
PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

PATRICIA CAREY

*L'auteur discute l'importance des changements d'attitudes chez la femme
(et chez l'homme), apportés par la nouvelle prise de conscience amenée
par le mouvement de la femme.*

The personal is political. This pronouncement of the Sixties, initially greeted with scorn, impatience, or a shrug by Establishment conservatives and radical activists alike, has lost its novelty as we enter the Eighties. The forefront political movements of the Sixties—civil rights, anti-war, New Left, counterculture—saw this concept in superficial terms. Long hair, denim and granny glasses signalled political allegiances, but the struggle for political change was most often focussed outward on policies and systems seen to be corrupt. Only feminism, the sleeper movement of the Sixties and sole survivor through the Seventies, made of the equation of the personal and political a philosophy and praxis.

It's not just that feminists lobbying for legislative change mobilize around private sphere issues like abortion, child care and family law reform, pensions and wages for homemakers, as well as, for instance, equal pay legislation. And it's not just that feminists celebrate and practise individual protest actions outside of organized political structures: letters to the editor, boycotts, sticker campaigns over offensive display windows. It's that feminists have unremittingly waged war on private and personal attitudes in women and men as a fundamental strategy for waging war on patriarchal (not to mention racist, militaristic and capitalistic) laws and institutions.

Few radical political movements are

naive enough to believe revolution in political economic structures is sufficient to change the myriad superstructures—religion, culture, education, language, media—which reinforce governing institutions. Yet anti-war protesters never fought the private sphere conditioning that breeds boys into soldiers. The New Left (male) leadership was notorious for exploiting women's volunteerism and for treating women as a lower class. Eldridge Cleaver celebrated insurrectionary rape—taking revenge on white racist males by raping their white women only after first 'practising' on his black sisters. Conversely, feminists viewed consistency between personal and public revolution as a first principle.

One of the strengths of a political movement that turns its analysis and activism toward something as shifting and insubstantial as attitudes is that it doesn't lose momentum when token or substantial reforms are achieved. When minority rights legislation, 'peace with honour' and designer denims brought an end to public protest marches, political activism around the related causes died, much as early twentieth-century feminist activity had done once the vote was won. Yet the racist, military, capitalist machine continues relatively unscathed.

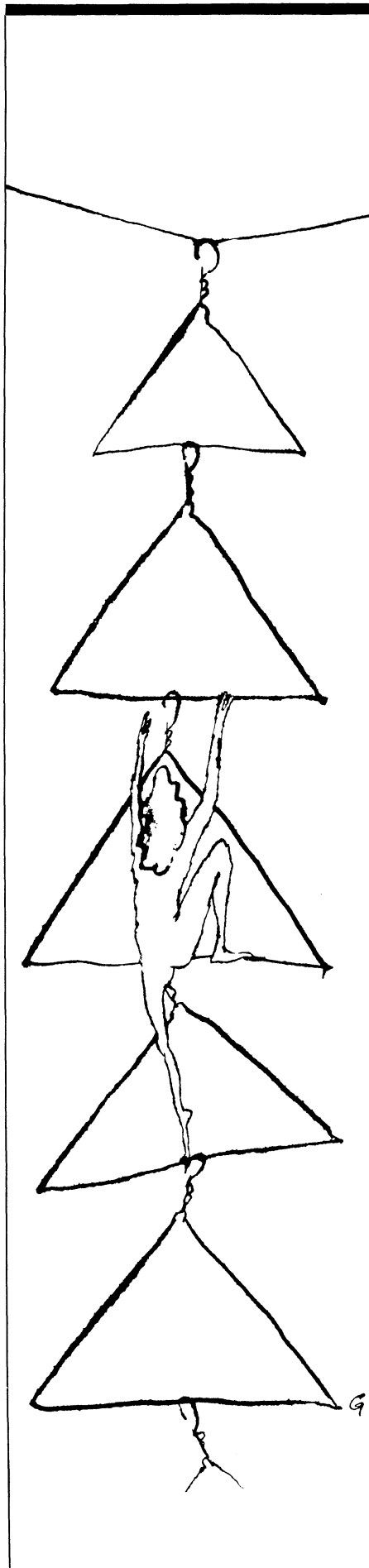
Feminism has been mocked since the mid-Sixties for its lack of unifying ideology and formal structure. Yet it survived the complacent, neo-conservative Seventies, becoming the single most pervasive political movement of the decade. Its survival and consistent progress through the last fifteen years can be attributed, I think, to one of its most frequently trivialized symbols and political vehicles: the consciousness-raising session. Countless male jokes centred on the devotedness with which women dropped everything to attend those meetings.

