro-claim elsewhere — indeed, which they surely intend to pro-claim in joining a political group or party? Trouble and Strife.

Euphoria at Canterbury: lesbian history

I am glad that you are putting us back into the history of the WLM and felt warmed and perhaps nostalgic on reading Sheila Shulman's piece.

However, for me, she understated the euphoria and assertiveness of the Canterbury and Edinburgh conferences, and I did not recognise in her, necessarily personal, account, my own ardent and quite spontaneous sense of being at a turning point of history when I stood near a pillar in the James Gillespie school hall and the 'lesbian demand' was actually taken seriously, and passed! I, and others, felt overwhelmed.

The clave as to why this sense is somehow missing from her account lies in her statement near the end of the piece, that "most of us had been heterosexual" and did not feel different from "[hypothetical] ordinary women".

I doubt that it is true that most of us at Canterbury had been heterosexual though it may have been different at Edinburgh. I had certainly never been heterosexual, and I did feel different from other women! After all, I was attracted to women, fell in love with women, and was at least indifferent to men. That made for a sharp sense of disorientation and fear (though oddly never guilt in my identity). I did not know any other lesbian until I was 21 and mostly felt either I was mad or the world was. Obviously my experience is not unique, and I feel it should not be left out of account.

The catalytic experience of Canterbury, Edinburgh and the development of the WLM generally, launched me and other lesbians into a sense of solidarity with a far greater number of people — straight women — than we had ever dreamed would be possible. This, through political analysis and sisterhood, a term of joyous recognition, without the overtones of guilt that can so easily slip, has since, perhaps inevitably, accrued.

I just wanted to put this on record.

Yours in sisterhood,

Caroline Natle.

London.
Lesbian Custody and the New Myth of the Father

Lesbians nearly always lose custody of their children if the father chooses to fight for them. But it's not only the children of lesbians that men fear growing up without fathers. Lynne Hame, a white lesbian mother involved in the Lesbian Custody Campaign in London, writes about how men take revenge against women who try to escape their control.

The experience of lesbian mothers involved in custody battles has been written about to some degree elsewhere. But I feel it is important to take account of the extent and viciousness of the reaction from men when their wives or girlfriends leave them as lesbians, (or subsequently become lesbians), taking the children with them, and the general ideology of fatherhood which is called in to protect male control over women and children.

I cannot be specific about the circumstances of mothers that I know about through the Lesbian Custody Campaign, because of danger to them, but I can say that many women have experienced rehearsals for daring to be lesbians and removing themselves and the children from male control. It is not uncommon for mothers and their lovers to be physically assaulted, for lovers to be raped or sexually abused, or for lesbian mothers to be accused of being mad, stealing their children, being insensitive to their children's needs, or simply being bad mothers.

It is not unusual for such violent behaviour, sexual abuse, and false accusations to be made by an anti-sectarian, socialist or liberal man, who may state that he believes in the equality of woman, the swapping of gender roles and the freedom for people to decide their own sexual orientation. He may well take his revenge beyond such harassment and even beyond the courts to, for example, contacting his ex-wife's employers and abusing her to them.

In court he may say that if the children go to the mother, they will be deprived of a 'normal' family background (the normal background that he can supply, as he has usually found a new wife or girlfriend, by this time) that the children will suffer from the lack of a 'father figure' (the mother's lover, if there is one, not being suitable for this role). Alternatively, his liberal facade may crack, and he will say that he doesn't want dirty perverts corrupting his children, and introducing them to a lesbian life style.

Not uncommonly his statements will be backed up by court welfare officers and psychiatrists, who will support the ideology of fatherhood by saying that, without a father figure and a male model, the child will suffer a confusion of gender identity and behaviour - boys will not develop strong masculine lines, girls will learn that they don't have to be as tough and can exist without men. Further, they will say that children will suffer the social stigma of not growing up in a heterosexual household.

Of mothers who win custody through the courts, and a few do, they have to show that the transmission of male control (values) will be continued by proxy (that is, without an actual male being present in the household). She may be ordered not to advocate lesbian or feminist politics to her children, not to engage in lesbian feminist politics, not to tell her children that she is a lesbian, or to see her lover in the children's presence. All this may be policed by a supervision order (a social worker visiting the house at intervals to make sure that the mother is complying with the conditions of her having custody). Often the price of getting custody is high.

A new batch of psychological studies (some of these commissioned in support of lesbian mothers) fall over themselves backwards to show that lesbian mothers do not encourage their children to be lesbian or homosexual, that children have many male figures in their lives, including continuing contact with the father (if there is one) - in fact that single heterosexual mothers — and that children conform to the correct stereotypes of gender behaviour. Here are some sickening examples of such studies.

At four, Sara asked her mother if girls can marry girls and she was told they could choose a lover of either sex. Father states he hopes Sara will be heterosexual in adult life. Sara enjoys dressing up as a princess in mother's high-heeled shoes and ringlets, and plays Moomin in fantasy games. Sara's grand-father, whom she had visited only twice in her life, was instilled in her mind as an 'important and valued figure'.

Martin, aged six, dislikes rough play, but shows no current feminine interests. He enjoys building, prefers the company of boys and has a girlfriend he plans to marry. (Taken from an American study called Lesbian mother's and their children, A Comparative Survey, by Martha消防patrick et al. 1982.)

Whilst these studies may be strategic, in helping to win lesbian custody battles (the recent British study has yet to prove itself), they take as their basic premise that lesbianism is a sickness or abnormality to that can only be defined negatively against heterosexuality, and the heterosexual family. They involve a denial that lesbian and feminism influence may be good for the children, and that being brought up without a male may be positively beneficial. They still take the view that lesbianism has to be
explained as some quirk of a faulty and inadequate personality. Indeed, the study quoted above suggests that lesbians may have a need for an intimate relationship not found in heterosexual marriages; since most of the lesbian mothers in this study befriend "this might represent an attempt to satisfy this hunger (for intimacy) which later expressed itself in a lesbian relationship." With psychological studies like these, who needs psychologists?

Until recently the need for male models and the father figure argument has usually been applied to lesbian custody situations. Perhaps it was assumed by the courts that the heterosexual mother and her children would enter under the control and protection of another male, who would transmit the appropriate male values to the children.

Divorce, however, increases to one in five of all marriages, and the number of one-parent families (mainly women) has increased to one in seven nationally. Also in the mid-seventies women made some legal gains (on paper at least) in terms of male violence and being able to get violent men out of the home ('courter injunctions'). All this, and the increase in the number of women choosing not to remarry, has produced a backlash in terms of fathers' rights and a new ideology of fatherhood.

The spearhead of such a movement can be seen to be led by Families Need Fathers (FNF), but it can also be seen to be supported in a more subtle form by Men against Sexism groups. FNF, in its more extreme statements, is the antithesis of the father within the family being eroded; in a 1981 document it states that urban violence and delinquency are the result of a lack of paternal influence! FNF was in fact formed in 1974, only a year after married women were given equal rights to custody (Guardianship and Divorce Act 1970). Before this, whilst married women had some rights to custody, and in practice often got care and control of their children, under common law fathers had complete rights over their legitimate children.

Since its beginning, FNF has on the one hand argued that father's rights are being eroded, whilst on the other it claims that only what's best for the children...that children need two parents. It has been developing psychological theories to fit in with this premise. Bowlby and maternal deprivation theory is undermined and the role and importance of the role of the father in a child's development. The members' underlying motives, to acquire some of the control that men have lost, can be seen quite clearly in some of its past documents; for instance, in its 'Evidence on Violence in Marriage submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee of the same name in 1975. It stated that: "We believe it fair to see much of the physical violence . . . as a final response to violence inflicted in other forms, especially by women, verbal violence", and they go on to state that the causes of domestic violence are due to (male) frustration. FNF does not explain, however, why it is that men beat women up and not the other way around. Where violence has been involved (FNF calls it alleged violence) it emphasizes that men must still have access to their children. It states that "It is always better for children to see their father" and fathers who are excluded from their children may resort to (justifiable) assault, manslaughter and even murder. In a 1981 document it states that there has been a "deadly psychological wound" imposed on fathers who do not get custody which is "little appreciated by the divorce courts."

In another document (Children and Family Breakdown; Custody and Access, A Guide of Practice, 1983) FNF outlines the kinds of access the non-custodial parent, read father, should have. Where violence has taken place, a separate room should be set aside for the father to have access to his infant (under three) several times a week. When the child is older, staying access should be allowed at least once a week, but visits to the child should be more often.

FNF, along with the Campaign for Equality in Divorce, have had considerable influence on the pressure to end maintenance for women, "fatherhood" without custody, and have pushed for the new conciliation procedures, where the divorcing parties have come together informally to try and work out some "reasonable" arrangement about the children. They have also pushed for joint custody to be made the norm. So far they have been fairly successful. A recent government committee, the Booth Committee, set up under the Lord Chancellor's office, to look at divorce procedures, is considering recommending that joint custody is the normal order unless the parties involved show good reason why it should be otherwise. Whilst a joint custody order will mean one parent will retain care and control, it enables the father to intervene and interfere in the mother's life and to veto important decisions that she might want to make about her children.

Lesbian mothers are well aware of the effects of joint custody and increased access orders. Joint custody is often agreed as a strategy in order to keep the case out of court, where the mother would most probably lose. Often the father does not actually want care and control of the children - this would mean too much hard graft - but he wants control over what happens to them, the best access times, and a reason to interfere. Frequent access is often agreed under the threat that the father will use her lesbianism to contest custody unless she agrees. Father's access, for lesbian mothers as for other women, is often a huge time of stress, when he either does not turn up on time, returns children late, and is difficult, or does not return them when he says he will, leaving the mother to wonder whether he has "kidnapped" the children or intends to go to court. He may frequently use access times to harass the mother, as well. Some men go back to court years later, when the hardness of the divorcing years are over, bring up lesbianism, and get care and control of the children.

Of course some may argue that since men are more emotional than women, they are better suited to care for the children. This is the only stance that they ought to be given more recognition. But there are two points here. One is that there is no evidence of them actually doing this, and the second is that their involvement in child-rearing, since they have the power, can only mean a transmission and reinforcement of those values that as feminists we are working so hard to get rid of.

Those of us who are lesbian mothers, who for one reason or another still have fathers involved with our children, know only too well how these fathers are able to undermine their own relationships with our children, and to put down our own values. Of course they have the backing of a male supremacist anti-lesbian society in this, so it is not so difficult for them to enforce their values. Fatherhood denotes status and power in our society. Up until the end of the nineteenth century fatherhood meant literally owning women and children as chattels. To act without the father's (male) approval is still very risky.

Some lesbian mothers are still dependent on men for doing at least some of the child care, and this raises the question of how far lesbian without children should share child care with those who have. While many lesbians have made the positive choice not to have children, and I for one would never say that motherhood is the next best thing to sliced bread, unless more support and consideration is forthcoming from more lesbian feminists, some lesbian mothers will continue to rely on men for child care. This can only perpetuate the situation of women's dependence on men, the transmission of male values and control, and the possible sexual abuse of our daughters. It will also increase the power of such groups as Men against Sentiment.

Many of us as lesbian mothers have had to come out twice in the movement: as lesbians and as mothers. The guilt about imposing our experience as mothers on other women is still there. Also, as lesbians with children we are continually in the line for anti-lesbian attacks, either through threats over custody, or from fathers who have access to our children, or from other agencies such as children's schools, and the social and health services. We need support. Whilst there are a growing number of us in lesbian mother groups, and custody groups, many of us still experience isolation, and lack of validation both from within the movement and outside of it.

As women with children who are stating by our existence and our lifestyle that we don't need and depend on men, either sexually, emotionally, or for protection, the extent of their reaction and revenge is not really very surprising.
sharing a particular pain*

What impact does it have on your life to study violence against women? Liz Kelly writes about how it made her more aware of the threat and about what she learnt about how women really deal with violence in their lives.

Most of my local feminist activity over the past ten years has been work around the issue of violence against women, and I am still involved in my local refuge group. The decision to do research followed two years of paid community work and lots of discussions about the relevance of universities to 'real life'. I wanted to talk to women about experiences of violence in the context of their lives, rather than as some abstract, separate event. I wanted to look deeper at some ideas I had about male violence and at how complex women's experiences are, and postgraduate research seemed the only way to have the time and resources to do this.

The initial aim of the project was to look at the links between the different forms of sexual violence in terms of the experiences themselves and how women coped with and understood them to look at how agencies respond and general attitudes to sexual violence and to discuss the long-term effects of sexual violence.

Living with the fear

I began, like most of us do, by reading and reading some more. My life became saturated with violence against women. I was spending most days reading articles or books that infuriated or challenged me. Aspects of what I had read or my reactions to it would pop into my head at inappropriate moments. I became ever more aware of how surrounded we are by images, comments, jokes and real events connected to sexual violence. It was impossible to watch television, read a newspaper, go to the cinema or a pub, walk down a street, or even have a conversation without some echo of this being present. Perhaps the clearest example of how 'highly tuned' I had become was when I read a book and saw a film I had first come across five or six years earlier, when I was a feminist working on male violence, and realised that I had 'not seen' rape and sexual abuse.

