

AMERICAN CULTURE

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Nancy Walker, *"A Very Serious Thing": Women's Humor and American Culture*

Daring to Be BAD

Radical
Feminism in
America
1967-1975

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Foreword by Ellen Willis

American Culture 3

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis • Oxford

4

Varieties of Radical Feminism— Redstockings, Cell 16, The Feminists, New York Radical Feminists

The radical feminist groups discussed in this chapter agreed that gender, not class or race, was the primary contradiction and that all other forms of social domination originated with male supremacy.¹ Radical feminists' commitment to an independent and autonomous women's movement and their conviction that male dominance was not a mere by-product of capitalism put them at odds with early socialist-feminists.² Nor did radical feminists feel much of an affinity with liberal feminists whose efforts to eliminate sex discrimination in the workplace they supported, but whose assimilationist goal of bringing women into the mainstream they opposed. To radical feminists, NOW's narrow focus on formal equality with men not only ignored the fundamental problem—women's subordination within the home—it assumed that equality in an unjust society was worth fighting for. However, as this chapter suggests, radical feminism was anything but monolithic. While Redstockings, The Feminists, New York Radical Feminists, and Cell 16 were all radical feminist groups, they were divided on critical questions. By late 1969, there had emerged different, and sometimes widely divergent, strains of radical feminism.

Redstockings

When Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone founded Redstockings in February 1969 it was with the intention of establishing "an ex-

PLICITLY radical feminist group, as opposed to a group [like NYRW] that had radical feminists in it along with other people."³ They envisioned Redstockings as a "very militant, very public group," one which would be committed to action as well as to consciousness-raising.⁴ They chose the name Redstockings

to represent a synthesis of two traditions: that of the earlier feminist theoreticians and writers who were insultingly called "Bluestockings" in the 19th century, and the militant political tradition of radicals—the red of revolution.⁵

As Willis remembers it, "it was Shulie and I who decided on the group, Shulie and I who made up the name, and we who invited other people."⁶ Besides Willis and Firestone, the earliest members of Redstockings included Kathie Sarachild, Irene Peslikis, Pat Mainardi, Barbara Mehrhof, Pam Kearon, Linda Feldman, Sheila Cronan, and Barbara Kaminsky. Carol Hanisch did not join the group because she moved to Gainesville, Florida to organize women for the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) and to work in Gainesville Women's Liberation with her friends Judith Brown and Carol Giardina. Sarachild attended several early Redstockings' meetings, but in March she moved to Gainesville for a month to work on a consciousness-raising handbook.⁷ However, when Sarachild returned in April she became one of the group's key members.⁸ Ros Baxandall, Barbara Leon, and Alix Kates Shulman joined later that spring.

For its first action, Redstockings decided to address the issue of abortion. By the late '60s sentiment within the medical profession and family-planning organizations was shifting in favor of reform (and in some cases repeal) of abortion laws. Beginning with Colorado in 1967, a number of states started to reform these laws. Unfortunately, these so-called reform bills were little better than the laws they replaced. The new laws did make therapeutic abortion legal, but "punitive therapeutic abortion committees put women through intense and often moralizing inquiries to determine whether their abortion request was truly justified on 'health' grounds." For instance, California and Colorado not only required written consent from two doctors and the hospital committee, but made the procedure more expensive by mandating that it be done on an inpatient basis. Restrictions such as these

forced poor women who "lacked the personal connections to private doctors and the funds necessary to obtain a safe hospital abortion" to use back-alley abortionists.⁹ Seeing the less than liberating effects of abortion reform, radical feminists like Cindy Cisler, a founder of New Yorkers for Abortion Law Repeal, contended:

Proposals for "reform" are based on the notion that abortion must be regulated, meted out to deserving women under an elaborate set of rules designed to provide "safeguards against abuse. . . ." Repeal is based on the . . . idea of *justice*: that abortion is a woman's right and that no one can veto her decision and compel her to bear children against her will.¹⁰

Indeed, as Willis points out, when feminists began to push for the repeal of abortion laws, "our first target was the 'reformers' who sat around splitting hairs over how sick or poor or multiparous a pregnant woman had to be to deserve exemption from reproductive duty."¹¹

