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I Don't Want to Change My Lifestyle -

I Want to Change My Life

Peggy Hopper and Steve Foldz

[I originally published this (in Hysteria, a woman's newspaper in Boston) only under my name, but when people asked to reprint it I had a crisis of conscience. I felt that Steve had contributed so many of the ideas that he should be a co-author. Besides, to do such would break the rules. Three other women also helped—Liz Fenton, Meryl Nass, and Lillian Robinson. (They really did.) The "I's" and "me's" refer to me, however.] —P.H.

It seems clear to me that the women's movement in Boston hasn't really been doing much this year as compared to last year. I think that the reason behind this is that people have tried very hard not to think about what they were doing, and have therefore become encased in dogma. I also feel that people have settled for reforming their lives instead of changing them.

These things work together—the dogma, the jargon, the elitism: they entrap us and prevent us from seeing our real enemy.

First I'm going to talk about the problems that women who work for wages confront and then I'm going to describe the myths in the movement that have been taking up our energies.

When one considers the perennially popular question of "What am I going to do with my life?", one realizes that the difficulty of finding an answer has a lot to do with this society. Although there's clearly a lot of work to be done, it's very hard to find a job, particularly one that you can stand. Even the better-paying jobs, the ones that require a college degree, are ones in which one takes orders and carries them out or sometimes passes them on to underlings. One does what one is told. (As my mother's favorite saying goes, "Snap to it.") And if one's suggestions are not ignored, they are incorporated into your orders.

(Of course, one can't do exactly and only what one is told or else the job won't get done. Machines break down and emergencies occur. But there is always a limit to how much initiative you're allowed to take.)

A waitress's job is not to serve food, it's to make profits. This becomes abundantly clear when the waitress gives some food away.

You may think your work is "creative" but just try challenging your job definition. You never get to choose what you want to do—much less to choose your wages.

We are what we do with our time. If one is a waitress eight hours a day, and spends those eight hours hoping for oblivion, then one is a person who spends half of her waking life wishing that she weren't there at all. If that is what one's job is like, then it is, practically speaking, futile to consider oneself a secret girl revolutionary, or a sensuous woman, or a loving mother or a hip chick. In the reality of those eight hours, one is stepped on. But, although most people find it less painful to deny this reality, we are interested in doing away with the pain altogether.

Many middle-aged people will tell you how hard they have worked (which is true) and say, "I did it all for the kids." In other words, they were hardly even alive at all.

One's labor disappears before one has even finished, into other people's profits and other people's fame. One is always either a screwdriver or a screwdriver or both. And that's how we spend most of the hours of our lives. (And this account doesn't even deal with those "natural catastrophes" of capitalism: depressions, recessions and repression and a major war for every generation in this century.) The work that we do keeps the whole system going. If it weren't for the rest of us, the Rockefellers would starve.

It is when we do away with the bosses that we will be able to be somebody—to have our lives.

A revolution will only happen in this country when the mass of people become so disgusted with things and cause so much trouble (like strikes) that the line between the owning classes and these would-be expropriators becomes very clear. The revolution is when the workers actually take over their factories and offices and restaurants and department stores and hospitals, etc. and kick their managers and administrators out and start running them again.

"The liberation of the working class is the job of the workers alone." —Marx

To my mind the two essential points that the above makes are:

1. People have to organize themselves into groups, e.g. all the nurses and aides on the hospital floor who are willing to talk back to the doctors, or a group of friends who are willing to talk back to the doctors, or a group of friends who are willing to talk about "personal problems" and help each other out.

2. The important thing is seizing power, and the most important power to be seized is control over production. This process ranges from "No, you are not going to talk to me like that" to "No, I'm not going to work that hard" to "No, it's not yours anymore, it's our factory now."

(A book which elaborates on some of these ideas in much greater detail is "Workers Councils" by Anton Pannekoek. It is available from Root and Branch, Box 496, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.)

(A pamphlet which describes what happened during the Hungarian revolution in 1956 is "Hungary '56" by Andy Anderson; it is available from the Red Book Store, 91 River St., Cambridge, Mass. 02139.)