During this period I became increasingly aware of and concerned about my own vulnerability. For the first time in ages I felt scared walking alone at night and became dependent on my bicycle. I struggled with myself over this, told myself this reaction was irrational, I was not at risk, that I had never been before I began the research. I wondered how much of our projecting our fears into the public sphere and onto strange men is a way of protecting ourselves from the implications of accepting that men do it, and that fear for others is more likely to be useful? How much is there a way of trying to keep some control because it is easier to limit our activities with men in general than our interactions with men we live with, work with, or who are part of the same family?

As I heard women's accounts of violence they had experienced from men they knew, and how these often functioned as some form of punishment for challenging them in a particular way, my fear began to focus on an individual man: a man with whom I had had several political confrontations in the past, and who had once threatened me at a party. Coincidentally this man seemed to appear in many of the places I was in pubs, at concerts, at the train station. My panic would climb and I would want to leave immediately. I began to feel that he knew where I was, that he was following me.

I then understood how overwhelming the ever present threat of violence in how women could be driven mad by this fear. After all wasn't I paranoid, who would take my fear seriously, based as it was on 'over-reaction', and projection? This experience made clear to me the importance of the threat of violence in women's lives, and that this is not just fear of walking alone at night but in the complex and subtle ways in many of the interactions women have with men - men they know and men they don't. I also understood how the threat can be the result of hearing about other women's experiences - the fact that so many women in the north changed their behaviour as the result of the Yorkshire Ripper and the media coverage was an extreme example of this.

Protecting Girls

Another aspect of this sense of vulnerability was specific to my daughter, then aged 10. After doing the first two interviews with incest survivors, hearing other women recall sexual assaults from childhood, and reading several studies from the USA, that estimate one woman in four experiences some form of sexual assault from an adult male before she is 16, I became concerned about protecting her from what seemed almost an inevitability. I had begun the research feeling that most women have some experience of sexual violence at some point in their lives. Having to accept this for my own daughter, her friends, another generation of young women, caused me great anguish.

My fears were about men I knew and men I didn't. I watched every man who came to the house relatives, friends and acquaintances. We both live with her father and I started to watch him too. My feelings were so strong that we had to discuss the effects of my distrust. I knew that whilst most of me trusted him, this faith was backed up by the knowledge that she knew the words to describe abuse and that it was wrong, and that he knew too that if I ever found out anything had happened my anger would be uncontrollable. Knowing that part of my trust was based on such negative factors was as much a depressing thought as it was a comfort.

I had several dreams at this time which involved revenging myself on men who had assaulted her on the way home from school. I became very concerned with knowing where she was all the time. I still panic if she's more than a few minutes late. We have discussed my concern and that my need to know she is safe is linked to knowing so many examples of things that happened to young women.

As I was working through all of this for myself, thinking about the interviews and reading I'd been doing, I saw how easy it is for men to choose to interpret children's openness and affection as sexual, to abuse children's trust that it is adults who know what is right. I also saw how much power adults, and particularly adult men, have over children. The difference in size and strength is greater than that between men and women. The rights most fathers assume to discipline children in violent and/or humiliating ways creates fear and awareness of the threat of violence for challenging male authority. The way children get afraid is often tied to them having to behave in certain ways, as defined by adults. We deny them knowledge of the world, thinking illogically that this somehow protects them.

I now think that children have no right to need to know why their mothers worry about them, what the warnings about strange men are about, and that it is certainly not only strange men that might abuse their trust. Children's vulnerability is reinforced and in part created by the lack of information, confusing information and sometimes misinformation they are given. They need to be given a sense of their own autonomy, that
they do not have to tolerate touching they do not want. As adults we have to learn to respect children, to stop assuming a right to touch simply because they are children, and by doing this we will reinforce the idea that they can refuse touches they do not want.

Sexual violence is far easier to commit when the man has all the advantages. I hope the knowledge my daughter has about sexual violence from my research and local work protects her slightly more than many women of my generation, who found out through painful experience.

Remembering and Forgetting

As I did more interviews, things women said often sparked off memories of my own. I remembered five separate incidents of sexual assault/abuse from childhood and adolescence. The fact that this also happened to the woman who typed up six of the tapes made me see that this was important. I had seen myself as lucky, one of the women who had escaped, and in terms of the more extreme forms of sexual violence this, so far, is true. But I had not escaped. Looking back, some of my experiences were formative and caused quite definite changes in my life.

I stopped travelling home on late night buses after having been trapped in a shop by a stranger. I took the opportunity only because the owner allowed, pushed us out of the way, assuming I suppose that we were a group of friends. I escaped only because the owner arrived, pulled us out of the way. Assuming I suppose that we were a group of friends. I took the opportunity only because the owner allowed, pushed us out of the way.

When I thought about the events, I re-examined the relationship. I remember this restricted my life, how it was important to be able to stay overnight with friends or have a male escort home. My adolescent independence was limited as I unconsciously tried to protect myself.

That was the only experience I ever discussed with anyone else. On another occasion I couldn't even explain why I failed to buy the school shirt I was sent to town for. I had in fact been followed around the shop by a man who kept touching me up. I'm not sure why I didn't tell him, perhaps because I said nothing was wrong at the time I had my period and he kept touching me. But I knew it was wrong, and I knew it was wrong.

An in-depth study of mine, including a follow-up, may encourage women to remember and report more incidents than an impersonal questionnaire. It is important to remember that however we study sexual violence, there will be incidents that remain buried and that any estimate we make will be an underestimate.

It was at this point that I began to see sexual violence as a continuum in a number of ways. There were some forms that most women would experience at some point in their lives (pressure to have sex, the threat of violence, harassment), and other forms that are not experienced by most women (rape, incest). At one end, the continuum contains male behaviours that are generally considered normal; at the other, extensions of these behaviours to an extreme. How women cope with these experiences and how different forms can have similar effects or the same form different effects is crucial. We cannot assume these effects in one or two forms.

The aspect of research I least thought about was the prejudice and fear of relationships. I had hoped this part of the interview would be relatively easy and would show that the usual family blaming theories were wrong. Some personal history is relevant here. I grew up in a Catholic, working-class, extended family til I was 8. When I was 12 my mother died of a long illness and my father looked after my younger sister and myself until he remarried just before I left home at 18.

Coming to look at mother-daughter relationships without a mother, yet being one, perhaps gives me a particular perspective. Women with children have no choice but to be mothers. Women in many jobs are expected to act as surrogate mothers to male superiors, and many married women feel this is their main role in relation to their husbands. Other women have written about this and I also know that mothers are more liberating in some cases because of the meanings it came to have. I could also be linked to a refusal to accept the heterosexual norm and that was pushing my own relationship far outside it as possible in order to prove that...
change is possible (although I don’t believe
in individual solutions). It was very obvious
that heterosexual relationships involve an
assumption of male sexual access, and when
this is no longer so, the relationship seems
not to fit the category somehow. I was not
happy about feeling so cut-off from my own
sexual feelings, but accepted that at least for
a time it was necessary.

Through working out my own feelings
and transcribing the interviews, I came to
see how central sexuality is to power and
control in heterosexual relationships. During
this period Catharine MacKinnon published
her seminal book, *Gender in American
Law*. Her analysis of the ways in which
women’s feelings about heterosexual relation-
ships were the control and form of sexual
expression. Women felt positive about
heterosexual relationships within which they
were respected as a whole person, where
they got care and nurturance from the man,
and perhaps most importantly, where they
felt they could refuse sex without this
threatening the relationship (and conversely
where they could initiate it without con-
tent). Many women commented on the
incorporation of men’s bodies into the realm
of women’s sexuality. Women felt that these
relationships were not based on a sexual
commitment.

Not surprisingly this was not the case for
many women.

**Political activity**

One problem that I often discuss in relation
to feminist research is how we keep
our focus on issues of gender and sexuality.
Thinking about issues in such depth can
often result in forgetting the basics that
were the original start point. It is a great
temptation to move out of the easy world
of feminist politics and into the relative
safety of academia. Fighting this temptation
and staying involved in my local women’s
refuge group, and supporting rape crisis, has
been very important for me. It has stopped me
from moving away from the reality of what I am
studying, and also offered at times another
source of validation for the ideas I’ve been
working on.

I hope that by moving from the inter-
views to my own experience and back to the
women’s self-help therapy group we have
come across, which is why it is used as the
major written source for this article. In *Our
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tation of the existing therapy techniques.
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Therapy is seen as a tool which has been
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Ernst and Goodison are referring to the early seventies, and the fervid enthusiasm they mention seems to have been largely replaced by tolerance, if not wholehearted enthusiasm. It is now unfashionable to suggest that therapy is of its origins and nature politically naive or even reactionary. Nonetheless, we feel that feminist criticisms of therapy are as valid as they have ever been, for the recent development of women's therapy leaves the basic therapeutic perspective unchanged.

The roots of women's therapy lie in the 'women's movement' of the 1960s, which emphasized personal liberation and 'human potential'. The central image was of a vaguely defined 'sick society'. The 'system' was poisoned by its materialism, consumerism and lack of concern for the individual. These things were internalized by people, but underneath the layers of 'shit' in each person lay an essential 'natural' self which could be reached through various therapeutic techniques. What this suggests is that revolutionary change is not something that has to be built, created or invented with other people, but that it is somehow natural, dormant in each of us individually and only has to be released. All the techniques used in women's therapy, apart from those derived from Freud or Jung, come from this tradition.

The essential belief of therapy is that people have a 'true' self, a human essence which exists before and outside of the social reality in which we live.

'True' selves beneath the social

This belief in an underlying socially-uninfluenced self must assume some characteristics of the 'natural self', otherwise it would be impossible to recognize one when you saw one. Speculations about 'human nature' have a long history and have usually been considered rather dubious by feminists. Therapy subscribes to a vague idea of people as naturally nice — the 'underneath we're all lovable' school of thought — and therefore to the idea that we need only rid ourselves of the socially imposed 'shit' to reveal the 'natural child' beneath.

Such a view of people may seem very appealing, but a belief in a naturally beautiful, happy, powerful and fulfilled self which only needs to be uncovered, leads directly and inevitably to the idea of personal solutions and individual liberating magic. It is not necessarily how feminists involved in therapy see the rest of their lives, but when it comes to doing therapy it is essential to each and every technique that women see their 'real' selves and their 'social' selves as distinct.

Assumptions about a natural self are closely connected with another aspect of therapeutic theory — the emphasis placed on childhood experience. Childhood is seen as the time when our natural selves are originally expressed, and it is assumed that many of the problems brought to therapy groups will have their origins in failed relationships with parents. This form of explanation is of course common beyond the limits of therapy, but it can and should be questioned.

The dubious way in which connections can be made between past and present is illustrated by an example of a bioenergetic exercise given by Ernst and Goodison, in which a woman 're-lives' being held down by her mother while her nappy changed and then connects this with her current anxiety to the ministerial position. Is the assumption here that her experience of nappy-changing this woman was in the past naturally inclined to be ministerial position, and still would be if her mother had changed her nappies differently, and will be in the future now that she has 'discharged' her traumas about it by 're-living' the experience?

The exercise on the past is based on the idea that we store up emotions which we couldn't then express, and that these emotions remain blocked inside us until we find a way of letting them out. These blocks are the source of our problems in the present: they are what prevent or from (here we go again) being the whole, happy people we really are. Therapy becomes a sort of mental laxative. This perspective leaves us reaching constantly backwards into our own past experience rather than forwards to the experiences of other women to find explanations for our lives.

Non-verbal equals natural?

Another aspect of therapy we want to look at is the emphasis on non-verbal means of expression, such as body language, guided fantasy, drawing and dreams. The assumption is that the conscious mind expresses itself in words which are pinned down by social meanings. The assumption on the other hand can supposedly by-pass social constructions and reveal itself directly through symbols and images. We reject the idea that symbols and images have a natural meaning any more than words do. To take an example, in one therapy exercise you are asked to draw a tree. After you have drawn it you are supposed to gain insights about yourself from it. But we question whether it is possible not to know what drawing a tall tree with spreading branches, green foliage and birds nesting in it would mean as opposed to a gnarled, black, leafless tree in a barren landscape. Such images are part of a 'language' with culturally fixed meanings, and if they were not they would be useless.

Drawing a tree is not necessarily any more 'true' or 'natural' a statement about the self than thinking or writing.

The last point about therapy is its preference for the emotional over the rational. The making of a transition from talking to feeling is constantly emphasized; shouting, crying, laughing, making sounds and body movements and thumping cushions are all seen as more natural responses. A woman who does not express herself in these ways is considered to be repressing her feelings which when the lid is eventually lifted will rob us of the forms. We cannot accept this. It is as true in therapy as elsewhere that what counts as a natural expression of emotion is structured and learnt. For example, in some cultures it is acceptable for men to cry in public. From the perspective of women's therapy this would suggest that these men are more in touch with their real selves and therefore less likely to be oppressive. Yet crying can express a multitude of different meanings. It can be an expression of personal grief or group solidarity, a sign of weakness or an appreciation of Walt Disney films. This is not nature. It is the expression of norms of culture, sex, class, peer-group or therapy group.