New York was among the states considering reforming its abortion law. When it was announced that the state would be holding legislative hearings on abortion reform on February 13, 1969, and that fourteen men and one woman—a nun—had been selected as expert witnesses for the hearing, women's liberationists and NOW members alike decided to picket the hearing. A group of about seven women's liberationists resolved to do more than merely picket. Determined that those fifteen witnesses would not be the only ones allowed to discuss under what conditions women might be permitted abortions, they decided to disrupt the hearing.¹² After one of the witnesses, a judge, recommended that abortion be made legal for women who had "done their social duty" by having four children, Kathie Sarachild stood up and shouted, "Alright, now let's hear from some *real* experts—the women." According to a *New York Times* reporter, the committee members just "stared over their microphones in amazement" at what was happening. Sarachild continued talking and urged the legislature to repeal all abortion laws "instead of wasting more time talking about these stupid reforms."¹³ Then Willis stood up and began to testify. Exasperated, one legislator pleaded with the protestors to "act like ladies," but to no avail.¹⁴ Finally, the committee adjourned and moved to another room to meet in execu-

tive session. Shortly after the protest, in an interview for the *Guardian*, Willis explained:

We broke up the hearings to push a political debate. We wanted to expose how the system operates in a male-supremacist way. We are particularly interested in exposing the concept of expertise, as opposed to letting people make decisions about their lives. This is the same stuff they tried to push over on the black movement.¹⁵

Inspired by the success of this action, the newly formed Redstockings decided to hold their own hearings on abortion. Although many women refused to testify about their abortions for fear of possible repercussions, Peslikis and Kaminsky managed to line up twelve speakers for the March 21 speak-out.¹⁶ Mehrhof recalls that members of Redstockings wore skirts and red stockings to the event. In an effort to "confront the spurious personal-political distinction," the assumption that abortion was somehow not political, the women decided to talk about themselves rather than talk in theoretical terms. Writing shortly thereafter, Willis maintained that they had been correct to talk in personal terms for it "evoke[d] strong reactions . . . empathy, anger, pain" from the 300 or so people who attended. So successful was the speak-out that its organizers hoped that the idea of speak-outs would "catch on and become the equivalent, for the women's movement, of the Vietnam teach-ins."¹⁷ In fact, their speak-out inspired others to speak out on the issue. As part of their campaign to overturn abortion laws, French feminists enlisted the support of a number of prominent French women (including de Beauvoir) who risked fines and imprisonment by publicly declaring, "I have had an abortion."¹⁸

In early April, Sheila Cronan proposed that for their next action the group hang a banner which would read "Liberty for Women: Repeal All Abortion Laws" from the Statue of Liberty. However, Cronan and her allies encountered technical problems in constructing the banner, and opposition to the action when Sarachild returned to the group. Sarachild argued that the action was poorly conceived and that the group's energy would be better spent writing a manifesto.¹⁹ When the group voted in mid-June to scuttle the action, the discussion reportedly "broke down into great recriminations."²⁰

The Statue of Liberty action became a point of contention because members disagreed about the importance of consciousness-raising. Not everyone in the group was as committed to consciousness-raising as Sarachild, Peslikis, and Mainardi. Certainly, Mehrhof, Kearon, Cronan, and Linda Feldman—who eventually left Redstockings to join The Feminists—felt that consciousness-raising should be de-emphasized. Even Firestone reportedly wanted the group to be more action-oriented. There were also disagreements about the pro-woman line. Mehrhof, Kearon, Cronan, and Feldman were its most vocal detractors. But Willis contends that both she and Firestone were far more psychologically oriented than Sarachild, Peslikis, and Mainardi of the pro-woman faction.²¹

The tensions over consciousness-raising and the pro-woman line seem to have been exacerbated by Sarachild's re-entry to the group. She reportedly let the group know that she was returning to Redstockings despite her differences with the group.²² She then reportedly tried to recruit to the group women who she thought shared her political vision. Baxandall, who was at that time in a study group with Anne Forer, Judy Thibeu, and Helen Kritzler, was among those Sarachild succeeded in recruiting. Baxandall asserts that Sarachild told her that she was shifting the group's focus from action to consciousness-raising and that the meetings were, as a result, much improved.²³ Indeed, the group became less action-oriented following the March 1969 abortion speak-out. The group did disrupt another all-male abortion panel at Cooper Union and helped to organize a number of joint actions.²⁴ But from the spring of 1969 until its demise in the fall of 1970, the group devoted most of its time to consciousness-raising, organized c-r groups for new women, drafted its manifesto, and distributed movement literature.²⁵

