

# A WORLD *of* DIFFERENCE

*Between the early Seventies and the late Eighties, the culture and priorities of feminism have changed dramatically. The old slogans of 'liberation' and 'equality' have been replaced by the tougher nuts of diversity and difference. The women's movement has indeed come a long way in a short time. So where is it headed into the Nineties? Marilyn Lake has some ideas . . .*

**I**t is fashionable to argue these days that we are in a post-feminist age, or that the women's movement has lost its way. Let me say at the outset that this is but masculinist wishful thinking.

I think the very success of the women's movement is evident in the number of domains in which feminists now work — ranging from equal opportunity offices, to centres against sexual assault, to women's refuges, to women's studies courses, to child care co-operatives, to filmmaking, to trade unionism and more. Women are now a force to be reckoned with: but it has been, paradoxically, our very mobilisation that has engendered a recognition of our diversity, of our divergent experiences, needs and priorities. The women's movement now has many ways, and multiple identities, which need to be fostered. It was never solely a middle class movement, as our brothers like to charge. But it has been a white Anglo-Saxon movement which too readily assumed that white English-speaking women spoke for all women. One of the major issues for the 1990s is how to reconcile an acceptance of differences among women with the assumptions of

oneness and sameness necessary to a feminist politics. And a feminist politics demands an explicit formulation of our feminist values and aims. This, too, is an important future project.

Feminist mobilisations occur historically when women identify as a group, seeing themselves oppressed by, or disadvantaged compared to, men as a group. In the nineteenth century it was clear that women were systematically deprived of a range of legal and civil powers enjoyed by men. They were refused citizenship, custody and property rights. By the 1960s, women had achieved formal equality in most of these areas. How do we account, then, for the resurgence of feminism, for the vociferous and concerted demands for Women's Liberation?

We can identify certain preconditions. First, there was the post-war expansion of the economy and the heavy demand for female labour by the early 1960s. The number of women (especially married women) in the workforce grew steadily, as did women's outrage at the discrimination against them in pay, conditions and opportunities. Second, there was the expansion of the tertiary education system in the 1960s. The new

availability of higher education fuelled expectations of social mobility. Young women were encouraged to think about their lives in terms of individual, personal, fulfilment. Third, Australia's participation in the Vietnam war and the policy of conscription politicised this generation of students, and it was an experience which, for women, pointed up very sharply the limits of men's radicalism. Men, it was recognised, could be, like other ruling groups, "chauvinist"; women, like other (Third World) oppressed groups, needed "liberation".

Again, the "sexual revolution" in its bid to separate (the joys of) sex from (the burdens of) reproduction, a goal facilitated and symbolised by the Pill, promised women new sexual freedom. But this new freedom was offered on masculine terms and all too often experienced by many women as a new confinement, a further means of exploitation. There was a felt contradiction between the intensification of women's constitution as sex objects and the promise of "individual fulfilment" through education, politics, a career or sex. Women's Liberation can be seen as both a product of, and reaction against, "sexual liberation". Finally, the publication and



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circulation of certain feminist texts offered women new perspectives, meanings and language in which to make sense of their experiences of trivialisation, denigration, powerlessness.

In its formulation of demands, the Women's Liberation movement expressed its basic driving force: women's bid to escape, their urge to flee, the confinements of domesticity. Women wished to jettison wifhood and motherhood as vocations: women wanted the freedoms that men seemed to enjoy. The main demands were:

Equal pay and equal education and job opportunities; rights to free contraception and abortion — the refusal of compulsory motherhood, access to community child care (an early slogan was "Free 24-hour Child Care"); an end to sexism in advertising, children's books, charity fund-raising and so on; the

affirmation of lesbianism, not just as a sexual option, but as a political position.

The Melbourne Women's Action Committee, for example, listed its objectives as: Economic Equality, Social Equality, Equal Education and Abortion Law Reform. The meaning is clear. Women demanded to be let in to men's domain of privilege, power, self-determination and economic independence. The goal of "equality" seemed unproblematic.

Women's methods of organisation were creative and various, depending on the issues to be addresses. Thus, to combat women's construction as sexual objects, as objects of the male gaze, demonstrations were organised, for example, against the Miss Teenage Quest in Melbourne in 1970 and the Miss Fresher Quest in Adelaide in the same year. To achieve equal pay,

women campaigned and demonstrated in novel and effective ways. There was Zelda d'Aprano's courageous self-chaining to the Commonwealth Building and Arbitration Court in 1969; the tram ride in 1970 when women insisted on paying only 75 percent of the fare; and the painstaking research necessary for the submission to the Arbitration Commission's equal pay hearings. Edna Ryan recalled, for example, of the minimum wage hearing in 1974, that she had obtained information from the Commonwealth Statistician revealing there were 131,700 fatherless families in Australia:

This proved beyond doubt that the family component in wage-fixing should be applied to women. There was a flutter of sensation in the courtroom when we produced that letter as part of our evidence.