What about consciousness-raising?

We are not suggesting that we do not still need to talk about ourselves at length with the support of other women. It seems to us that the rise of the small self-help groups owes much to the gradual disappearance of consciousness-raising. Therapy groups are often the first point of access for women new to the Women's Liberation Movement. We feel that their popularity is a comment on the fact that we still need space to discuss personal experience, rather than shoving an attraction specific to therapy.

Women's therapy has claimed to reach the problems consciousness-raising (CR) could not reach. It is argued that CR identifies problems around marriage, sexual possessiveness, jealousy and lack of confidence, for example, but failed to stop women experiencing them. This boils down to this: that these feelings are rooted deep within us and cannot be eradicated by an act of will. We consider this to be a
misrepresentation of the purpose of CR, which claimed that 'feelings' could not simply be expelled because they could not be divorced from the relations that created them. CR recognized that feelings have material roots. For example, jealousy has roots in the social and economic importance of catching and keeping a man (lover), the stigmata of being a single woman, the emphasis on valuing a woman only in her relation to a man, and people on the basis of their attractiveness, desirability and so on within social constructs. (This list is not exhaustive!)

The immediate 'liberation' of CR is in recognizing that 'the problem' is inside our heads. Therapy returns us to a view of ourselves as the arena for struggle which feminism helped us to escape. Therapy is backward-looking: you change the past and you're free in the present. Feminism is forward-looking: you change the present and you're free in the future.

Power

The ways power is concealed in therapy and feminism are totally opposed. Ernst and Gowing suggest:

'Therapy can help us to reach beneath our conscious awareness to contact the power locked in ourselves and the deep layers which energise us to act in our own and common interests. The resolution we want sets a change not just in the ownership of production but in the declaration of our sexuality, our feelings, our relationships, our working and living conditions, our consciousness of ourselves.

Power is regarded as being locked within ourselves, a property internal to individuals rather than as constructed within social relationships. As for the 'reclamation' of our sexuality, etc., this is part of the same assumption that these things already exist in us as a feminist form and only have to be unearthed. Revolution is split by Ernst and Goodwin into two completely different areas: economic change, which is external, and this process of 'reclamation' which is internal. The dangerously apolitical nature of the confusion is summed up for us by the following introduction to a co-ordinating exercise on racism:

This exercise is based on the idea that in order to have become oppressed with racist attitudes and patterns of behaviour, we were ourselves first badly hurt, the racist mocks grief. By starting from a position of pride in who we are and a sense of unity with all oppressed people (by recalling how we are or have been oppressed) we can discharge that grief and let go of the racism.'

Postscript

Tracey: Having written this article I wanted to say what I found attractive about therapy. The experience of being in a group with the time and attention of five other people was very powerful. There was an emphasis on being self-created, and many of us were definitely discouraged. Looking back on it I see very little that I could not have got from close friends or a CR group, but at the time therapy also offered 'freedom'. In particular freedom from my past. I felt that if I kept 'pouring this' just enough I could catch up and be free of it. Although I was a feminist and accepted the reality of external oppression, I also believed that 'screwing my self out' was a good thing in itself. (There might be political side effects of being a really 'tough' person, but these were just side effects.

There were times when I did feel I had broken through the dead beats of myself and that was extremely happy and full of energy. I now consider that these feelings were not caused by therapy 'tough' but by other factors such as general support from the group and what else was going on in my life. I also think that these and a half weeks of feeling amazing don't outweigh two years of trying to feel like that again, or the hundreds of hours spent reliving my childhood.

The last point I want to make is that feminists who weren't into therapy were somehow categorised as 'out of touch with their feelings, depressed, joyless, digging on for the resolution but doing nothing for themselves now and so on. This is probably what kept me involved in therapy the longest. It is a myth.

1. Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodwin

DOES IT MATTER
IF THEY DID IT?

What is lesbianism? Sheila Jeffreys looks at the work of Lillian Faderman and her critics.

In her book Surpassing the Love of Men, Lillian Faderman showed that passionate friendships with other women were a crucial part of the lives of middle class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She, in common with other American feminist historians, found that the diaries and letters of these women would almost inevitably reveal a same-sex friendship which was likely to have involved passionate embraces and kisses, declarations of love, sharing a bed for a night of cuddles and intimacies, and which would last, often, from childhood to old age.

These relationships were so socially acceptable to contemporaries that a woman could write to the fiancé of the woman she loved and tell him that she felt just like a husband to her betrothed, and loved her to distraction and could not help but be very jealous. Men tended to see these relationships as very good practice for their future wives in the habit of loving. Sometimes the women's friends could not bear to be parted even on the honeymoon and the husband would spend his honeymoon with both of them.

Today the moral panic is that fascinations of eternal devotion and descriptions of highly sexual interaction are starting because we have been trained to see such behaviour as indicative of lesbianism and not part of the everyday lifestyle of the majority of married middle class women. Faderman shows how scolds in the late nineteenth century started to create a stereotype of the lesbian in which such passionate interactions were included, and how the acceptable form of friendships between women became more and more circumscribed. Strong emotional and physical intimacy was allowed only to those who were classified as 'sensitive'. She attributes this change to the greater necessity of controlling women which resulted from the development of a really strong women's movement and social and economic changes which threatened men's power over women. Emotional relationships between women were harmless only when women had no chance to be independent of men, and became dangerous when the possibility of women avoiding heterosexuality became a reality.

Faderman's work earned her many admirers, but it also provoked some critics to a storm of protest. It is important to our understanding of ourselves that we understand what the controversy was all about.

The problem seems to be that Faderman includes these passionate friendships specifically within the history of lesbianism. She assumes that the women involved were unlikely, because of nineteenth century views on women's lack of an active sexuality, to have engaged in genital contact, and her definition of lesbianism does not include compulsory genital activity.

"Lesbian" describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By the other women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other, "Romantic friendship" described a similar relationship. (Peden 1981, p18.)

Faderman is aware that the suggestion that lesbian identity need not include genital contact is controversial. She recognizes that "It is no doubt unlikely that many women born into a sex-conscious era can conduct a lesbian relationship today without some sexual exchange. The pressure is on in our culture if we want to be physically and mentally healthy ..." (1989). She quotes a number of lesbian writers who reject what they see as the male definition of lesbianism as defined by and focused upon genital contact.

From The Scratch Verdict, a picture of a romanistic friendship by the painter Angelica Kauff- man (1741–1807).
In discussions, workshops, on the pages of The Guardian and elsewhere, lesbians have voiced hostile reactions to Faderman’s assumptions. There seem to be two main grounds for the opposition. One is a sense of betrayal. Faderman’s definitions are seen as watering down lesbianism by playing down the sexual content. Another objection is that Faderman has made a false reading of history and has somehow been delusional to the memories of the women she describes as having passionate friendships by imputing to them lesbianism when they would not have recognized themselves as lesbians. An example of a fairly standard attack is an article by Sonja Ruehl in the recent Women’s Press collection Sex and Love (1983) in which she dismisses Faderman’s work as being of any use to feminist theory because, she says, Faderman ‘desexualizes’ lesbianism. Ruehl and other critics take a particular contemporary definition of lesbianism—the one which lies closest to the hearts of the male sexologists—and they deny that women’s passionate friendships can have anything to do with lesbianism because, not surprisingly, they don’t match up to this definition. They want to uphold a particular lesbian identity and subculture which they see as being threatened by admitting those who have not gone through the initiation ceremony of genital contact. (They clearly define ‘sex’ as genital contact.) All the informal sexual activity, kissing and fondling which nineteenth century passionate friends went in for is dismayed as ‘whiny washy and ‘not’ lesbianism.

Some of their anxiety is well grounded. I think it is true that the uniqueness of lesbianism and the lesbian identity has been under threat from the concept of heterosexuality. Lesbians in the movement have had to play down their passions and their sexuality so as not to give offence to the heterosexual women who are still the bulk of the movement; little attention has been given to lesbianism in the past. Lesbians cannot be undermined beneath the good feelings of hand-holding sisterhood. There is no space to talk about specifically lesbian oppression and give us little chance to build up the history and culture of lesbianism which we need for our pride and our survival. I don’t accept Adrienne Rich’s idea of the lesbian continuum whereby all women’s friendships with women are some shade or gradation of lesbianism who simply have ‘best friends’ who are women share neither lesbian oppression nor lesbian experience. So long as we keep the definition of lesbianism open enough to include heterosexual women who love their women friends, it will be hard to articulate what is specific about the experience and oppression of lesbians and to develop the strength to fight compulsory heterosexuality and the invisibility of lesbians.

Why passionate friendships are part of the history of lesbianism

However, if we accept that proof of genital contact is required before we may include any relationship between two women in the history of lesbianism, then there is a serious possibility that we will end up with no lesbian history at all. The history of heterosexuality, and that is the only history we have been offered to date, does not rely on proof of genital contact. Men and women are assumed to be heterosexual unless there is ‘genital’ proof to the contrary. Women who have lived in the same house and slept in the same bed for 10 years have had their lesbianism strongly denied by historians. But men and women who simply take walks together are assumed to be involved in some sort of heterosexual relationship.

If we see the creation of a lesbian history as important then we must be prepared to assert that certain women were involved in relationships which have some relationship to lesbianism, even though in any historical period before the 1920s we are likely to have difficulty locating women who would be recognizably part of a sub-culture and lesbian identity which would fit with current definitions. The argument that it was socializing and useful to identify as lesbian women who had not seen themselves as lesbian when there was no modern term for it is merely to say that modern definitions are arbitrary and dubious. It suggests that there is something rather nasty about lesbianism which would cast a slur on those to whom it was attributed. I can’t agree about that. Hetreosexuality has changed its form too, yet we are prepared to assume women to be heterosexual in the past who had no interest in sexual activity with men and may have endured it with total repugnance. Many nine tieenth century women, so far as we can tell, were in this position. For the married middle class woman in the nineteenth century, a heterosexual identity based upon positive choice of sexual activity with men, or indeed upon any concept of desire for men, would have been unattainable. Can we include these women in the history of heterosexuality?

Heterosexuality is, of course, much more than a sexual practice. It is an institution with rituals, history, poetry, art, etc to back it up. Trying to pretend that heterosexuality or homosexuality are simply, or mainly, sexual practices, is to ignore the politics entirely. Society is organized around heterosexuality and it is based upon it under male supremacy. Since that is so, women who won’t take part drift in a limbo or form an identity for themselves which can enable them to survive with a sense of self, a culture and a social life. Lesbianism can therefore never be simply a sexual practice but the sexual practice that has been identified as lesbianism has been taking place between prostitutes, to turn men on, for centuries, and it has also been tried out by women whose commitment to the heterosexual system has never been in doubt. Lesbianism is a commitment to women, a culture, a political alternative to the basic institution of male supremacy, a means through which women have always gained self-respect and pursued their own goals and achievements with the support of other women. It is more than likely to include a sexual component, which may or may not take a genital form.

Whose interests does it serve to regard lesbianism as a sexual practice? Lesbians then become part of a list in sexualological textbooks with bestiality and paedophilia. The emotional, cultural and political dimensions disappear. This serves the status quo. Lesbianism as a sexual practice is not a threat in itself if it were, then there would be no stock in trade of brothels and men’s pornography. Lesbianism as an emotional universe which provides an alternative to women from choosing into the heterosexual system, is a threat. It is then anarchic and threatens the organizing principle of male supremacy which is heterosexuality.

Why do we need a lesbian history? To build our confidence and self respect. To make it more possible for women to be lesbian. With no past our existence is very shaky. We need to be visible. We need to know how lesbianism has been controlled in the past, just as we need to know how heterosexuality has been organized, so that we may organize in the way most calculated to threaten and explode the heterosexual system.

The Scooby Verdict

Having said all that and having found myself in basic agreement with Faderman, I must admit to being thrown by her second book The Scooby Verdict. The book treats in greater depth an incident given briefly in Surpassing the Love of Men. This is the case of Miss Woods and Miss Pirie against Dame Helen Cumming Gordon in Edinburgh in 1811. Dame Cumming Gordon’s grandchild (the illegitimate daughter of a Scottish imperialist and an Indian woman) was at the school run by Woods and Pirie. She told her
grandmother that the mistresses had sex together and Cumming Gordon saw that all the other children were removed from the school and the teachers ruined. Woods and Patie then brought a case against Cumming Gordon, which they won largely as a result of the inability of the judges to believe that two ladies would do such things. The book included large chunks from the trial transcripts into contemporary English. These offer us tantalizing glimpses of how women and girls in the period saw their relationships with each other.