Redstockings, as the name implies, was strongly influenced by the left. Although the group rejected Marxist theorizing on the "woman question," it appropriated Marxist methodology in an effort to construct a theory of women's oppression. For instance, Firestone argued that in developing an analysis of male supremacy, feminists could

learn a lot from Marx and Engels: Not their literal opinions about women—about the conditions of women as an oppressed class

they know next to nothing . . . —but rather their analytic method.²⁶

The pro-woman faction, the dominant faction in Redstockings, articulated what Willis has described as “a kind of neo-Maoist materialism,” which put them at odds with many other radical feminists.²⁷ According to the pro-woman line, women’s behavior was the result of immediate external conditions and not, as many other feminists argued, the result of their conditioning. Or in the words of their manifesto, “women’s submission is not the result of brainwashing, stupidity, or mental illness but of continual, daily pressure from men.”²⁸ It rejected as false all psychological explanations of women’s behavior. For instance, while many feminists argued that women marry because they are brainwashed into believing that they must, pro-woman feminists argued that women marry because remaining single is “truly difficult” and requires that one work at a “boring and alienating job.”²⁹ Carol Hanisch, one of the main proponents of the pro-woman line, even argued that looking pretty and acting dumb were survival strategies which women should continue to use until such time as the “power of unity” could replace them. Willis maintains that the pro-woman line

did tend to put power issues into very sharp focus. If you simply ignored the complicated psychological issues which [the pro-woman line faction] didn’t agree existed and just talked about the particular power relations that were happening . . . you still learned a lot.³⁰

Moreover, in arguing that there were no personal solutions, but, rather, “elements of resistance and accommodation” in all choices, Redstockings tried to avoid making moralistic judgments about other women, especially non-Movement women.³¹ Indeed, for some Redstockings the pro-woman line was also a way to address the issue of class. In the spring of 1970, Barbara Leon argued:

to advocate that women “liberate themselves” by giving up marriage reflects a strong class bias in automatically excluding the mass of women who have no other means of support but a husband.

To Leon all the talk of conditioning or brainwashing

falsely divides women into two groups—those who are “militant” and those who are still “brainwashed,” thus keeping us apart and preventing us from realizing our common oppression. Talk about brainwashing ensures domination of the feminist movement by college-educated white women: the majority of women whose struggles we must join (welfare mothers, black and brown women fighting for their liberation, working women and housewives) are too involved in matters of survival to listen to mythical abstractions about damaged psyches or internalized images.³²

As Leon’s statement suggests, Redstockings assumed that their “common oppression” united women more than class or race divided them. In their manifesto, Redstockings tried to mitigate class and race divisions by “defin[ing] our best interest as that of the poorest, most brutally exploited woman,” and by “repudiating all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women.”³³ Redstockings’ analysis suggested that a multi-class and multi-racial movement could be achieved if white, middle-class women would simply renounce their privileges and altruistically identify with women who were less privileged than they. It was a nice fantasy, but as we shall see, it did not materialize.

Pro-woman feminists not only defended married women against charges of brainwashing, they claimed that marriage represented the best bargain for women—a position which was somewhat anomalous among radical feminists. Patricia Mainardi claimed that in consciousness-raising sessions

it became obvious that the entire alternative lifestyle revolutionary subculture was in some ways a giant step backwards for women, despite its attractive aspects and the hopes some women had for it being an improvement over “traditional marriage.”³⁴

Mainardi went further and argued that both men and women “would like love, security, companionship, respect and a long-term relationship.”³⁵ And in a 1971 speech, Sarachild argued “most women wouldn’t join a movement that called for ‘free love’ . . . because they know that isn’t freedom (for women) or love (for women).”³⁶ In explaining women’s preference for monogamous relationships, Leon stressed “the dangers of venereal disease, unwanted pregnancy, or forcible rape that a woman

exposes herself to in casual encounters."³⁷ Not everyone in Redstockings agreed that sexual fidelity was preferable to "free love." Willis recalls having had "terrible fights" with Sarachild about monogamy.³⁸ While Willis admits that consciousness-raising revealed that most women favored monogamous relationships, she claims that the group was unable to reach a consensus about why this was so:

There were a lot of arguments about how to interpret that material (did it represent these women's true desires, their objective interest given a sexist culture, or the psychology of the oppressed) and what to make of the minority who disagreed (was the difference in their situation or their emotional makeup, did they have false consciousness, or what).³⁹

Sarachild proposed in 1969 that women "use marriage as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the family revolution. When male supremacy is completely eliminated, marriage, like the state, will disappear."⁴⁰ Indeed, Sarachild reportedly declared at one Redstockings meeting, "we won't get off the plantation until the revolution!"⁴¹ The irony of all this is that most of the women in Redstockings did not reside on "plantations." For instance, Sarachild, despite her protestations about staying on the "plantation," had never married. In fact, Willis claims that most of the women in Redstockings "came out of the counter-culture and continued to hang out with counter-culture men." Willis notes that "there was this rebellion and resentment against the lives that in many ways we were, in fact, living."⁴²