Men no longer laugh—and women continue to meet. The original, formally scheduled meetings, attended principally by university-educated women under thirty now take place virtually everywhere—in fact wherever two or more women are gathered together—at dinner tables, in classrooms and in editorial rooms. Even glove and hat tea parties reverberate with refrains ranging from sober to hilarious as women name and oppose the patriarchal enemies *within* themselves as well as without, in the *attitudes* which colour their environment as well as the institutions which shape it.

This attention to attitudes and the enormous personal changes evident in women and men over the last ten years account for the fact that while ardent feminists are often not taken seriously and are vulnerable to discrimination by, for instance, employers and professors, the Women's Movement—that more amorphous tide of change—is taken very seriously indeed. A decade of grass roots attitude changes has made fatuous the wistful, Chicken-Little fiction that the Women's Movement is dead.

• • •

In 1971, there was already a small treasury of classic feminist scholarship available: *The Female Eunuch*, *Sexual Politics*, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, *Woman in Sexist Society*, *The Dialectic of Sex*, *Woman's Estate*, *Man's World*, *Woman's*



Gail Gellner

Place, among others. The Women's Movement, nonetheless, was located mainly in the universities. In the early Seventies, most of us made contact with the movement via the media, which lampooned or ignored feminism. 'Libbers' were castrators, frustrated spinsters, dykes, strident, embittered bitches. Small wonder that the vast majority of women maintained a careful distance. There was guilt by association in such labels, particularly for young women leaving high school and older women with marital security to protect.

Small wonder, too, that men felt little threat, especially when the initial feminist name-calling identified the faces of patriarchy: sexist children's books and textbooks, unequal pay and opportunity, language, the vaginal orgasm, the double standard. Men were judged as a group in abstract rather than personal terms. While divide and conquer labelling kept women aloof from the movement, men proudly admitted to being one of the boys: male chauvinists all.

Through the early Seventies, women could dissociate themselves from feminism as long as they believed they, personally, had never been oppressed. Most of us felt that way for some time. The critical transition depended on that frozen-in-time moment when a man close to us uttered a breath-taking insult, demand or unforgivable cliché. They were infinite in variety, indistinguishable in meaning and intent:

You don't need to pay for your dinner; if you just sleep with me you can consider the bill paid.

But women are best suited to menial work because they prefer mindless jobs.

Of course, rape is on the increase. When women wear short skirts and no bras, they're asking for it.

When the penny finally did drop, we saw that being labelled a dyke, bitch or castrator was no worse than being Woman, Other, Outsider to male values, institutions and respect. At this point of recognition—of identifying with the oppressed—a great dividing line separating women occurs. Those who make that identification become unapologetic, self-declared feminists, almost without exception permanently active in feminist causes. Those who do *not*, say, 'I believe in equal pay for equal work but. . .' and though they've undergone major personal changes in the last decade by proxy, default and choice, these changes tend to be piece-meal and unrecognized as part

of an overall pattern of transformations due to and celebrated by the Women's Movement.

How to measure the ripple effect generated when one person in transition touches another who touches another, the ripples colliding, intersecting, overlapping and causing further ripples?