Faderman chooses to rest the book on the interesting question of what Patie and Woods were doing with each other. Were they involved in genital contact, as some witnesses in the trial suggested? Faderman is certain they were not. Her lover Ollie, who travelled to Edinburgh with her when Faderman did her research, was just as convinced that they did. I admit to being puzzled by both their versions of events, and to being puzzled as to why the question of whether they had genital contact is a matter of such importance it needs to be proved or disproved. I'm not sure that it's sufficient subject matter for the detective story that The Scotch Verdict becomes. Faderman and Ollie’s versions are interspersed amongst Faderman’s versions of the trial transcripts.

Faderman considers it unlikely that the two women had genital sex for the following reasons: they lived in an era when women were likely to repress sexual feelings or at least not interpret them in a genital way; and they were unlikely to have done it (as they were accused of doing) whilst sharing beds with school students. It is quite possible to sympathise with Faderman’s belief that they did not have genital sex. What is hard to stomach is the energy she devotes to proving this. Here is part of her explanation:

Almost everything Jane Cumming and Jane Patie’s biographers described as its countertext in a gesture or remark was entirely innocuous. Where there was no intent to countertext it was because Jane Cumming invented that particular detail from a stock of misinformation and half-understood images. Those she had gathered from one or two gifts at the High school, shopkeepers’ daughters who had been out in the world before they were sent to learn a trade...

From September to November they came to each other’s beds many a dozen times to talk... Sometimes they came to argue in subdued tones — but the strength of their emotions was so powerful that if I could not find vent through the voice, it would be expressed through the body: they might shake each other or pound the pillow or rear at the bedhead. Sometimes they sobbed, breathing high and fast... In October Miss Patie’s rheumatism would have been bad. Sometimes, when they were on good terms, Miss Woods would have gone to Miss Patie’s bed to massage her friend’s back. Faderman 1985 (246).

And so on. Ollie’s version is very different. She uses a very contemporary model of lesbianism to explain for herself what those women were doing. For that reason I find it hard to accept. It does seem that she was simply transposing her own experience and definitions onto that of women in a very different time and place. Here is part of her explanation:

They became lovers — not in the romantic friendship sense, but as we would use that word today — shortly after they were, eight or nine years before the break up of the school... And then there were in bed together. They had not been in bed together for over a year perhaps, maybe longer. Miss Cumming swore loudly. They had not intended to, but they found themselves realising love. 'The long separation, and the necessity to be honest, the risk, all together made it more exciting than it had ever been. (p247).

The strength of Faderman’s determination to prove that they were not doing genital sex is so strong that she uses it to prosecute her in her earlier book that nineteenth century women in passionate friendship would never have had genital sex. I think there is a third possibility which may give credit to the fact that these women were living in a very different world with different definitions, whilst allowing some flexibility. I think it is possible that two women engaged in passionate friendship as a part of a unique friendship, might discover the interesting sensations attendant on genital friction and explore the possibility of improving on the sensations. Women do sometimes discover sex with other women in this way now, so I do not think it is impossible that they would have done in the nineteenth century. I think we must be flexible and avoid transplanting onto the experience of our foremothers either a contemporary lesbian identity or a determinably non-genital one.

What is very interesting about the book is that it shows that girls at 'nice' boarding schools in 1881 seem to have been as keenly aware of and as likely to chatter about lesbianism as they are today. They talked of lesbianism with maids and nannies who all seem to have known something about it. This suggests for me that an assumption that all passionate friendships were non-genital is untrue when so many girls and women were aware of the genital possibilities of such relationships.

An aspect of Faderman’s writing that I find unsettling is her tendency to use class stereotypes. The assumption in the section above, that girls who were 'trades' and not ladies would have been more likely to have known about lesbianism, and to have read, as she suggests, pornographic magazines, sounds rather suspicious. She seems to have had some problems interpreting the Scottish class system generally. She comes out with some gross class stereotypes. She searched in Edinburgh for a model on which to base her idea of the maidenservant at the school, Charlotte Weiffin, and writes as follows:

... imagine a girl I saw Friday night in a working class dance that we happened into after an early dinner. The place was almost empty. She was on the floor, giddily dancing a distance from her partner, her eyes darting her feet moving in a body. They both, but especially she, looked bored — worse than bored, listless, without passion or hope. She is snotty, white-skinned, plainly ... I think she looks viciously, loving herself in the mirror, whose, perhaps, allows her to give her a life of life. (p260).

Overall, I would say that Scotch Verdict is a book worth reading, in conjunction with Surpassing the Love of Men. It would be useful for us to debate the difficulties of writing lesbian history, for write it we must. Faderman is one of the few women who has embarked on the field and her work is fascinating and full of questions. To write lesbian history it will be necessary for us to debate what our lesbianism means to us and to explore our different definitions. This is a process long overdue. The subject of passionate friendships resists passionate controversy and this suggests to me that it must touch on some very important political issues. Any heretical questioning of the traditional twentieth century stereotype of lesbianism, such as was done in the 'Political Lesbian' Paper, which called on feminists to withdraw from men and define themselves as political lesbians even before they had had a love affair with a woman, leads to a storm.

How can we question that definition whilst protecting our identity as lesbians? If we do not question it, then lesbians will remain a tiny minority of women, defined by genital contact, fitting neatly into the category the lords and masters have assigned to us. The ramps of heterosexuality will not be breached, and the heterosexual foundations of male supremacy may clamber quietly on. If we do question it, then we question our own security too, inasmuch as our security and identity have been based on this definition. We need an identity that is strong, revolutionary and lesbian.
Whose Pictures Of Women?

A group of feminist activists, Kathy, Mary, Liz, Helen and Ruth, talk about what Channel 4's series 'Pictures of Women: Sexuality' meant to them. Is this the picture of women's liberation we want to broadcast?

During January and February a series of six programmes made by Pictures of Women collective about women's sexuality were shown on Channel 4, Monday nights at 11.00 pm. The programmes covered heterosexism, pornography, advertising, prostitution, sexual harassment and sexual violence. The collective intended the programmes as an introduction to the way feminists see sexuality. We had heard quite a lot about the programmes and were looking forward to them.

We came together after the first programme because we were so angry about the content and the way imagery was used. All of us had, in one way or another, felt alienated or excluded from that programme. We decided to carry on watching and write something about our feelings.

We don't feel the programmes touched our reality. We are five women, all white. We come from different class backgrounds, some of us are lesbians and between us we have six children. We live in a small city and are active in Women's Aid, Rape Crisis, Reproductive Rights and our local women's centre. Some of us felt a barrier about writing but not about talking so we decided to tape a discussion after seeing all six programmes. We typed up over 24 pages of talking and this piece has been edited and rearranged. It was an experiment for us to try and find a way to write collectively. It was much more complicated than we expected but using a different method allowed us all to contribute.

Expectations

Ruth: When I knew it was a collective of women producing it, filming it, who had some control over the way it was presented then my expectations were obviously high. I was not only expected to be able to pull some things out that I identified with, but thought that there would be a clear feminist perspective on the issues. It just felt like such a short time and opportunity.

Helen: It was really well set up in the press beforehand as being to do with female sexuality. It was to do with women as they are, not sex objects in a heterosexist world but women within their own sexuality.

Kathy: I did expect to see and listen to women I could identify with and understand.

No Perspective

K: I'd really like to talk to them about what they meant by collective working, because it felt to me that they had drawn on each other's different skills but that they hadn't drawn up any ground rules, any perspectives which they could work together towards. It got an impression of them trying to present the programmes differently, but not having any idea of how different or in what way. It felt as if they didn't have any real understanding of the issues they were presenting, and yet they controlled the content so there was no opportunity to hear ideas other women or groups might have. I don't think it's bad that, having got a chance to use the machinery, they wanted to use it, but I think they should have given the content over to women who were involved in the issues they were presenting.

H: Yes, it felt like they were playing around with images. This often made the programmes difficult to watch. They weren't challenging and were boring if you knew what they were talking about. If you didn't know all of that to start with they were very confusing, so you lost out all round, really.

Mary: The one called 'Men at Work' felt a bit better. Most of the first part was a film with actors showing sexual harassment in the workplace. The rest of the programme included the discussion referred back to that. So it was easier to follow because it had a focal point.

Liz: One thing that made me very angry was the lack of responsibility about raising issues. However badly it was done, they did discuss sexual violence, prostitution, lesbianism and there was absolutely no contact made for women to follow up those things. Women watching might have needed support or wanted to join a group.

Ruth: The only contact I remember them talking about was how to contact the Advertising Standards Authority, which obviously reflected their main concern with media. It's got more official status than our organisations as well.

R: You could have watched the whole series and not know anything about the amount of work that feminists in this country have done to set up services that women can use.

Feminism misrepresented

L: I felt several of the programmes were very selective in the way issues were discussed. For example there is a debate in the women's movement about prostitution but there was no way that came over in the programme. They presented a woman from the English Collective of Prostitutes as an expert and representing the feminist viewpoint. She maintained that there are virtually no pimps, that very few young women are coerced into prostitution and that these things don't really matter anyway because prostitution is basically an economic choice.

M: The suggestion was that a feminist attitude to prostitution should be that it is a job like any other. There was no discussion about why prostitution exists in the first place or how it links to men's ideas about sex as a commodity. Feminists do support campaigns against harassment of prostitute women, but we should also be confronting why men use prostitutes in the first place.

L: I objected to them putting a discussion of marriage in the middle of the last programme which was mainly about male violence. It didn't really fit with the rest of the programme at all and implied that violence only happens to women who are married. It also happens to women who are single, who are divorced; the link isn't to marriage but to sexuality.

R: The first programme was on women's sexuality, but there was no discussion about who lesbian women are, where they come from, how they live their lives, what it means to them to live in a heterosexist society - none of that came out. The one upfront lesbian that was shown was not saying much, but what she was saying was to a guy lucky. She wasn't talking to other women about why she was a lesbian and what it meant for her.

K: I was really angry at the way that discussion implied that you were born homosexual or lesbian and that was a problem you had to face. I see lesbianism as one of the most positive choices women can make about their sexuality. Another positive choice is celibacy which wasn't mentioned at all.

H: It was crazy that there were six whole hours on women's sexuality and no discussion amongst lesbians.

Images of women

K: Basically there wasn't a positive thing
about being a bloody woman!

K. That's how it felt anyway, women live in this void where the whole of their life experience is a negative one because they are on the defensive all the time — there were very few positive images of women in the programme.

L. It seemed that they weren't concerned about getting women to talk about their own experiences, what they were concerned about was playing around with images of women.

K. Not only images but totally taken by the machinery and technology, that seemed to have been the most important thing for them. I also resented very much any pictures of reality they showed. People's housing and living spaces were generally very middle-class and affluent.

H. They actually gave a lot of time in the programme on pornography to pornographic images and they stayed on the screen for quite a long time too.

R. They talked critically about the way pornography objectifies and fragments women's bodies but they then reinforced that by further defacing those women, scribbling out bits and pieces of them and writing all over them.

M. Like that picture from a pin-up magazine onto which they then scribbled the word 'object' and the collage that was made up of parts of women's bodies. They were using the stereotypes against women instead of exposing the stereotypes. In the same programme where they spoke to two women from Women Against Violence Against Women, they sat them up against a white-washed wall on two stark chairs! They should have been included in the discussion at the end.

L. Watching all those pornographic images really upset and disturbed me. The women in the discussion group at the end didn't seem affected like that at all, the main objection it seemed they had to porn was that it was boring!

K. Even the introduction to the programme was parts of women again. It was fallopian tubes and ovaries turning into a face! So is a woman her sexual parts, or isn't she?

In the last programme about rape and domestic violence they showed a woman as a creature in a spin which was meant to show how your rights as a married woman are different from your rights as an individual, particularly in relation to violence. When I was watching her stand there in her white wedding dress, I identified with her and I really felt horrified and stupid and ridiculous. I didn't feel like that on my wedding day. All right, I feel like it now, looking back at it, and maybe I should have been more aware and perhaps I should have known all those things, but I didn't. How dare they pick you up in your white wedding dress and have a man saying: 'It's your responsibility, you don't know these things, how stupid you are? I felt my experience was treated very flippantly. Also in that programme was a reconstruction of a court scene in which the prosecution cross-examined a woman who had been raped and that was done in a very similar way.

R. I think they could have used that scene quite well, but within the context they put it, it was totally dispensable; it was just another piece of stupid play acting. And for me when I saw it I knew that was real, that is what happens to women, but I couldn't make it real in the context of the programme, it was still a piece of comic strip.

H. And it's only not a joke if either that's happened to you or you know that's what happens. If you don't, then it could be quite humorous. There's no way that should be remotely humorous.

Experts

R. The whole emphasis on experts infuriated me. Why have a woman take what felt like half an hour to say basically that she thinks advertising doesn't make society the way it is, it simply reflects it? That could have been said in a couple of minutes and then challenged and talked about.

H. But it never was challenged, nothing was really. They just talked around a little bit with imagery. Nobody came back to what she said at all, they moved on to the next thing.