But if the pro-woman feminists of Redstockings were highly critical of the sexual revolution and free love, they were not anti-sexual in the way Cell 16 and The Feminists were. Like a number of other radical feminists, they criticized the repression of female sexuality and "took for granted women's desire for genital sexual pleasure."⁴³ To feminists who doubted that heterosexuality for women was either fully chosen or truly pleasurable, the Redstockings' position smacked of false consciousness. Indeed, Atkinson reportedly attended one Redstockings meeting where she and Willis got into a disagreement over whether women really needed sexual relationships. Willis recalls at one point in the debate "Ti-Grace saying very patronizingly that [sexual desire] was all in my head."⁴⁴

Redstockings' analysis of sexual politics had more than a little to do with their conviction that heterosexuality could be deployed on women's behalf. Indeed, in 1968 Sarachild argued, "We're saying that for most of history sex was, in fact, both our undoing and our only possible weapon of self-defense and self-assertion (aggression)."⁴⁵ Redstockings envisioned women directly confronting the men in their lives, much as the women did in William Hinton's *Fanshen*, a widely read and influential book among feminists and leftists which documents the revolutionary transformation of the Chinese village of Long Bow.⁴⁶ According to Willis, the idea behind Redstockings' "vision of direct confrontation between sexual classes" was that if all women demanded equality and refused to "scab" men would be forced to treat women as equals.⁴⁷ But as Willis notes, there was a strong "heterosexual presumption" here which ran counter to Redstockings' claims that they did not elevate one lifestyle or sexual preference over another:

It was tacitly assumed, and sometimes explicitly argued that men's need for sexual love from women was our biggest weapon in both individual and collective struggle—and that our own need for *satisfying* sexual love from men was our greatest incentive for maintaining the kind of personal confrontation that feminism required.⁴⁸

Lesbians, who were seen as withdrawing from the sexual battleground rather than engaging men in struggle, were irrelevant to Redstockings' vision of class struggle between men and women.

In their manifesto, Redstockings contended that "all men"—not just the ruling class men whom politicians typically targeted—"receive economic, sexual and psychological benefits from male supremacy." Indeed, according to their manifesto, "All men have oppressed women." Redstockings rejected an institutional analysis of women's oppression because they felt it allowed men to evade responsibility for their role in maintaining male supremacy. Thus, the manifesto contended that "institutions alone do not oppress; they are merely tools of the oppressor."⁴⁹ Willis, who finds fault with Redstockings' anti-institutional analysis, explains:

The idea that systems (like the family or capitalism) are in some sense autonomous, that they operate according to a logic that in

certain ways constrains the rulers as well as the ruled, was rejected as a mystification and a way of letting men off the hook. To say, for instance, that the family oppressed women was to evade the fact that our husbands and fathers oppressed us.⁵⁰

To Pat Mainardi, for instance, the problem was not marriage, but, rather, the "male supremacy and sex roles within marriage."⁵¹ Not all members agreed with this analysis; in their individual writings both Willis and Firestone stressed the centrality of marriage and the family to women's oppression.⁵² For example, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone called for the elimination of the family structure, "the vinculum," she argued, "through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled."⁵³ If all men were their oppressors, all women were automatically assumed to be their allies, or sisters. Thus Redstockings pledged that they would "always take the side of women against their oppressors."

By spring 1969, only several months after Redstockings' founding, group members found themselves increasingly divided on ideological, structural, and strategic questions. Kearon, Mehrhof, Cronan, and Feldman constituted the minority that pushed for more action and theory, separatism in personal as well as political life, and a more egalitarian group structure. They resented Sarachild's attempts to reinstitute consciousness-raising, an activity they felt resulted only in more consciousness-raising, never in action.⁵⁴ Even before the disintegration of NYRW, Mehrhof had argued that "consciousness-raising has the ability to organize great numbers of women, but to organize them for nothing."⁵⁵ Mehrhof and others wanted to organize actions in order to make their ideas public and to test themselves. To Kearon consciousness-raising seemed dangerously static:

The mass of woman want facts and statistics. We also want training in consistent principles of feminism. We want to change and remold ourselves. Talking about our personal problems is not enough.