The most obvious effects are visible in the postures of men in power in recent years. Some corporate executives are finally promoting women from administration to management, not, I think, because of agreement with a decade of literature on job discrimination, but because their daughters have either persuaded them or suffered bias and exploitation in their own careers. Pope John Paul II distinguishes repeatedly between the holy need for human rights and the heresy of equal rights. Birth Control, abortion, divorce and the issue of women priests were the focus of his American sermons, not because the church wishes to update its theology, but because nuns, parishioners and apostates challenge the church fathers' attitudes towards women.

Less visible are the profound changes that have evolved in women's attitudes to themselves, other women and men. Because women's first identification with the movement tended to be prompted by and focussed on the men closest to them, the discontent, outrage and scrutiny triggered by recognition of male oppression drove women together in some form of consciousness-raising group. We needed peers to test our conclusions on, seek support and advice from, reveal our deepest fears, guilts and aspirations to. The cost of critically reappraising our feelings, behaviour and beliefs was high, though less so for single, childless women still young enough to plan careers and domestic goals than for older women. Yet we started to touch and include in our network our mothers, teachers, neighbours, figureheads. The starting point was invariably sex roles.

There are some wonderful moments I remember from this stage in our politicization:

Three women in a campus birth control centre shyly admiring—through the safe vehicle of art criticism—the beauty of the female body.

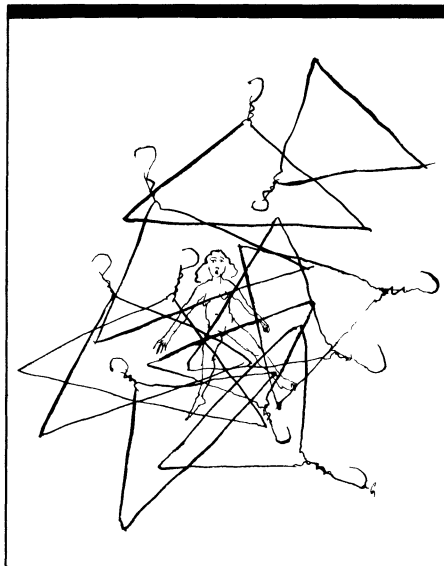
Two women swearing in outrage as a male professor argues Morley Callaghan's female characters are not one-dimensional.

Roommates checking neurotic hostess reflexes when a male dinner

guest complains there are no serviettes on the table; knuckles white with the effort not to jump up when he could more easily reach them, we mystify him with roars of laughter at our shared struggle.

Seeing my mother with new eyes—not as 'just a housewife,' but as a role model of integrity and strength and later as a coconspirator in exposing male vanity, prudishness, myopia.

We became each other's consciences. Women writers had to be more enlightened, perceptive, truthful than their male counterparts. Women distraught at the departure of an inconsiderate, unfaithful man were chastized for not being thrilled instead. Cynical about Nixon or Trudeau, we were shaken and unforgiving when Golda or Indira were calculating and hawkish. Sisters who couldn't throw out



their razors or who flinched at examining their own cervixes were shamed into upholding the cause. It was heresy to admit in mixed company (male/female or feminist/non-feminist) that another feminist had flaws. But on queen bees, cheerleaders, women who didn't want jobs outside the home, it was open season. Supermom, superwife, supermistress, were replaced with the uncompromising law that we be superfeminists, perfect role models to each other and all women. Mercifully, the late Seventies brought a relaxation in this intolerance of diversity. Secure we've supplanted the male-prescribed definitions of the ideal woman for our own, we can allow individual eccentricity at last.

If we pushed each other hard, we also nurtured the best in each other. We fed our fragile, new-born self-esteem—headier stuff than any chemical high. We blossomed when told with convincing faith, 'yes you can'—leave a bastard, insist on a raise,

excel at law school, command respect. We sold each other on that vital first principle, 'no you're not'—ugly, stupid, selfish, inarticulate, helpless. We, who had developed an inexhaustible supply of intuition, sympathy and receptiveness to the unspoken needs of others, at long last built up the *female* ego by means of traditional 'feminine' virtues. More, we tapped them to diagnose for each other where self-doubt comes from, how it is used to limit us, how to break the habit.