K. And why did they have a Freudian psychoanalyst in the first programme, give her 20 minutes or however long it was and never actually say what Freud did for women's sexuality, how his theories are based on him dismissing girls' experiences of sexual abuse as fantasy — I mean how can you!!

H. The programme began with her and it finished with her, didn't it, and mostly what came over from that interview was some really dreadful stuff that shouldn't be in a programme about women's sexuality.

M. The woman doing that interview should have challenged lots of points but her attitude to what was being said wasn't clear at all — did she really accept the psychoanalyst's ideas about penis envy, paranoia?

R. I presented an 'expert' being given licence to talk about my sexuality. A group of women talking about their feelings would have had much more meaning for me.

L. Because she was an expert she was allowed to be cold and detached about what she was saying. For me discussions about sexuality are about feelings and emotions and also about politics. The way she was interviewed was as if she had an 'objective' view, and one of the most fundamental things about feminism is that it validates women's personal 'subjective' feelings.

H. Also the way she spoke was offputting and boring. Lots of women I know didn't watch any more of the series because the first one put them off so much.

K. That psychoanalyst was like a politician. The master the things she said the more she smiled. It was like saying (laughing) this hurts me more than it hurts you.

R. Experts never seemed to get edited either. Yet in the last discussion group they were so concerned to get a particular point from women from Women's Aid, Rape Crisis and Rights of Women that they actually stopped discussions about women's real experiences that would have been useful and interesting.

H. Women were actually cut in mid-sentence to sharpen them up and get them onto the next point, although relatively compared to the rest of the programme I found women of the discussion groups quite accessible.

R. The discussion on advertising was quite good, they talked about trade advertising and I thought quite a lot of points came out. But they chose to end the discussion on 'If only men would take it up, then we'd get somewhere'.

H. It was like saying the thing to remember in all of this is that we want our help from men, and then we'll get listened to, then we'll get heard, something will happen if men do it for us and on our behalf.

So what's new?

For a group supposedly concerned with pictures of women they were extremely insensitive about the images they did portray. Ironicly they ended up putting forward what they supposedly objected to — stereo-typed images of women. The content of the series was heterogeneous and most of the women who appeared on them were white and middle-class. Most women appeared as some sort of expert or professional.

There were no discussions or differences in experience or analysis. Most of the discussion groups seemed to have been set up to contain women who basically agreed with one another, and this often made them boring. It was all very safe: no threat or challenge to the status quo.

The collective call themselves Pictures of Women. We'd like to know which pictures of women they felt they were presenting: images of and to whom — more of us were excluded than included. So what's new?
Swallowing The Pill

What would a feminist view of the Pill and its relationship to women's sexual freedom? The recent scare about the Pill's effects has brought up a lot of fear and anger. Like many of us, Sue Leigh now finds herself discovering the possible consequences of choices made many years ago.

Recent research on the Pill has linked it to increased risks of cancer of the breast and cervix. The newspapers headlined it as a big story. I saw the banner headlines and bought a copy of the Standard. At first I read it appeared to be one of the women at greatest risk. I had started taking the Pill when I was under 25, and had taken a medium progestogen Pill for 6 years. It was the first time I had thought about my body in relation to contraception for many years. I was sterilised in my mid-30s and have since become a lesbian. I somehow felt I had overcome this side of my biology.

I have since found out that any cancers I might have had as a direct result of the Pill would most likely have made themselves evident by now, but I talked to several friends who gave up taking the Pill 20 years ago, and who thought they might be at risk, and I became increasingly angry at the thought of one of them getting cancer as a result of what, at that time, seemed to be a way for women to gain greater control over their own reproduction.

Talking it over with friends in their 30s and 40s I started to form a more historical framework on the Pill and related changes in the politics of contraception.

First of all I asked myself why I was so angry about the Pill. We are all being chemically poisoned in one way or another by nuclear waste, fallout, lead in petrol, insecticides - modern living is carcinogenic. Furthermore the recent research findings were not the first to link the Pill with cancer, and much of the research has been questioned for its lack of rigour. I think I was angry because taking it involved a free choice - women choose to take it or not for another form of contraception, or can abstain from penetrative sex. This raises all sorts of questions around perceived choices available at certain times in history or in an individual's life experience. It also depends on women's experiences with other forms of contraception, how important it is to them not to censor, their relationships, economic circumstances, a whole network of factors. At the same time it is important to understand the social climate in which the Pill was introduced on the market, what alternatives have been made available, and what has happened to it since.

The Technological Miracle Fix

The Pill was introduced in the '50s at a time when women in the west expected to have no more than the average 2.5 children, and not to have to spend all their married lives childbearing as their grandmothers had done. Reading the letters from working women giving their experiences of childbearing in 1915 makes horrifying reading: I had seven children and was six months in ten years and three months. This left me at the age of thirty and a complete wreck.

For women who expected to have small families the Pill seemed the answer to all their contraceptive needs. But almost from the start there were fears about its safety, as high-dosage pills were cynically tested on women in the third world. We were willing guinea pigs ourselves.
Friends have told me how they said they were getting married in six weeks so that they could be issued with the Pill.

Within the space of a few years, certainly between 1964–1976, it became easier to obtain the Pill if you were unmarried. A sexual revolution was supposed to have taken place which doctors and clinics were forced to respond to. What eventually happened was that more women turned to the male-dominated medical profession for contraception thereby giving them greater power to intervene chemically or surgically in women’s lives.

The Pill was ideally suited to the ‘swinging sixties’. Women had to take it daily and so became always sexually available. We thought that the Pill might even up some of the sexual inequalities between men and women, because women would be free from the fear of getting pregnant. What really happened was that we found power relations in bed still favoured the man, and that the Pill made it more difficult to refuse sex. A woman was now supposed to enjoy sex, please men, achieve orgasm every time and if she didn’t there was something wrong with her. This, anyway, was the image of the sixties given by the media as a role model to women, and was extended into the sexually liberated woman of the seventies, the antithete to the bra-burning dyke (yawn). In reality most of us did not have the money or circumstances to pursue any of these free-wheeling lifestyles but took the Pill when we were sleeping with a steady boyfriend or husband, and felt that we were missing out on some great party that was happening any where but where we were. It certainly wasn’t happening around the unwashed supplies in my council house, or for young women at the small town youth club where I worked part-time.

There were also economic reasons why the Pill suited the sixties. There was nearly full employment and women were needed in the workforce. Married women were especially popular in the labour market as part-time workers in low paid sectors of the economy. Women were encouraged to limit the size of their families in a reliable way so that they could return to work earlier. There were also strong pressures on women at that time to have smaller families because of very real fears around the dangers of overpopulation. I remember that, as a middle-class liberal, I felt quite guilty about having accidentally conceived 0.5 over the socially acceptable number of 2.5 children, because I thought I was contributing to the overpopulation. These social pressures still exist, if you do not take the Pill and become pregnant whilst using less reliable methods of contraception you are blamed for being careless. Women in the west who have large families still get blamed for their inconstancy especially if they are poor. By taking the Pill in the sixties you were merely being a responsible citizen.

The Risks

Although scoffed at by the professionals approval of the Pill, we, the first generation of women to take it, were not altogether unaware that swallowing synthetic hormones every day for years might not be good for us. I can remember telling my mother that I was on the Pill, and her expressing doubts about its safety: “It’s quite drastic to interfere with your hormones, are you quite sure it’s safe?” I wasn’t sure but desperate. I had three children under five and the pill had not worked. I weighed up the risks. There were the risks of unknown health hazards which might prove grounds against the use of yet another pregnancy. Sterilisation or vasectomy was seldom offered as a choice then. Many of us opted for the unknown risks as many women see still doing, and I recognise their dilemma because the choice is still not a real one.

Before the introduction of the Pill most women were offered the cap at birth control clinics. In 1963 I was living in a small Oxfordshire town, and had to travel 20 miles on public transport with 2 small children to get to the nearest family planning clinic. I had to wait for hours to be interviewed by a white coated woman health worker who filled in a massive form and iewally asked, leaning forward conspira-

torially, “How’s the sex life?” I was fitted with the cap in a tiny and far from private cubicle, where I could hear what was happen ing to the apprehensive women on either side of me. If we had been less divided (expressing only our fears to each other in the waiting room) we might have given each other advice and support, but the circum stan ces made the fittings fraught and hasty. With no room for me to fiddle around to see how it fitted, little supportive instruction and the distraction of wondering how my children were getting on in the waiting room, it is not surprising that I became pregnant for the third time, and that I welcomed the arrival of the Pill.

For me, as for many women, it was important that the Pill was taken by mouth. It was easy, foolproof and non-toxic. You could forget about the connection between pregnancy and sex, but the price I paid was taking a drug which had an effect on the whole body. When I began to take the Pill I experienced breakthrough bleeding and nausea. This wore off, but during the eight years I took the Pill I put on 1½ stone, which disappeared within a few months after I stopped taking it. At the end of eight years I started to develop swollen veins in my legs and headaches and I stopped taking it. Although, surprisingly, very fertile, I only had periods every six weeks. My cycle became a regular 28 day one on the Pill and has never varied since, whether as a result of all those years on artificial hormones or physical changes in me I shall never know. Above all, there had been the feeling that my natural cycle was being chemically interfered with so I always felt out of touch with my own body. But whenever I was asked how I got ‘on’ with the Pill I always smiled brightly and said it suited me fine – I wanted to have control over nature through modern medicine, anything rather than return to less reliable methods of contraception which appeared to control me.

The side effects, which became evident over the years, provide a staggering list of nasties, which are consistently smoothed over by the medical profession. They were of the opinion that certain side effects would go away with a change of Pill, or go away after a few months. Anyway, many women who developed blood clots, strokes and so on were taken off the Pill before they died.

The side effects were also blamed on other factors which exacerbated them and which were often thought to be within a woman’s control. They were blamed on the combination of the Pill with the woman’s own life-style. She was the one who was asked to change her habits rather than be offered alternative methods of contraception. Many women who are most at risk from circulatory disorders are older women (over 35), heavy smokers, and women who are pregnant. It is ironic that the Pill is not recommended, albeit for sound medical reasons, to those women who offend a society which is again, sexist and still hasn’t burnt old prejudices about heavy smoking being uncouthly.

What has slowly become apparent is that the effects could last long after we stop taking the thing. More and more reports are coming out which link the Pill to increases in cancer of the breast and cervix, and as more health risks become known women are likely to be blamed for taking the Pill when they know it has hazards attached to it.

Although, as I have already mentioned, there have been several reports which linked the Pill to cancer, why did the two reports released last year attract so much publicity, especially as they have been shown to be inadequate in many respects? It is no coincidence that they have received so much media attention at a time when unemployment is high, and women are being forced/ encouraged back into the home. It is also interesting that the scares around the Pill fit in with the ‘New Morality’ of the right, which seeks a return to ‘family values’, and an end to sexual promiscuity. The right are especially vociferous about the contraceptive advice given to young women under 16. They have extra ammunition when they can prove that there is a relationship between increased sexual activity in young women, the use of the Pill, and cancer of the cervix.

It is the paradox of the Pill that it permits women to control nature through modern medicine whilst at the same time their bodies are kept in a condition resembling pregnancy which is induced by the hormones in the Pill. Except for the undisputed improvements in women’s health, which were present before the introduction of the Pill, is using the Pill too far removed from the constant pregnancies of our grandmothers in terms of the control it offers over our bodies? It may have improved women’s quality of life, but it has really offered more control over the process.
of reproduction? As women it seems we are given valium to control our raging moods and artificial hormones to control our raging fertility. Women have replaced the fear of pregnancy with the constant fear of illness so that women who take the Pill have to be constantly watchful for side effects, bumps and positive smear tests.

Some alternatives are less awful than others.

The evidence is not yet clear as to whether women are seeking alternatives to the Pill as a result of the latest scares. There certainly has been an increase in the demands for cervical smears, and the South London Hospital for Women cannot do any more tests because of a backlog.

It is also difficult to find out how concerned women really are about the latest scares. Reports from clinics indicate that women sought advice and guidance in increasing numbers about the new research, but so far I haven’t heard that a significant number of women have stopped taking the Pill. My guess is that women will continue to take the Pill whilst the risks remain obscure, and few adequate alternatives are put forward in clinics. Alternatives are pushed more when women are judged to be unwise to the Pill. The change that needs to come about is for clinics to adopt the view that all women are unwise to the Pill because of its health risks and to start taking more time and trouble in the way in which most of them offer the alternatives.

The cap is seldom presented as a safer alternative in terms of health because women need time and support to learn to use it successfully. The cuts in health services makes it increasingly hard for clinics to give this kind of contraceptive help to women.

Furthermore if pregnancy occurs as a result of using other methods of contraception the cutbacks and restrictions on abortion services make it more difficult for women to fall back on termination as a last resort.

The RU 486 is often given to women who are unwise to the Pill in spite of the fact that it has a frighteningly high incidence of side effects especially heavy bleeding and infections. It has also been given to women thought to be ‘at risk’ from ‘unwanted’ pregnancy.