To achieve political intervention on behalf of women, the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) conducted its famous survey in the 1972 federal election, an election which returned a Labor government to power for the first time in 23 years. Gough Whitlam scored the highest possible score, Billy Snedden the lowest. To achieve entry to the administrative level of the Victorian Public Service, women with ambiguous given names applied to sit the exam, up till that time closed to women. To promote cultural and sexual independence from men, women's conferences, consciousness-raising groups and dances were organised right across Australia.

In its meetings, Women's Liberation was characterised in general by an adamant refusal of "male" power structures, male hierarchies and the paraphernalia of leadership. Deeply suspicious of elites, Women's Liberation insisted on collectives rather than organisations with presidents, treasurers, and secretaries. Differences in approach to organisation partly explained the pronounced antagonism many in WL felt towards WEL. Anne Summers recalled attending the first national WEL conference:

Its differences from a Women's Liberation Conference were apparent as soon as I walked into the opening session and saw the row of "leaders" facing the hall full of women ...

Summers concluded: "we are determined to avoid having leaders — we want to move on from competitive masculine power politics involving aggression and backstabbing to true egalitarianism".

This preoccupation with egalitarianism pointed to the importance of enabling women to find their voices. Women had been silenced by patriarchal culture, by the dominant organisational structure and discourses and in particular by the political leaders of the "new left". Consciousness-raising groups enabled women to speak their pain, to understand their experiences in social terms, to generate new ways of naming their experiences. A new

language gained currency. As the history of the Diamond Valley group testifies: the concepts of "conditioning" and "sexism" were totally new and offered an entirely different perspective of their lives.

The determination to eschew hierarchies was both a reaction against the practice of the new left/libertarian/anarchist male comrades and an endorsement of their ideology. Feminism is always caught and constrained by the terms of the masculinist discourses which constitute its context. What is most striking when looking back on feminist debates of the 1970s is the continual agonising over whether certain actions were truly "revolutionary" or merely "reformist", a dichotomy borrowed straight from marxist analysis. Thus, while stating the need to "reject all male-defined concepts and goals", we were urged, ironically, to concentrate on "constant revolutionary action".

Just as Simone de Beauvoir invoked the existentialist opposition between "transcendence" and "immanence", and Betty Friedan called on women to seek Maslow-type growth, fulfilment and maturity, so feminists in the 1970s classified political actions and agendas into the despised "reformist" and the admirable "revolutionary" kinds. It has since been suggested that the ejaculatory metaphor of revolution might not be appropriate to feminist methods and visions. Rather than ask whether certain policies were "reformist" or "revolutionary", perhaps we should have been asking whether they would empower women, and which women in particular. "Smash the family" was a "revolutionary" slogan, but for Koorie women, whose families had been systematically broken up throughout the century, it must have had little appeal. Similarly, abortion on demand made little sense to a people whose very survival was in jeopardy.

Though caught within the terms, concepts and frameworks of prevailing masculine discourses, the Australian women's movement has nevertheless also been characterised

by a pronounced separatist impulse — a healthy determination to achieve a degree of autonomy and independence from men's movements. This is evident, for example, in the strength and dynamics of the refuge movement, referral and sexual assault services and the expansion of women's studies courses. But as feminist activity proliferates and disperses, and as theoretical analysis proceeds at different rates and in different directions, it is becoming increasingly evident that we need to reconnect, to re-establish links in order to reformulate our goals. By the 1980s, the simple goal of "equality" seems to be thoroughly inadequate. As the 1980s slogan says: "Equality with men is a limited ambition". Many women are disillusioned with the effort to compete on men's terms: those terms continue to mean more work by women for less pay. At the same time, it is becoming clear that men's ways, men's organisation of the world, has brought us to the brink of destruction.

Women are freeing themselves from the male point of view and consciously exploring alternative ways of seeing, knowing, working and loving. But what would a feminist world look like? What are feminist economic policies? To what extent do "equal opportunity" policies subvert masculine power and practices, to what extent do they consolidate them? How do we bring about men's equal participation in the work of caring for people? How do we enable men to look after the sick, the old, the young, the dependent, on a regular, daily basis? And how do we address the differences between women and men without obliterating the differences among women themselves? The real challenge for feminism in the 1990s is to come to terms with female diversity, to build on difference, regarding it a source of strength rather than a source of weakness in need of repression.

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