Perhaps the deepest, most costly change (and the most beneficial new resource) was the pathological self-consciousness instilled in us by our dialogues with other feminists. We analyzed our every action and reaction for its political meaning and effect. The now familiar conflict between radicalized intellect and traditional guts began. My mind is won over by an egalitarian man but my traitor feelings can't warm to him because he's shorter than I. My mind scoffs at the breast fetish, but I can't altogether stop feeling physically inadequate because mine are too small. I am moved by D.H. Lawrence and enjoy watching football and would do unmentionable things to gain entry to a Rolling Stones concert, all the while mentally deploring my visceral taste. We're all still trying to cope while our emotions and unconscious responses catch up with our thinking.

Because of our unrelenting self scrutiny and critical reappraisal of old norms, we have constantly been mocked for having no sense of humour. Like all clichés this charge contains an element of truth. Feminists don't laugh, for instance, at dumb-blond, bra-burner or rape jokes. And we don't suspend our political judgments at light-hearted social occasions. But we've always been able to laugh at a good joke. We laughed until we wept at our discordant versions of the fake orgasm, at the trauma of trying on bathing suits, at some of the B-movie lines used by men to seduce us.

We had a choice of laughing or weeping at the impact of our personal changes on the men in our lives, for men's approach to feminism focussed on sex for a tiresomely long time. It took a few years for them to relinquish the popular (male) definition of a feminist as a sexually liberated—i.e., indiscriminating—woman, when the answer to the old question, 'What is it that women really want?' was simple: more foreplay and some passing attention to the clitoris. Finally, by about the mid-Seventies, men figured out that, in fact, feminists were very discriminating about whom they slept with and under what conditions. For, if it was true we no

longer refrained from sex out of guilt-ridden notions about 'nice' girls, it was equally true we could no longer be seduced by guilt-inspiring charges that we were frigid, inhibited, selfish or teases.

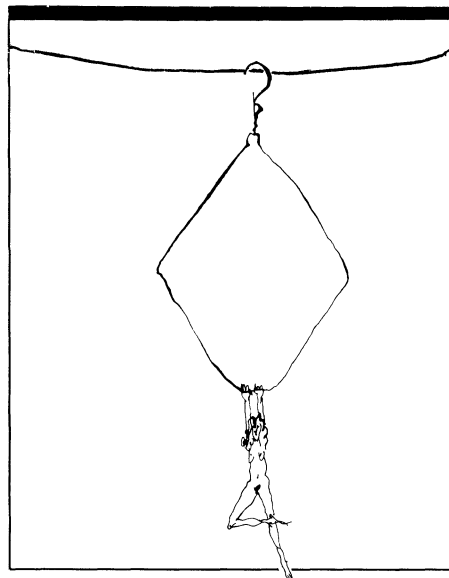
For every man who revised his behaviour and attitudes out of sympathetic understanding of feminist principles, there were a dozen who adopted egalitarian rhetoric as a seduction tactic. Words like 'tender,' 'sensitive' and 'vulnerable' entered male vocabulary (take a glance through the personal ads). Five years earlier they would have branded a man effeminate. We were commended for paying our own tab, corrected for our sexist use of pronouns, urged to take the initiative more often. As a tactic, such rhetoric usually worked for a while. When the mask slipped, we split, nursing our shaken self-esteem. Ironically, these tactics backfired in many cases; men could not maintain this false persona for long without absorbing some of its features. Egalitarian rhetoric subtly altered many men's characters even when that wasn't the game plan.

Men less interested in one-night stands than in lasting relationships were more guileless and less subtle. Initially mocking—"Surely you're not one of those strident libbers?"—they started bringing out the heavy ammunition when, after unsuccessfully urging changes in the power balance, give and take, exchange or division of labour, we started leaving them. Women of all ages, accustomed to being left by men, walked out of their relationships. Instead of examining their own shortcomings or their refusal to make any of the changes we had spelt out, most men laid the entire blame on us and/or our women friends. (Witness Dustin Hoffman blaming Jane Alexander in *Kramer vs. Kramer*.) We were not liberated, just selfish; we were ball-breakers, maladjusted, man-haters, unethical; no man could make us happy. Mainly we were latent lesbians or outright dykes.