Sterilisation is the alternative I opted for, but it is for women who wish to end fertility rather than control conception. There have been side effects with even this drastic solution, and it does involve surgery, so, as with all the other alternatives women need information and discussion through helpful clinics and self-help groups in order that they can make real choice around the limited alternatives available.

Some women have tried to regain control over their bodies by natural means as part of the movement towards alternative medicine. Natural birth control however requires a great deal of effort and dedication getting to know your cycle, observing your mucous daily etc. It is rather like organic gardening – very rewarding in terms of individual health, but often risky in terms of end product.

The other natural method, which is often connected to natural birth control mentioned above, is non-penile sex or rather non-penetration of the vagina by the penis. In natural birth control there are many times in the month which are ‘unwise’, and non-penile sex is often practiced, but this relies heavily on the willingness of the man to co-operate.

Non-penetration by the penis involves a level of trust and caring which few men are capable of. It also suggests a radical change in heterosexual attitudes to sexuality in a culture geared to the idea that without penetration you haven’t really done it. Besides non-penetration involves women is having to become more intimate with men’s genitals than they might wish. Nevertheless it is an alternative which is seldom suggested, there is only one sex manual for young people which presented this as a positive choice, and this was banned by many schools.

Many women are silent around their fears about the Pill, and say, as I did, that they are quite content with it because they know that they are taking a risk, but feel that the risk of future illness is less traumatic than unwanted pregnancy or abortion. Along with that risk goes guilt because if they fail it all it will somehow be their fault for choosing to take the Pill. Heterosexual women live within a cycle of fear, guilt and idly around fertility, and that is why so many of them carry on taking the Pill and say it suits them fine. I recognise that silence.

As is well known, the nineteenth century socialists Marx and Engels had relatively little to say about the oppression of women. These feminists (and friends) who today find their analyses of other aspects of society so fruitful have therefore scoured through the volumes of their collected works and pondered long and deeply the little they could find of relevance to sexual divisions. Engels’ ‘Origin of the Family’ has been one of their major sources.

This is actually quite a slim book (150 pages), only one full chapter of which concerns sexual divisions. It started with Marx’s marginal notes on Lewis Henry Morgan’s lengthy Ancient Society, or Researches into the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization (1877). Engels added to these and wrote them up and published them in 1884 after Marx’s death. The book ran into several editions with new prefaces and an addition. A new translation was produced in the 1940s, and with the rebirth of feminism two new editions were issued in the early 1970s, one with an introduction by Eleanor Burke Leacock and the other with one by Evelyn Reed. Also in the early 70s more than a dozen articles were published ‘Looking Again At...’ or ‘Revisiting’ Engels, discussing his attempt to explain the conditions which caused men to exploit women.

The book itself has as its central theme a very common among 19th century thinkers – the establishment of a series of stages in the evolution of mankind. Morgan’s version of this theme focused on changes in the arts of subsistence. That is, he divided development into 3 stages, each of which were further subdivided, according to the technological level and inventions and discoveries.

Developing at the same time as changes in the arts of subsistence were changes in social, economic and political institutions. Since many of the stages and subages occurred before written records exist, Morgan had to work out some way to define the nature of their social structures. This he did by looking at contemporary societies at the various stages of technological development, and he supplemented information about what existed in his own time with
Evidence of past structures which he saw as embedded in systems for naming kin and in myths.

Morgan’s focus on changes in society led to changes in the division of labour and patterns of ownership. His work was the most acceptable to Marx and Engels. They felt he had provided the earlier sections for the materialists account of history they had begun in *The German Ideology*. Engels’ book shortened and sharpened up Morgan’s account, stressing what he saw as its major theoretical and political implications. Engels emphasized the transition from the stage when natural products were appropriated (hunting and gathering) to the stage where domestic animals were bred and crops grown (agricultural production), because he saw the latter as allowing the production of large surpluses and hence the start of social inequalities — of some having more and some less of the surplus. He also emphasized the development of extensive exchange of products between households as leading to economically-based classes and the requirement of an overall political organization (the state) to rule and control the dispossessed and to maintain the privileges of the wealthy.

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In the earlier stages of human evolution, the only social division was according to gender. In Morgan and Engels’, these were between men and women. Engels’ account of savagery and of early barbarism is therefore largely taken up with detailing how patterns of sexual division and connection shifted and changed. He suggests that after a possible period in a ‘very remote epoch’ when there was promiscuity (when ‘every woman belonged to every man and every man to every woman’), there soon developed a prohibition on marriage between parents and children, and then on marriage between brothers and sisters. Since promiscuity was never certain but promiscuity was, it was the sisters who stayed together. They lived in communal groups/households and their children who lived with them were the next generation of that group. The brothers meanwhile lived in the communal houses of women to whom they were temporarily attached acting as partners with other men there.

Communal householding (matrilineal) the supremacy of the woman in the house; just as the woman determines the male parent (maternal) that the women — the mothers — (were) held in high respect. Among all savages with the exception of the lower and middle stages… the position of the woman is one of nearly, but not absolute, equality. However, as the traditional sexual relations lose the primitive character of forest life owing to changes in the economic conditions, women found sexual relations with several men oppressive and humiliating, and they sought ‘the right of chastity, of temporary or permanent marriage with one man only, as a way of release’ (p.117). At this same time, however, ‘the domestication of animals and the breeding of herds (also)… developed a hitherto unsuspected source of wealth’ and according to ‘the social customs of the time’, the cattle belonged to the men — as did the commodities exchanged for cattle (which came to include slaves). All the surplus therefore belonged to men, and this made the man’s position in the family more important than the woman’s. Men then wanted their cattle, and not their sisters’ children, to inherit from them. Because women had already brought about ‘pausing marriage’, men were able to introduce strict monogamy — though only for women — so patriarchy was assured. The overthrow of another right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The men who remained in the house also, the women were degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children (p.121, stress is original).

Exactly when this happened wasn’t known, because with the dawn of history it had already occurred. But Engels was able to include some evidence on the family in the next stages of evolution, and to show that monogamous marriage had not always and everywhere been equally hard. Women were freer and more respected among the Romans than among the Greeks, and freer still among the Germanic tribes. But in the space of a page he dips from the ancient world to his own day, to announce that although monogamous marriage continues among the bourgeoisie, it has virtually disappeared among the proletariat. Here all the foundations of typical monogamy are dead away — there is no property, for the preservation and inheritance of which monogamy and male supremacy were established; hence there is no incentive to make… male supremacy effective… Engels that large-scale industry has taken the whiz out of the home onto the beer hall and into the factory, and made her the chief breadwinner of the family, in the interest of men. The idea of male supremacy is left in the proletarian household, except, perhaps, for something of the brutality towards women, and the lack of respect for women which has existed since the introduction of monogamy (p.135).

Engels saw the family as having the best form of sexual relationship of his time. (His feeling for the equality of proletarian women and for her advancement was unconnected with his own long relationship with a working class woman, and after her death with her sister.) For most Victorians, however, marriage was not freely chosen. Engels also believed that marriage was a means to disinherit to correct their children, and within marriage there was "open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife". Engels therefore looked forward to the overthrow of capitalism and private property — which he and his comrades hoped would be imminent — not only because this would improve the quality of people's employed lives, but their private lives too.

The single family would then cease to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping (would be) transformed into a social industry. The care and education of children (would become) a public affair; society would take all children alike, whether they were legitimate or not. (p.379).

There would then not be a return to 'pausing marriage' much less the group marriage or promiscuity of earlier times, because in the intervening centuries there had developed a particular form of 'alex love' — romantic love — which has been the supposed basis for marriage for many centuries. Marriage under communism would be monogamous and based wholly on mutual inclination.

Revisiting Engels

Those who have written recently in appreciation of Engels’ work have suggested his contribution was to establish the beginnings of a history of the family and of women’s oppression. They see his account as tracing the sexual nature of relations between men and women and the possibility of change (improvements) in the future. It is certainly true that Engels nowhere suggests that women are naturally inferior to men — which is remarkable in a late nineteenth-century author. He does also stress that power, sexual and emotional relations between men can vary profoundly — with changes in technology and in the economic system, and he is progressive in seeing prostitution as due to male dominance and marriage, and not to male ‘needs’.

But the book is fundamentally flawed, as is all of Marx and Engels’ (and most subsequent Marxist work) on women’s oppression. First, Engels asserts that in subsistence economies, such as hunter-gatherers, or among

**Excuse me, do you speak English?**
the nineteenth century poor, there was near equality betwen men and women. Yet this is contradicted by the actual accounts of some of the tribes he cites (e.g. the Australian Aborigines) and by his own earlier book, *The Condition of the Working-class in England* (1844). It may be uncomfortable, but it has to be admitted that when ever- one but to work all the hours God sends to make a living, some still work more hours than others, that when there is no little food to go round, some get all the meat and beer - and have the right to use violence and to abuse others sexually in a way, that there is not *equality* in misfortune, but rather further inequality and exploitation. Hunter-gatherer men may have a hard life, but their power live is harder. Femalest men are oppressed by capitalism, but this does not mean they do not, in turn, oppress women.

Engels's *and others’* unwillingness to see inequalities in early societies is undoubt- edly related to seeing the divisions within such societies as natural. In *The Origins* there is a sense of early men having a functional, utilitarian understanding of and cooperation with nature and of the difference of role between males and females being a requirement if the society as a whole is to survive. Each sex is seen as necessary to the other, and their relationship is seen as one of co-operation and mutual aid.

Although feminists have been swift and thorough in demolishing assertions that there are psychological differences between the sexes, and physiological differences - eg men's masculinity - which are significant today, and although we have also criticised the fact that almost all studies are set up to look at differences and never at similarities between the sexes, we seem to experience a curious block on recognising natural determin- ations in accounts of early societies. It seems to be universally taken as 'obvious' that all societies must recognize and treat the genital differences among humans in the same way as Western societies do (as is of major social significance: as the basis for dividing the population into two, and only two, mutually exclusive categories from birth), and that all societies, and especially early societies, will have a sexual division of labour. Anyone who tries to question this is accused of 'denying biology'.

However, differences of skin colour or age are equally 'biological', yet most people are happy to accept that these are not seen and used as the basis for social divisions only in certain cases and in different sorts of ways. Why is the double standard in respect of sex? Perhaps because gender is so central to our thinking that it is a major act of the imagination (bound only in a few science fiction writers) to conceive of the possibility of a society without it: one where sexual differences are not seen as necessary to the other, and their relationship is seen as one of co-operation and mutual aid.

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Who's holding the test-tube?

What are the new reproductive technologies? And why should we care? Julia Hamer and Elisabeth Powell-Jones report on the first national conference on the new reproductive technologies that took place in Leeds, March 24–25. This is followed by an explanation of the complicated jargon of the medical men. Diana Leonard writes on their definitions and our interpretations.

Medical intervention in women’s reproduction is not new. Contraception, abortion, sterilization and the process of giving birth are routinely controlled by doctors. But medical and scientific intervention has now reached a further stage of development. So much so that the Government has set up the Warnock Inquiry into Human Fertilization and Embryology. Its terms of reference are:

to consider recent and potential developments in medicine and science related to human fertilization and embryology, to consider what policies and safeguards should be applied, including consideration of the social, ethical and legal implications of such developments and to make recommendations.

Billled in the press as ‘the test-tube baby’ inquiry, the Committee decided that its terms of reference include sex selection, sex determination, artificial insemination, invitro fertilisation (IVF), embryo replacement (ER), embryo transfer (ET), cloning, genetic engineering, organ transplant using embryos, surrogate motherhood and womb leasing, and the artificial placenta (xenografts), but not abortion and contraception. There is no firm news about when the Warnock report will be out, but all the evidence they are prepared to accept is now in and the last Committee meeting has taken place. We expect their report to be available anytime from June to December 1984.

The first day of the Conference was spent learning about the new technologies and looking at the way the medical and scientific establishment has reacted to their potential. We worked from the information supplied by the Warnock Committee, which served to remind us of the considerable establishment interest. We examined the way the media has promoted the new reproductive technologies, particularly IVF, with lots of photos of delighted white mothers with babies and nary a word about their failures.

There were two main issues to be discussed: the increased control over women by men (professional and husbands), and the different application of the technologies to different women. On Sunday we explored the implications for all women disabled, Black, Jewish, white, with and without children (voluntarily or involuntarily), heterosexual and lesbian. The medical professionals promoting the new technologies are dividing women into fit and unfit mothers. While we expect this division to be followed in the Warnock Committee’s recommendations, it was firmly rejected by the women present.

Given the potential for exploiting women, we were certain that Black and Third World women will continue to be the most exploited. For example, in the USA there are agencies to provide surrogate mothers. The men who run these “stables” are keen to apply the technologies so that Mexican and other Latin American women can bear children for wealthy westerners. If we could cross international lines, then $10,000 is a significant sum of money, whereas (in the US) it’s just a week’s or a month’s wages”, says John Schug, president of the Biotechnics Foundation in California. He claims that a Third World surrogate mother would not even need to be healthy. "The mother could have a health problem which could be quite serious. However, if her diet is good and other aspects of her life are OK, she could become a viable mother for genuine embryo transfer." Although this may sound too much like science fiction, and may not happen in Britain, we know that Third World women are already used routinely for experimentation by white western scientists, for example, for the testing of drugs prior to their release as “safe” in the West, and the widespread use of the forms of contraception that are considered least acceptable here such as Depo Provera and contraceptive hormonal implants.