It seems to me that the women's movement in Boston has been backing away from this idea of groups of people seizing power. Of course, this idea does undercut some popular day-dreams. One woman I know has said that becoming a radical made her a better worker. At lunchtime, the other women in the office would read glamour magazines, while

she read the Old Mole (a Boston underground paper). Nothing bothered her anymore, because although nobody knew it, she was a secret girl revolutionary.

Besides cutting out a lot of exciting fantasies of being a guerrilla fighter in the Rockies, the idea of groups of people personally taking power is also scary. It's hard to talk back to the boss. I'm afraid of people I don't know, and have an extremely hard time talking back to piggy types, like managers. It's easier not to deal with them. This scheme of revolution does not leave radicals out, because radicals can and should be instigators. But real action will come only when the masses of "unpolitical" people start to move, to organize their anger in a major way.

MYTHS IN THE MOVEMENT

I think that the women in the movement have spent a good deal of time this year chasing after myths. The myths have gradually calcified into dogma, and opposing ideas have not been dealt with kindly in meetings.

I'm going to talk about those myths which I find most objectionable, and then I'm going to propose some types of activities which I think would lead people in a better direction.

THE MYTH OF SISTERHOOD

Now, a lot of us are very lonely. That's endemic to American society. In fact, it's not just us, often our parents are lonely too, but they have TV. So changing the thrust of our rhetoric from "all women are oppressed" to "all women are sisters" made us feel reassured. However, it didn't work for long.

I, not unlike other women I've spoken to, know about 200 Bread & Roses women by sight and about eight well, only one of whom could be called a heavy.

When I went to the dance held in October to raise money for the women's center, I freaked out. There were all these women whom I recognized (but who didn't seem to recognize me) and they were dancing together, talking together. I desperately wanted them to talk to me, wanted them to dance with me because I really believed all the rhetoric about how these women were all my sisters, how when the chips were down, they were the one group who really had my interests at heart. But now I realize that that just isn't true. (Incidentally, I've talked to several other women who have had similar crises of "anonymity".)

I'm not trying to say now that we should all go out and try and make it real: I am not saying that we should put our whole hearts and souls and guilty consciences into finding women who are lonely, and forcing ourselves to be their friends. I am not saying that we should guiltily try to make ourselves match up with the ridiculous rhetoric.

What I am saying is that the qualities of trust, support, and free conversation which so many of us miss in our lives will only start appearing in groups of people who are tied together by specific bonds, like ordinary groups of friends of long standing, or a group of salesgirls who have started talking back to the boss, or for that matter, a group of executives trying to break an industry-wide strike. "Our common oppression as women" just isn't enough. I think that 90% of the people in this country are oppressed and exploited by the ruling class; yet when I walk down the street they don't feel like my sisters and brothers.

We shouldn't promise people answers to all their personal problems as if we had these answers, because it just ain't so.

GAYNESS

Another myth in the movement is that being a lesbian is the only "revolutionary" way to order one's sex life. The phrase "woman-identified woman" makes me very uptight. It is frequently used to imply that because a woman has a relationship with a guy, she can't possibly be as much in earnest as a "woman-identified woman". Furthermore, she is supposedly condemned to be under his thumb and can be expected to go around selling out and shitting on her sisters.

Gay liberation is certainly a good thing in that it is useful for the people involved; it wreaks psychological havoc in America; it can teach everyone a lot about sexuality; and it is of course good for women to feel that they don't have to be absolutely dependent on men as sexual partners. However, I think that a lot of women have been misled into thinking that one isn't really committed to the women's movement unless one is gay, or that a gay relationship is going to be so much more ultimately groovy than any other sexual relationship they've ever had. A few of them may turn out that way, but good sexual relationships just aren't enough. One still is caught in daily life: going to work, or enduring school, or raising a kid.

I think that we're all oppressed by this society in ways that we can't stand, and I think that if lesbians didn't lay so many trips on straight women about how being gay is so much better (and being more oppressed = better, in movement jargon), those women might feel less defensive and spend more time fighting their real enemies.