By calling us dykes men meant to wound us and vindicate their own behaviour. In the early days, they didn't really believe the charge. To begin with, the idea of satisfactory lovemaking without the benefit of a penis begged male credibility. We were really being told our expectations were abnormal, our needs deviant. In the same way that men dare each other to feats of masculine prowess—shop-lifting, playing chicken on the highway, rape—by calling reluctant participants sissies, we were being dared to prove ourselves 'normal'—by being selfless, acquiescent and seduced by the erstwhile maxim that any man is better than

no man at all. Yet many of us left men, not for a rival lover, but for celibacy, preferring solitude to a demeaning relationship. On a scale of outrages, men felt it better to lose a 'deviant' woman to another 'deviant' woman than to lose a 'normal' woman to another man. But far better to lose to a flesh and blood 'competitor' of any sex than to a desire for solitude.

Celibacy, bisexuality and lesbianism have increased. For some women, sexual choices are now based on principle; what is involved is often a question of emotional/intellectual preference rather than simple sexual preference. Women are showing a growing favoritism for women's company—a truly revolutionary development considering we used to be defined by the men we were with. When I was in high school, breaking a date with women friends in order to accept a date with a



Gail Geltner

man was pardonable behaviour. We spent weekend evenings with women only by default. No longer. Even married women often admit that the emotional bonds they share with other women are deeper, more fulfilling and more rewarding than anything they have experienced with men. Perhaps for the first time in history, men are being forced to compete with women for women's affection and loyalty. Women are asking men to demonstrate the personal qualities we cherish in women. Wealth, status, power, muscle and virility don't count for much, especially without honesty, sensitivity, generosity, willingness to change and a sense of fairness.

In 1980, the question, 'What is it that women really want?' is no longer posed with a mixture of bemusement or implied irrelevance. The aggrieved bafflement is still there, but a note of self-pity, desperation and, yes, fear, has been added.

Films, books and magazines now constantly inform us that the age of the wounded, beleaguered and impotent male has begun.

Watch carefully between the lines in *Manhattan* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Read M.T. Kelly in the *Globe and Mail's* Fanfare section. Look up the infamous January 1979 issue of *Saturday Night*, for a now classic document on the male ego, not blindly rampant but blindly, righteously indignant. Fulford's 'Notebook' tells us,

Every revolution has its victims, and in the current revolution the pitiful refugees crowding the roads are the men who have been rejected or abandoned or simply discarded as irrelevant by women who are 'finding themselves.'

Women are urged by Fulford to have compassion for men who have been 'stripped of the self-assurance that was their fathers' birthright' and who 'have had the misfortune to be brought up in one era and then live their adult lives in another.'

Mr. Fulford, we might well ask, what of the victimization of women pre- and mid-revolution? Have increases in rape, in the wage differential, in wife abuse, in pornography escaped your eye? When did women enjoy *any* of their fathers' birthrights, let alone self-assurance? Has women's painful straddling of two eras cost us no dislocation, rejection, pain?

There is, I believe, some consolation to be found in this new version of the old double standard. Try to remember when in the past men publicly and *emotionally* identified love, marriage and children as priorities of the good life. When were women last credited with the strength, independence and self-assurance to live contentedly without men? Most important, when were we last asked for something, in this case compassion, without an implicit or explicit threat attached? As in, 'If you don't put me before your job, I'll leave you,' or 'If you don't keep the house cleaner, I'll punish you by silence/sulking/not making love.'

Lysistrata is a comedy in which women withhold sex from their men until they stop waging war. The comedy resides in the dramatization of private, personal acts overthrowing public, political systems. And, of course, there's a happy ending. As the 1980s begin, women appear to be on the threshold of achieving the balance of power because they realize the personal can and does shape the political. Ripples, not yet waves, of change are lapping at the edges of male security. It will take time, but just watch the circling tide of change expand.