We began to discuss the issue of motherhood and how we, as feminists, feel about it. We looked at the social pressure on women to be mothers; the view that you’re not a real woman until you have a child, and the negative way women without children are described as ‘bald’, ‘sterile’, and ‘infertile’. Often child-rearing is the only area in a woman’s life where she can have some control and her children may be her only source of love and affection. Much of the time was spent sharing personal experiences and feelings which gave us a different perspective on the technologies than we would have had if we had just discussed the issues on an abstract level.

There was concern that a blanket rejection of in vitro fertilisation, in particular, would in effect be saying that the infertile children whose parents have less right to have children than other women. This would be as bad as saying that the infertile children of white or Black women or women with disabilities have no right to have children.

Unfortunately, discussion of our feelings and views about disability in children didn’t go as deeply as it might have. We simply accepted a wide range of screening procedures to detect certain congenital conditions, with the underlying implication that the less than “perfect” baby will be aborted. The stress for “perfect” babies has a nasty past in the West. It takes us back to Nazi Germany, the Final Solution and their breeding programmes. The new infant is a medical approach aimed at ‘correcting’ defects by selecting ‘perfect’ embryos for implanting, or later by surgery while still a fetus in the womb. If the underlying premise is accepted, how do we object to creating ‘perfect’ babies? The more closely the idea of ‘perfection’ is defined and enforced, the more deviation from it will be punished by social isolation and judgements of ‘freakishness’. These ideas may seem closely related to anti-abortion groups that define themselves as pro-life. However, we believe that a woman must be able to exercise choice once she discovers that she does not want or cannot cope with a pregnancy. The emphasis must be on what the woman wants and not on some notion of creating ‘perfect’ babies. We think this issue needs a lot more discussion.

While many issues remained very open-ended, there was agreement amongst all of us who were there. We did not think it necessary to have a complete consensus of opinion, a ‘feminist line’, but we did agree about how to approach the issues. There is a need for more information and discussion. We agreed that there is a need for action. We agreed that we reject the underlying philosophy upon which the medical profession, and we think the Warnock Inquiry, are basing their recommendations for practice. We therefore can work together to demand increased control by women over all reproductive technologies, both old and new. We agreed there is a need to present an alternative view to the general public and to widen the discussion within the movement.

There is a particular need for a network of women to monitor developments and more opportunities to come together to consciousness raise around these issues. The national office of the Women’s Reproductive Rights Campaign have offered to collect and send out information to interested women by keeping a resource file which women can consult, by sending out photocopies of articles if requested (small donation), and information through their newsletter. (Their address is 52/54 Featherstone St, London EC1.) We feel this is an increasingly important issue, as did the other women who came to Leeds. Women are urgently needed to help.
In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), Embryo Replacement (ER) and Embryo Transfer (ET) — ‘Test-tube Babies’

IVF and ET are used primarily to overcome female infertility due to the absence or gross disease (or past medical destruction) of the Fallopian Tubes, down which the egg has to pass to reach the uterus. The concept of IVF is simple: a ripe human egg is extracted from the ovary shortly before it would have been released by nature. Next, the egg is mixed with the semen of the husband or partner, so that fertilisation can occur. The fertilised egg is then transferred back to the mother’s uterus, once it has started to divide. In practice the technique for recovery of the eggs for fertilisation, their culture outside the mother’s body, and the transfer of the developing embryo to the uterus, have to be carried out as very carefully controlled conditions. IVF and ER became a human reality when the first baby, Louise Brown, was born in July 1978. This birth was the culmination of more than a decade of research by Mr. Patrick Steptoe at Oldham General Hospital in June 1978. His work was the culmination of a decade of research by Mr. Patrick Steptoe and Dr. Robert Edwards at Cambridge University. Their programme at Oldham resulted in two further IVF births. ER (embryo replacement) is the term used when the embryo is returned to the donor mother, and ET (embryo transfer) when it is implanted into a woman other than the donor of the ovum (egg).

Induction of Super-Ovulation

Normally one egg is released during each human menstrual cycle. Some women do not release an egg regularly and for those certain hormones, such as chorionic gonadotrophin, may be used to stimulate ovulation, as this can cause the release of several eggs in a single cycle (super-ovulation). Therefore the recovery of an egg for techniques such as IVF involves a surgical operation and an anaesthetic, drugs that cause super-ovulation can be used so that more than one egg can be recovered from a single operation.

Developments of IVF: Surrogate Mothers, Womb Leasing and Egg Donation

In veterinary practice it is now possible for an embryo conceived in vitro to be transferred to the uterus of a cow, pig or sheep that is not its natural mother. The term ‘surrogate mother’ has been used to describe this situation in humans or alternatively ‘egg donation’ (or ET).

It has been suggested that human egg donation might be used:

(a) Where a woman has or may be the carrier of an hereditary disease. She might receive a donated egg, which after fertilisation by her husband’s sperm in vitro would then be transferred to her uterus.

(b) Where a woman cannot herself bear a child (eg. has a history of miscarriage or a disability). She could donate an egg which would be fertilised by her husband’s sperm in vitro and then transferred to the uterus of another woman. The surrogate mother would then carry the pregnancy but return the child to its genetic parents after delivery. This sequence of events has been called “womb leasing” in some publications, if the mother is to be paid to carry the pregnancy. (Our stress.)

Cloning

In certain amphibian species (such as frogs) and more recently in some mammals (for example sheep) it has become possible as an experimental procedure to divide a fertilised embryo when it is at a very early stage of development and contains two or four cells. Each of these cells develops into a separate individual (clone), but they have identical characteristics and genetic constitution.

It is possible that cloning could be used to investigate the chromosomal normality of human embryos conceived by a couple who have a high chance of producing an abnormal child. One of the clones would be allowed to continue development, while the remaining clones would be deep frozen. If the embryo proved to have a normal chromosomal makeup, one of its clones could be unfrozen and transferred to the mother’s uterus.

There are reports that in the USA and Australia, IVF embryos have been transferred to women who are not genetically related, but in the UK there are as yet no reports of a successful pregnancy in which a woman has borne a child of which she was not the genetic mother.

Edwards has said publically he is against these latter procedures being carried out on a mass scale, because there would be ‘no point in getting married in the first place’. Others feel hesitant because of the legal uncertainty as to whose child it would be (the sperm donor’s, the egg donor’s or the ‘womb owner’s’). It is, however, reported that a consultant is planning to open a clinic using IVF and donated eggs if the Warnock Committee Report is favourable to the procedure. Andrea Donkin describes this as reproductive prostitution. She suggests poor women would end up giving eggs or going through pregnancy for the rich.

The technique described by the DHSS is only one of various forms of cloning, and would be less mysteriously described as artificial twinning. Another, parthenogenesis, the production of young by the mother without fertilisation, which is quite common in some species, is not mentioned. It has been discovered recently, however, that the start of the process can occur in humans.

Since all offspring of this form of cloning are female, it is obviously of use to animal breeders, but not, one would think, of much interest to most scientists in relation to humans.

There are no reports yet of a successful human pregnancy following (artificial) cloning of the embryo, though twins or triplets of course have been born naturally.
Artificial Insemination

The DIHS distinguishes two types of artificial insemination: Artificial Insemination by Husband (AIIH) and Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID). (The DIHS doesn’t describe the process by which semen is obtained.) The semen can either be placed in the upper portion of the vagina next to the cervix or injected into the uterus through a fine catheter (tube). AI may be carried out using fresh or frozen semen.

AIIH is used for some couples who cannot otherwise conceive and if, for example, it is felt that the chances of pregnancy would be increased by concentrating the husband’s semen or by inserting it directly into the uterus. Other reasons for AIIH are:

- When the husband cannot ejaculate or if efforts to inseminate fail.
- For couples where the husband is severely physically disabled and AIIH offers the only possibility for him to father a child.

AIIH is often used when a man is undergoing surgery or radiotherapy that may result in sterility. The semen may be stored by deep freezing and used at a later date for AIIH. More recently, semen has been similarly stored by some men before they undergo vasectomy as a means of permanent contraception.

AID may also be used to overcome a particular type of female infertility where antibodies which kill the sperm are found in the cervical mucus. In such cases, AID may be successful when the semen is injected into the uterus.

AID is used when investigations have shown the husband to be infertile or to have significantly reduced fertility. AID has also been used when a female partner suffers from, or may be the carrier of, a serious hereditary condition, for example, Huntington’s disease, and the couple decide that they will not risk passing on the husband’s condition to the next generation.

Choosing the Sex of Human Offspring

In future, the development of a technique to separate male and female bearing sperm would allow couples to choose the sex of their offspring using AIIH after the sperm had been separated. Techniques to separate male and female bearing sperm do not exist at present.

There are however two techniques available that can identify the foetal sex as early as 16–18 weeks gestation, namely ultrasound (high frequency sound waves making a picture on a TV screen of the foetus in the womb), and amniocentesis (taking a sample of the fluid surrounding the foetus in the womb, drawn through a needle inserted under local anaesthesia) followed by chromosomal analysis. Neither method is now used to identify the foetal gender when there is a risk of a sex-linked hereditary disease, but both techniques can only be used at a relatively late stage of pregnancy. A foetus of the affected gender is identified, a late abortion may be carried out under section 1.18 of the Abortion Act.

It has been suggested that IVF, cloning and freezing techniques could be used to determine the sex of an embryo prior to its transfer to the mother’s uterus, thereby avoiding situations where a late abortion might otherwise be performed on account of an inherited sex-linked disorder such as haemophilia. It has also been suggested the techniques might be used more widely by couples who particularly wanted a child of a given sex.

Ongoing Development of the Human Embryo and Foetuses In Vitro

In the current state of knowledge it is not possible to maintain development of a human (or other primate) embryo in vitro beyond a comparatively early stage, but development of current techniques is likely to result in embryos being maintained for progressively longer periods so that embryonic and foetal development can be studied. In the foreseeable future it is improbable that a human embryo could be maintained to full term in vitro.
A few months ago I co-ordinated a day workshop on 'Women, Health and Sexuality' at an adult education institute. I quite expected that there would be a diverse group of women, what wasn't prepared for was the number of women who were so wound up in holistic medicine that reactions to oppression and exploitation, as well as health, were individualised into a matter of 'state of mind'. Not only could you prevent cancer through being 'in tune' with your mind and body, you could transcend sexism by the same method.

Sophie asks for a more scientific (albeit feminist) approach to alternative treatments, as well as a more analytically questioning. Again this is nothing new, but more suggested than developed. If, and I agree, we need to remove the fuzziness from alternative approaches, then we need a much more precise view of science. For myself, I am not only a question of whether science is 'male' or 'female'. What would constitute a feminist scientific approach to allopathic and alternative medicine? When Sophie talks about evaluating different approaches what she appears to be partially asking for is a feminist evaluation of different methods of getting statistics, 'facts', rather than a more in-depth discussion of what constitutes radical science. This would have to include the intuitive and imaginative 'hearsay' in science and would be valuable in an evaluation of alternative health methods.

Sophie's clear look at a tendency for feminists to go into an individual sampling of the different alternatives to conventional medicine — her insistence that as feminists we should ask political questions about the theories and practices of different treatments — is appealing to me. Yet ... when I turned to Carol Sorde's article, 'Alternative Medicine Necessarily Better For Women?', (pretty much a qualified yes), I was also in sympathy. I am a fanatical of alternative health care. I am a 'believer', if not in a big way, and especially in relation to chronic health problems. Yet I rely on the NHS for cervical smears, parties about heart murmurs, children's ailments at times.

Carol's discussion of the social relations between practitioner and patient in the NHS and in holistically oriented treatments raised important issues about how to evaluate different treatments. But when used as acupuncture to illustrate a particular point I began to wonder. "To lie there and have needles put into you, (which is a crude simplification for which I apologize), does seem to be far away from any idea of power to the patient!!! It is not Acupuncture as medical practice that I dispute, but what I see as the inevitable social relations of passivity and power." Although she goes on to say that she is in the process of having her mind changed, I haven't a clue in what way. Surely you cannot simply locate 'power and passivity' in the treatment but must look at the context in which that might occur. When I was having acupuncture, my sense of having chosen and understood the basic ideas behind it made me feel more in control than during any NHS treatment I've had.

Perhaps it is the perspective of the practitioner and patient together which may transform the particular treatment. Although I may have romanticized Chinese health care in the mid 1970s, I still think that there were parts of the Chinese approach then (things have changed now) which are relevant to this discussion. There, whatever the treatment — herbal, acupuncture, surgical, drugs — it was discussed in detail with the patient in a political context.