And, in what seems a reference to Sarachild, Kearon pointed out that it "is not for any well-educated woman to declare that education is unnecessary or undesirable. It is essential for all women to be politically educated."⁵⁶

This faction also opposed the pro-woman line which they ar-

gued underestimated women's revolutionary potential and thus "kep[t] [women] from moving out . . . from going on the offensive." In particular they objected to Redstockings' position on marriage and sex. Kearon criticized the assumption that "it is natural for men and women to be dependent on each other." She excoriated the pro-woman line faction for being concerned with ensuring male fidelity "instead of encouraging women to break off their relationships with men."⁵⁷ According to Willis:

The struggle [over separatism] was between women who took for granted that being with men was desirable and those who wanted nothing to do with men and were angry at women who they felt were too male-oriented.⁵⁸

For this minority faction, the goal was to wean women from debilitating relationships with men, not to encourage them to engage their lovers or husbands in battle. They argued that heterosexuality inhibited female solidarity and encouraged female dependence. And, like Atkinson, Kearon chided pro-woman feminists for being so concerned with sex:

Sex is considered a necessity of life (Who says so? Well Sigmund Freud and Paul Krassner seem to think so). And by sex they mean heterosexual sex not masturbation, not lesbianism. It is considered "dangerous" to one's health to go without it for long periods of time. Exactly what kind of symptoms one can expect from it is never mentioned. But the very vagueness of the disease makes "sex starvation" a heavy threat, and is just another device, originated and propagated by men to keep women bound to them.⁵⁹

For Kearon and her allies, heterosexual desire was nothing more than a male fabrication designed to keep women enslaved to men.

Mehrhof, Kearon, Feldman, and Cronan also opposed what they felt was the unequalitarian structure of Redstockings. They argued that the group automatically assumed that those women with skills, such as writing or public speaking, should be the group's spokeswomen. This became an issue almost immediately when Willis and Firestone were extensively quoted in a series of *Guardian* articles on women's liberation.⁶⁰ Some women felt that they should not have identified themselves as Redstockings members without first informing the group that they were being interviewed. Others resented their access to the media. At a March 25

meeting, Kearon and others criticized Firestone and Willis for "hoarding" the creative work and dominating the meetings.⁶¹

The "equality" proponents learned that Atkinson's group, The October 17th Movement (later to be re-named The Feminists) had adopted the lot system whereby work was divided into two categories—creative and routine—and was determined by lot rather than expertise or familiarity.⁶² By April, they had succeeded in getting Redstockings to vote in the lot system. In early June, Mehrhof and Kearon raised the issue of class, claiming that those women with skills had not obtained them by accident, but by virtue of their class background. Mehrhof and Kearon were of working-class or lower middle-class origins, but this was something they shared with several other members, including Willis, Peslikis, and Sarachild.⁶³ The equality issue—or the class issue, as it later became—caused a great deal of tension in the group. Willis, who wrote a column on rock music for *The New Yorker*, admits that writers had a certain power in the movement because they could get their ideas across much more easily than other women. Their power contravened the ideology, especially characteristic of Redstockings, of women's shared powerlessness. The influence enjoyed by writers in the movement suggested that some sisters were indeed more powerful than others.

Those accused of elitism handled the criticism differently. In 1984, Willis wrote that she "tried to respond to the criticism by echoing it and withdrawing from [her] leadership role, in classic guilty liberal fashion."⁶⁴ But Willis recalls that Firestone was very "impatient with all the noodling over egalitarianism" and did nothing to disguise it:

I remember one meeting where Shulie refused to do any typing. She said that was what she had always had to do and she hadn't joined the women's movement to do more typing. She was very snarky about that.

In the end, Willis believes that Firestone "took it personally and felt betrayed by people whom she felt were trying to derail the movement." She claims that Firestone "was always under attack" for elitism and feels that it was "aimed as much at her good qualities as her bad qualities." Willis admits that Firestone could be "bossy and domineering," but contends that she was also "a

leader with good ideas."⁶⁵ According to Mehrhof's notes of the March 25 meeting, Firestone, upon being attacked, said, "the same thing happened in Radical Women—you are trying to castrate me."⁶⁶ In the *Guardian* article, Firestone attributed the "decapitation of leadership" to a "terror of carrying [feminism] to its logical conclusions."⁶⁷ But, at least in principle, Firestone was not opposed to internal democracy. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, she maintained that the movement's commitment to "establishing an egalitarian structure" set it apart from other movements which "are unable to practice among themselves what they preach."⁶⁸

Sarachild was also attacked for being too dominant, too much of a leader. Willis, like many others who worked with Sarachild, acknowledges that she could be "really obstreperous and not listen to people." However, she feels that Sarachild was "attacked unmercifully for being 'too male, too unsisterly, too argumentative, and too judgmental.'" ⁶⁹ As usual, Sarachild was attacked for her confrontative method of consciousness-raising. This time, Joyce Betries, who later joined the sectarian left group Youth Against War and Fascism, challenged Sarachild's leadership. Betries succeeded in getting the group to adopt a set of consciousness-raising rules designed to minimize the power differential within the group. According to Cellestine Ware, a black woman who helped found New York Radical Feminists, the rules even prohibited members from commenting on another's experience.⁷⁰