LIFESTYLE

Another popular idea around town is that the essence of liberation is a liberated lifestyle. (I think that the essence of liberation is power over one's life.) A lot of women have been taking karate courses, for instance. Now while I certainly think that having a healthy body and knowing how to fight (if only against a single unarmed opponent) is good, it's not as great as is often claimed. The same goes for car mechanics courses. Since women have long been denied access to a certain type of knowledge, like mechanical skills, they decide that it will make a real difference if they start to learn these things. However, these courses start becoming a substitute for political action. If the only activities engaged in are skill classes, art courses, and exercise groups, the women's movement starts to look like a less refined version of the YWCA. It is not that these activities are bad; it's that they don't add up to power.

In other words, stomping through the streets in your workboots, knowing that you can kick some guy's balls in, is a very good first step. But actually doing something is what's really important. And even more than that, getting together with others in your situation and taking over that power is what counts.

As for communes, even if you can get them to work (which isn't easy) you are still stuck with the original problem of what to do with your life.

PORNOGRAPHY, CENSORSHIP AND PURITANISM

I don't find it strange that young boys and girls want to know what their own and others' bodies are like, and what sex is like, nor do I find it repulsive that both women and men often like to talk about and engage in sexual activity.

While it is true that most pornography is degrading to women, it does not immediately follow that we should try to ban smut from the newsstands. I think that any left-wing censorship campaign encourages the right wing in this

country, and doesn't help to derigidify our own thinking either. (Maybe what we need is more female pornographers.) We also need greater acknowledgment that the way people's minds work is not always nice, wholesome and pure.

Maybe what we need is more women writing about, doing photography about, drawing pictures about, sexual desires and fantasies towards men and other women.

Another kind of puritanism in the movement that is also common is the way that it is fine to talk about gay sex or about being fucked over sexually, but just plain enjoying sex with a guy isn't as permissible.

I'm not the only woman who's been made to feel ashamed of being "genitally oriented".

N.O.W.

Some women who've had disillusioning experiences in the women's movement have started saying that NOW is much more on the right track—"After all, at least they're actually doing something instead of bullshitting all the time." That is true, but the same thing can also be said for the Democratic Party.

NOW's members are mainly well educated and relatively privileged. They see themselves as being prevented from "making it" the way they deserve to. The difference between them and many other women is that most women either realize that they're never going to "make it" or that they don't want to. Congresswomen, advertising executives, businesswomen and college professors are not the kind of slots that are open to most women. So while I don't think that there is anything wrong with an oppressed group trying to get a bigger piece of the pie, I don't think that we're talking about the same pie. They want to get rid of some of the more neanderthal notions which are keeping them out of the executive suite—I would much rather blow it up.

There is also the question of tactics. This system has a lot of leeway in it for making reforms—but not for making real changes. If one female academe who's three times as well qualified as any men around wants a professorship, she can fight it in the courts. (Among other things, she can afford a lawyer and afford to wait as many years as it takes.) The system can give way to avoid a scandal. But if large numbers of women in a city decide that they want pay equality with men, either their employers will pay off the judges—or the judges will deliberate and decide in all good conscience that the law just doesn't apply because of some technicality. You can certainly win little battles pleading in the courts—but you can't win the big ones.

What we need is activities which tend to get lots of women together in groups that can take some action: like women in a hospital kitchen who tell the manager that if he wants them to work faster, he can do it himself. What we don't need is an organization that will say, "Stop that! If you don't behave, Congress won't pass the law we've been lobbying for."

THIRD WORLDISM

Another strange thing about the movement is that here we all are living in one of the all-time Pig States, where thousands of people have been involved in all sorts of spontaneous expressions of disgust (like anyone who thinks that last year's Harvard Square riot had very much to do with Bobby Seale - which was the organizers' intention - just wasn't there), yet politics usually means talking about the NLF or the Panthers and very rarely just about us. A lot of the reason for this is historical: five or more years ago most of

the white New Left was centered around elite schools, and a natural upper class disdain of the masses (plus disdain of those who fancied themselves upper class) combined well with the empirical evidence that the masses of Americans were well indoctrinated with racist and anti-communist ideology. Naturally, leftists felt very isolated and many looked to countries like Vietnam, Cuba and China for inspiration. That seemed to be where things were happening. However, a lot of things have changed since then, and you'd think that we would have learned by now that what a Communist Party does in an agricultural country is not exactly the best model for activity in the United States.