Other thoughts were stirred up in me by Carol's focus on taking control, taking power, taking responsibility. Quite rightly she points out that some alternative professionals are as classist, racist, sexist, ageist and heterosexual in allopathic medicine as we are. "They can be careless and disrespectful of women's needs and desires (sounds familiar)? Quite rightly she points out that "Some women do not want that power; even big strong dykes want to be looked after sometimes!" And she's clear that there is a contradiction we all should be aware of between taking responsibility for our own health and recognising the basic responsibility for our individual health lies in the society we live in. But what exactly does 'taking control', 'taking power' mean on an individual, one-to-one level?

As a relatively small, puny, not young dyke, I think there are very different situations in which we approach health care. One is when we're relatively 'well', or disturbed by a chronic health problem, and...
When we're relatively well it's easier to be more 'active' and to take control than at the point when we might be scared and in great physical pain.

I want to improve our health or prevent ill health. We're likely to be less fraught than when we know/figure something is really very wrong. In the first case it's easier to be 'more active' and to take control than when we might be scared and in great physical pain.

However, in both situations I would want a — I mean — have to say it — dialectic relationship with practitioner and treatment. One in which my health needs are being 'served' and in which I'm involved in understanding it and fitting it into the rest of my life. I would want the possibility of one-to-one treatment/cover in which I knew or was told about the possible effects/side effects of the treatment and where I could trustingly receive the healer's help and advice. To receive help/advice/treatment is not necessarily in itself powerless. And I would also want the possibility of collective discussion with other 'patients' and with practitioners — a to and fro between my individual needs (no matter how socially based) and feminist desire to exchange and explore with other women in that situation. An ideal, I know, but not an impossible one.

The Feminist advancement: retreat or neither?

Barbara Brigg in Cattern 15 and Danielle Harway in 16 both tackle feminist therapists. Dianne Grinnithey lays open her own experience of severe emotional crisis. Barbara and Danielle are feminist therapists; their articles attempt to discern crises of therapy and to build bridges between the individualized experience of one-to-one therapy and the necessity they both see of collective organizing, understanding and change. Of course I won’t try to ‘perfect’ answers — gossamer as I am, in therapy after years of dismissing it myself. The answer is not there in any easy way, nor do I believe they could be.

Barbara Brigg in Feminist Therapy: some questions asks why so many feminists are interested in therapy. "Are we only just waking up to a need previously unmet, and adding to our political practice, or are we seeking for solutions in the face of political failure?" She goes on to ask if therapeutic practices, "do they have a valid place in the way I feel?" Sadly my struggles not to be an 'individualist' further undermined my self-confidence, my vague feelings that it was all right to want to be happy, to feel joy and pleasure. I became increasingly more and more self-absorbed with my self. Any sense of identity I had had only come from my 'political activity'. Trying to sort out my emotions seemed greatly self-indulgent (and almost insopatically difficult). So I ignored my feelings of uselessness the best I could until they overwhelmed me.

At present feminist therapy is an option primarily open to white middle class women. The women writing in Cattern point out that working class and/or black women suffer depression, crisis, nervous breakdowns in larger numbers than middle class women, but because of their specific oppressions of class, race, sex and age do not have the 'choice' of turning to private therapy. They end up in the NHS sector and there they are drugged and often hospitalized, with the aim of forcing them back (adjusted of course) into society.

The Unkindest Cut — or not

H-Davidson's article in Cattern 16 on The Psycho-Control of Women. Labotony as a method of social control takes us into medicalised 'treatment' of women. We jump from the question of whether therapy can be part of feminism to the totally biologically oriented male-dominated 'treatment' of women who haven't the choice, who go 'too far', who cannot function in society, cannot escape notice — from family, superiors, the medical profession itself. There is no reason why a very specific form of psychiatric 'treatment', lobotomy — in which nerves in the brain, usually in the frontal lobe, are cut — should not be used to illustrate the psychiatric profession's overall attitude to women. In itself the information in D's article about the history and present day approach to psycho-surgery in relation to women is horrifying and fascinating. She says of psychiatry that "the constant in all these theories has been biological: a biological cause of unknown origin. The unknown always causes uneasiness, both for psychiatry as a discipline which was left in a no-man's land on the fringes of medicine, and for the public who expected the mind doctors to 'do something' about the behaviour of the insane." She claims that psycho-surgery is the logical outcome of a biologically oriented approach to mental illness. In discussing Dr. Pizay's book on battered women, which puts forward the belief that certain women are 'addicted' to violence through their addiction to a certain brain chemical, D says that "Pizay is directing women's feet towards the first ring of the ladder which ends in psychosurgery".

All this is very interesting, but I can't help but think it collapses too much meaning into a specific form of treatment. Even if lobotomy and electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) were outlawed, the sophisticated and devastating use of drugs is a much more prevalent, even 'accepted' method of social control and one far harder to intervene in.

The Cattern articles do not fully tackle the difficult question of what it is to be done about women (ourselves, our mothers, daughters, lovers, friends, any woman) who are seriously 'out of their minds' — with fear, depression, delusion and so forth. Whatever reason, unable to cope with day to day life. For some, therapy may help, for many it wouldn't be enough. For many, the psychiatric institution waits and solicits nothing.

The other articles in both issues of Cattern are varied and very good. Does Superwoman Have Prearranged Trouble? Medicine and the Male Reproductive System by Naomi Pfeiffer is a wonderful little article which points up the completely different ways in which medical language is used to describe male and female reproductive organs and functions. The Setting Up of the Women's Health Information Centre by Lisi Safford is a useful and constructive description of what the role of the centre will be and the way in which it is being organized. Outline by Pam Dawling is the only overt self-help health article, looking at the question of whether women can ovulate twice in one cycle, which is very important to those using 'natural' birth control methods.

Overall I enjoyed and was stimulated by these 'catalytic' — my questionings and doubts are an indication of how much the articles made me think, gave me ideas and information.

Sue O'Sullivan
Writing Our Own History 3

Storming the Wimpy Bars

In one of the earliest public actions of the WLM in this country, women hold demonstrations in Wimpy Bars against their policy of refusing to serve “unaccompanied” women late at night. Lilian Mohin talks to Sara Scott about her first consciousness-raising group and their involvement in these 1971 actions.

Sara: Who were you first involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement?
Lilian: Literally, physically, in 1970, when I came to live in England. I’d been reading feminist literature, avidly, in America, but had been too frightened to join up with any of the feminist groups that were available where I was living, mainly because I felt they were big and strong and wonderful and I was a woman. That was to do with a kind of media-hype that I don’t think exists here.

Once here, I felt I had a sort of foreign status and could only fit in immediately—which I did. This was 1970 and I was married and had two children and I went off to my first consciousness-raising group meeting in Notting Hill. It had been advertised for new women in The Guardian and was held in a very small sitting room which overflowed with women. We obviously needed several groups. So, women arriving started heading off with someone else who lived in the area, and my CR group came out of that.

S: What was the initial attraction of feminism when you were in the States? What had been published?
L: Much of it was very theoretical, very abstract, which I could agree because it didn’t touch me. But also, I think, being Jewish meant I had always been concerned with politics one way or another. The Civil Rights Movement principally, and pretty much anything that was about someone else’s misery that I could get into—so I did do quite a lot of that. And what made a difference about the literature I was encountering about women was the way it was written. There was an article in a newspaper, not in a feminist newspaper, and a woman columnist writing about herself. It was about standing in her kitchen talking to other women and this was so different from all the civil rights and lefty stuff, and it seemed to be about me, which really was a revelation in those days.

S: Now, the first group you were in was a consciousness-raising group in London. What sort of awareness did you have, at this time, of being part of a movement, of there being other things going on?
L: A lot really. I think because it started with the left, with socialism, they were into structures, so one could not avoid knowing. So I think it was sort of two-tier. There were these structures and we knew about that, and then there was what we were doing with each other once a week, and that was really quite different and much more important than there was already the Women’s Liberation Workshop in London which was a kind of umbrella for lots of small CR groups. It seemed necessary for the groups not only to talk and develop theory from that, but also to come together regularly and do things, and then go back into our groups and see whether that had worked and what it meant. At that time there was a demonstration against the ‘Miss World’ competition at the Albert Hall. I didn’t go to the ‘Miss World’ demonstration, I felt it was not appropriate for me to get arrested—would who look after the kids? But not long after that I was involved in the Wimpy Campaign in 1971, have you heard about that?

S: No! Miss World, yes, but Wimpy Bars?
L: Ah, well, it was one of the many things that were going on. I think to the rest of the country as well as London. The Wimpy chain had a rule about not serving what they called “unaccompanied women” after 10 pm. Which meant if you wanted to eat after 10 you had to go in with a man, and they were putting up signs in Wimpy Bars that said this. Although why anybody wanted to enter a Wimpy Bar anyway was not clear. Still we were concerned that we weren’t allowed to even through most of us didn’t want to.

So there were demonstrations in different parts. In Golden Green they tried letting off smokebombs, but no-one noticed. It was just awful, no-one did anything. Eventually, there was a planning group of all the groups that were involved in this Wimpy business. We got legal advice and learned that any place that the public at night could exclude anyone on the grounds that they were likely to be criminals. The categories considered most likely to be desirable at a glance were thieves and prostitutes. And they decided only women could be prostitutes. What if she’s wearing men’s clothes? How about men in dresses? What do any of it MEAN!

S: How did it go on the day?
L: I’d gone into Covent Garden and hired a costume from “The Sound of Music” for one of the women in my CR group, so she went in a very wonderful royal blue men’s habit. It was very exciting. We marched. We had picket signs of our own creation—not anyone else’s slogans. Evaluating. Fun even. In the week before that demo several women in the planning group had become ill or had other reasons for not being able to manage the last minute organizing and I was left doing most of it. To me this seemed temporary, an accident. But at the demo
there were suddenly a lot of cops piling out in a determined looking sort of way and a few fought through the crowd to get to me - small money-losing me - to say, archly, "Who's in charge here?" I gave our standard reply, "We do not have anyone in charge, thank you very much." They didn't bend to this but departed having left the unconscious which may have been what they intended.

The manager closed down the Wimpy Bar early and we felt so sort of pleased with our selves that none of us rushed off to another Wimpy Branch in Paddington. That was very different. Evidently the Marble Arch lot had been alerted to our demonstration before it happened and prepared. So were the cops. So it had been in reality fairly civilised. But at the one opposite Paddington Station the manager was completely unprepared and panicily. We must have looked like dangerous masses approaching his nice plate glass window - a mob headed by a heavily made-up nun. There was a revolving door into this place what a friend in the nuns outfit, who also had a caliper on her leg which wasn’t visible under the habit (she had had polio as a child) led the way into it. Just as she got in the compartment, the manager stopped the door, crushing it against her leg and locked it, with the patrons inside and us outside. She screamed. She screamed. The people inside the Wimpy Bar screamed. We descended to get in and rescue our friend. The people inside were desperate to get out side. This sudden terribleness. The police came again but different ones than at Marble Arch.

Everything lost that cheerful fantasy air very fast. Although they made the manager extricate Lyn at once they were interested in protecting the Wimpy manager and in what evil we represented. At that time there was a lot of publicity around the Angry Brigade and the police as if we were anything to do with them. Some of us hadn’t heard of the Angry Brigade, others assumed the question was were we angry - and we were, of course, and said so.

S: What happened in the end?

1. Eventually we were released. I returned the man’s habit to the hire place, albeit with pancake make-up on the wimple.

Wimpy Bar management invited us to a discussion which was in fact a polite capitulation. In those terms it seemed over. But for us, well, it wasn’t. For example, when we went to discuss their capitulation they offered us elaborate food and drink (not Wimpy Bar food). We took this as a softer we didn’t intend to accept. We didn’t want a polite gentleman’s arrangement in which all parties would pretend that someone else had been silly, or smooth but we charming grown-ups would now overlook all that. No way. So we said we’d prefer to take the food and drink away with us, so it was nice food and we’d enjoy it without them around, thanks.

S: What do you think you learned from the action? Did it seem like a victory?

1. Sure, a small one in a way. But, as I said, the importance of this and other early actions was in what we learned both about how the world and war operates and about what we might be able to do for ourselves. Working on what we really want - which for most of us didn’t include Wimpy Bars in any way - followed. Even symbolic action had to be closer to our own lives than this.

That demonstrations are so heavily, so rigidly, structured in the minds of the police and also in our own minds was very revealing. If we hadn’t heard so far from the Wimmy perhaps it would have been less obvious that we had been playing by rules, somehow allowed to demonstrate, naughty little girls given a small space in which to misbehave. It reminded me of all I’d read about why guerrilla warfare works. Somehow I think we had collaborated in a standard view of the situation of ourselves. A demonstration is such a predictable number, so within male expectations… so bloody useless, really. Talking about what we’d done, what we’d thought, led us into quite other areas, away from such obvious lefty and traditional actions. Confrontations with authority were played by rules that we accepted somehow but certainly didn’t create. For me, that particular semi-illuminated the necessity to concentrate on, not them.
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