The issue of expansion was yet another tension in the group. Until the summer of 1969 the group had been closed except to those who were recruited by members. Many of the founders preferred to recruit women who agreed with the group's program. Baxandall contends that Sarachild "wanted people who had developed a line to be in the group together and to recruit other people based on that. She was in the process of becoming a Leninist."⁷¹ Their reservations about expansion stemmed in large part from fears that new members would weaken the group's analysis.⁷² However, other women felt that the group, by remaining closed to all but those who already agreed with its analysis, was wasting an opportunity to organize large numbers of women. In late June, Redstockings announced that it would begin organiz-

ing groups for new women. According to one estimate, there were about 200 women in Redstockings at its height.⁷³ By establishing new groups, Redstockings expanded, and avoided diluting the politics of the original group, Group X.

But there was tension between the new women, who were forever suggesting that the manifesto be changed, and the founders, who saw any revision as a vitiation of their manifesto.⁷⁴ Karla Jay was among the new women who felt that the founders expected them to embrace their program and analysis "as though they were the Ten Commandments."⁷⁵ Yet one can appreciate how the founders felt. Many of the new women lacked their experience in radical politics. In fact, Peslikis contends that many of the women who joined Redstockings lacked any class analysis.⁷⁶ Over time the new groups grew more autonomous from the founding group.

Redstockings continued to function until the fall of 1970. But the battles over separatism, consciousness-raising, elitism, and expansion wore people down. Mehrhof, Kearon, Feldman, and Cronan left Redstockings for The Feminists between the spring and fall of 1969. Firestone grew increasingly impatient with the pro-woman line and the consciousness-raising program of the dominant faction and was increasingly at odds with the minority faction that was pushing the "equality issue."⁷⁷ She was also becoming more involved in writing her book, a fact which undoubtedly made some women resentful. Mehrhof noted that by late June, Firestone was "slipping out of the group."⁷⁸ Within a few months she would begin to organize New York Radical Feminists with Anne Koedt. In fall 1969, Willis moved to Colorado to participate in the GI Coffeehouse movement and to try to initiate a radical feminist movement there. Shortly after Redstockings accepted Betries' consciousness-raising rules, Betries left the group. Somewhat later, Sarachild left the group, and with Barbara Leon and Colette Price started *Woman's World*, "a New York City-based newspaper of feminist analysis."⁷⁹ Peslikis and Mainardi left to start Redstockings artists, and later, the journal *Women and Art*.

Why did Redstockings dissolve? The group's detractors maintain that Redstockings was derailed by its dogmatic commitment to the pro-woman line and consciousness-raising.⁸⁰ Peslikis contends that Redstockings had fulfilled its purpose by writing its

manifesto and disseminating movement literature.⁸¹ And Hanisch and Leon attribute Redstockings' demise to newcomers who joined the group despite disagreeing with the group's philosophy.⁸² However, the group's most vocal dissidents had been with the group from the outset.

Redstockings left its mark on the movement. It popularized consciousness-raising, invented the speak-out, and radicalized thousands of women by distributing movement literature—at first free of charge. Redstockings' insistence that all men oppress women and its nonjudgmental stance toward non-Movement women were valuable correctives to the prevailing left analysis which attributed women's oppression to the "system" or to women's "false consciousness." Nevertheless, the pro-woman line was in many respects problematic, especially as it was elaborated by Sarachild and others. Both consciousness-raising and the pro-woman line assumed that women's experiences and interests were uniform, or as Sarachild put it, "that most women were like ourselves—not different."⁸³ In assuming the universality of their experiences, they seriously underestimated the class and racial differences dividing women. Even as late as 1973, Sarachild maintained that "what was moving behind radical women was that we understood that we were basically the same as other women and therefore what would turn us on would turn other women on."⁸⁴ But despite their sincere efforts to identify with those women most victimized by the system, the movement remained largely white and middle-class. The vast majority of working-class and third-world women were not "turned on" by their feminism.