The women's movement, the GI movement, the increase of wildcat strikes, strikes in high schools, have all involved a lot of people who had different backgrounds from the original new leftists. It should be clear that large numbers of people in this country are dissatisfied with the present situation. Also the events in May 1968 in France, the widespread strikes in Turin, Italy for the past several years, the recent uprising in Poland would give us an indication as to what a revolution in an industrialized country would be like. But instead of finding out about these European events, the underground papers, including the women's papers, hang on Madame Binh's every word.

I think that the direction the student movement took has a lot to do with why as soon as we move away from the immediate issues of husbands and boyfriends we generally are supporting and mimicking other people's battles—not fighting our own.

Most of the issues the student movement picked to fight about - war research, complicity, expansion, ROTC - important issues, to be sure - didn't deal with the university as a school - classes and professors, except for a few exceptions like the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. It wasn't as if we thought that students liked school—the social phenomena of many students dropping out and wanting to drop out, cutting most of their classes, attempting suicide, and spending a whole year of their university career stoned, are familiar to us. We even knew that a major factor in the big and prominent actions like Columbia and Harvard was that students were so disgusted with school that they would go along with most any issue in order to express their anger. We knew that students were treated like subhumans, relegated to the lecture hall, brainwashed and machined to fit into their slots. However, we rarely faced those issues directly (nor did we try to understand what the nature of those slots was)—we were afraid of being "liberal". We passed up the opportunity to encourage students in intransigence to the system in their personal lives in order that we could enlist their bodies in our campaign to kick ROTC or the CIA or some other such thing off campus. (I would suspect that black student struggles had a tendency to a different character. They at least were usually fighting their own battles, not somebody else's.)

We never sufficiently realized that this is a capitalist system—that we and the other students were going to get out of school and go to work for wages (if we could get jobs); we didn't directly fight the purpose of school, which is to make sure that we would have all the requisite technical skills and no more, that we would follow orders, that we would never refuse an assignment, even if it involved murder, and to throw enough academic fog in our minds so that we could never understand what was going on. The point of our classes was to make us believe in the keynesian reformed version of capitalist exploitation, the B.F. Skinner updated version of psychology, the new relevant version of religion,

the inviolability of ART, the Walt Rostow humanist version of imperialism and our own innate superiority over all those beneath us and our innate inferiority with regard to all those above us. The university made sure that we would carry those ideas around in our heads and never trust our own feelings.

CHANGING OUR LIVES

The United States is a very industrialized capitalist country in which the overwhelming majority of people work for wages and are therefore exploited by the owning and ruling class—i.e. they are part of the proletariat even if they're engineers and look "middle-class". The radical movement is not necessarily a collection of the fiercest fighters. People in this society are always fighting back. At the very least, they continually gripe among themselves. Usually, they also talk back to their bosses and call in sick when they're not. Most people try not to work as fast as possible and discourage others from doing so. Sometimes they go out on union called strikes or, better yet, on wildcats.

Women have been talking back to and fighting with and walking out on their men since time immemorial. We all know that students hate school, cut up in class and daydream. There is a lot of generalized opposition in this country. The movement is that group of people who say, "Your (our) discontent has a more general social cause than just that particular boss, husband, school. The movement is also a group of people who think that the anger should be organized, that targets chosen and who sometimes feel that they have a personal stake in upping the ante. So, given that, who are we, and what should we do?

"The Proletariat is Revolutionary, or it is Nothing"

—Marx

Those of us who work should deal with that situation. We should object to the ways that we are being screwed and get together with the other employees: "I talked back to my boss and wasn't fired"; "I stopped worrying about not being an 'efficient' waitress"; "All the women on the line learned to embarrass the hell out of the foreman by discussing their menstrual periods."

If talk doesn't work, we can take part in action—sabotage: "my boss was a bastard and his account books will never be the same"; "erase your company's computer with a handy home magnet"; and wildcats: "we all got sick of the job—on the same day"; "the customers were pouring into the restaurant for lunch, when all of us waitresses told the manager we had been working too hard and were all going to take a break."

This whole article has been talking about mistakes we have been making and directions we should be taking. Since it was written in the midst of things it is neither perfect nor complete (notice the omission of any extended discussion of the family). However, I think that the major points are correct. What we need is a lot more debate and a lot more thoughtful activity.

Fight Dirty—Life is REAL.