Their assumption that most women were like themselves also led them to underestimate the difficulty of achieving female solidarity. The Chinese women of Long Bow may have built "a strong united sisterhood," but as Willis points out, "America is not a Chinese village."⁸⁵ Their declaration, "we will always take the side of women against their oppressors," ignored the possibility that women's interests might in fact be oppositional.⁸⁶ Their insistence on pursuing "only what is good for women," rather than what is "'revolutionary' or 'reformist,'" echoed Stokely Carmichael, who in 1968 had declared "it is not a question of right or left, it's a question of black."⁸⁷ While this was clearly a reaction to those left feminists who were forever criticizing femi-

nism as intrinsically reformist, it seemed to imply that "reformist" and "revolutionary" were male categories which did not apply to women's liberationists—a point later amplified by cultural feminists. Perhaps this is why pro-woman feminists were initially so restrained in their criticism of liberal feminists whose feminism was more self-interested and who lacked Redstockings' commitment to "the poorest, most brutally exploited women." For example, it was not until 1971, long after other radical feminists, that Sarachild acknowledged that

N.O.W. was always afraid to support the principles of all-female groups, despite the absolute necessity for an oppressed class to organize out of earshot of the oppressor and build an independent base of power. The classy N.O.W. ladies were too afraid of labels like "man-hater."⁸⁸

And in contrast to most radical feminists who dismissed *Ms.* magazine when it began publishing in the spring of 1972, Sarachild hailed it as "a molotov cocktail that looked like a martini." She lavished praise on the magazine, claiming that its "feminist, political content, in some important ways, is better than most of what the women's liberation movement has yet come up with."⁸⁹ Although she conceded that *Ms.* seemed "rather nervous about its association with the real, breathing women who comprise the feminist movement," she argued:

Of course, *genuine* support from the "prominent" and "respectable" type of women could be a real aid to *Ms.* and to the feminist movement as a whole. The defeat of male supremacy is, after all, in our common interests and such women may have access to sources of information and money which would otherwise be unavailable for feminist use.⁹⁰

Sarachild's early defense of *Ms.* is ironic because by 1973 she was charging *Ms.* with opportunism and calling the magazine "the Teamsters of the women's movement." Sarachild argued that *Ms.* had "moved in on the women's movement the way the Teamsters moved in on the Farmworkers Union. They don't break hard ground themselves. They only go where people have been."⁹¹ In 1973 Sarachild, Hanisch, Leon, and Price re-established Redstockings, and in 1975 accused Gloria Steinem, *Ms.* magazine's chief editor, of having had ties with the CIA.⁹² They further insinuated

that the CIA was using the magazine as a pawn to supplant radical feminism with liberal feminism. For the re-formed Redstockings, the movement's decline was the work of "agents, opportunists, and fools."⁹³ They did not acknowledge that their faith in a universal sisterhood might have been misplaced.

If pro-woman feminists were slow to criticize liberal feminists they took little time in denouncing women who chose alternative lifestyles. Their conviction that the search for alternative lifestyles would promote "personal solutionism," and would distance the movement from the masses of women led them to validate traditional over rebellious lifestyles. Sometimes they even seemed more interested in preserving traditional strategies than in carving out new ones for women. Jennifer Gardner, an early proponent of the pro-woman line who had moved from New York City to the Bay Area and worked on the *Women's Page*, attacked the small-group concept which Pam Allen, now another Bay Area resident, had pioneered:

The small group is . . . simply a counter-institution. It works by diverting women's energy from revolutionary activity to attempts to live an alternative life style. In small groups . . . we are supposed to create a new morality right in the middle of the same old objective conditions. The implication is that we are to blame for our oppression, that all we need to do is "change" ourselves, and things will be fine.⁹⁴

With the emergence of the gay liberation movement and lesbian feminism, Redstockings' "heterosexual presumption" developed into an antagonism toward lesbian feminism that verged on homophobic. To the pro-woman faction the growing numbers of women exploring same-sex relationships seemed to jeopardize the struggle against male supremacy, at least as they had envisioned it. In mid-1971, Sarachild and Leon claimed that within the

"left" flank of the so-called feminist organizations (in "women's liberation" and "radical lesbians") there were and still are all those incredible claims of groovy and liberated all-female "alternative lifestyles," of women who were so "strong" they no longer "cared" about men even though they were still living in the same world as men, the man's world, in fact.⁹⁵

Women who experimented with celibacy, lesbianism, bisexuality, and women's communes were accused of retreating from the

sexual battlefield. And in 1975 the recomposed Redstockings blamed lesbians, in partnership with "pseudo-leftists," for the movement's decline.⁹⁶ For example, Pat Mainardi contended:

The leftist women thought of us as support troops for their dogma; the lesbians as potential sex partners, the sum of these two attitudes—followers, supporters and sex partners—is exactly the same as men's attitudes towards all women. It is easy to see the derivation of the left-lesbian alliance—they need each other, as two sides of the same coin.⁹⁷

Redstockings' fears about personal solutionism were not unfounded, for experimentation with nontraditional lifestyles was often accompanied by diminished political activism. Some women did become more interested in making internal changes—"changing their heads"—than in struggling to change external conditions. Yet many women in the movement did not find the prospect of relentless struggle with recalcitrant men appealing. Moreover, to many it seemed that women would have more energy to fight male supremacy if they were no longer entangled in emotionally draining relationships with men. In fact, many radical feminists, including a few Redstockings, were exploring alternatives to heterosexuality. Although radical feminists were committed to collective struggle, they were hardly uninterested in improving the quality of their personal lives. Beyond a point, the Redstockings' solution of engaging men in personal and collective struggle seemed more tiring than inspiring to many women.

Just as the pro-woman faction argued that no lifestyle was preferable to another, they contended that no man was better than any other. But the idea that all men were intransigent heels was, as Willis explains:

contradictory to the fact that we were all trying to pressure the men to be better. For what improvements men did make were a choice on their part, because they could find women who were not in the movement if they wanted to.⁹⁸

If men were irredeemably sexist, unwilling as members of the oppressor class to part with their privileges, women were ineluctably their victims. Their contention that "women act out of necessity, . . . not out of choice" reduced women to helpless victims

unable to act upon the world. For instance, in 1970 pro-woman line advocate, Judith Brown wrote:

The current trend toward unisex and female aggressiveness in bed is not a sign of female liberation. In Unisex [*sic*] the male is coopting [*sic*] the few ornaments women have to make themselves more attractive in the necessary race for a man. Urging women to take more responsibility in bed is an attempt to extend her sphere of emotional responsibility to love-making; now the man doesn't even have to take the risk of initiating sex.⁹⁹

The assumption seemed to be that men were imposing new fashion and sexual standards upon women. But, of course, many women were interested in playing a more active role during sex and welcomed the less constricting clothing afforded by unisex fashions. By the same logic, it could be argued that abortion laws were liberalized to maximize men's sexual access to women.

Even Patricia Mainardi, who was very much in the pro-woman camp, today acknowledges that the pro-woman line may have exaggerated men's power and women's powerlessness.¹⁰⁰ In an effort to discourage women from seeking personal solutions, pro-woman feminists depicted women's oppression as so total that individual women were unable to resist. Pro-woman feminists made women's oppression seem monolithic and immutable in much the same way that certain feminists today do. Indeed, Willis maintains that Redstockings' tendency to see men as "a monolithic mass" and women as powerless victims set the stage, quite unintentionally, for the sort of analysis articulated by Andrea Dworkin.¹⁰¹ The major differences being that pro-woman feminists attributed women's acquiescence to material conditions rather than to false consciousness, and men's resistance to the attachment of any oppressor class to its privileged status, not to some peculiarly male predilection for power.

The pro-woman line became a much maligned tendency within certain movement circles. For instance, Judith Hole and Ellen Levine accused the pro-woman line of fostering "female 'cultural nationalism'" by glorifying feminine behavior.¹⁰² And feminist playwright Anselma dell'Olio claimed that the pro-woman line revalued femininity, and thus encouraged attacks on strong, assertive women.¹⁰³ However, Sarachild and others would never have condoned attacks on strong women. In fact, they were con-

stantly under attack for being too vociferous and "unfeminine." Moreover, the pro-woman line faction was interested in validating women's traditional survival strategies, not femininity. Redstockings did apotheosize women, but for the political acumen and cunning which they believed women had developed as members of an oppressed class. In contrast to cultural feminists, they would have attributed male belligerence and female pacifism to men's power and women's powerlessness, not to biological differences or different value systems. For Redstockings, it was a question of power relations, not values.¹⁰⁴

Cell 16

To Susan Brownmiller, the women of Cell 16 were the "movement heavies."¹⁰⁵ Nor was Brownmiller the only one who felt this way. After members of Cell 16 visited a NYRW meeting in 1968, Corinne Coleman remembers having thought, "wow, they're very strong!" Certainly, Cell 16 with their program of celibacy, separatism, and karate seemed the quintessential radical women's liberation group. Cell 16's political perspective became well known within the movement because the group published one of the very earliest radical feminist journals, *No More Fun and Games*—a title that captures all too well the essence of the group's message. Roxanne Dunbar formed Cell 16 in the summer of 1968 after moving to Boston from the West Coast where she had been active in the new left. She recruited women to the group by placing an ad in an underground paper. Besides Dunbar, Cell 16 consisted of Dana Densmore (whose mother, Donna Allen, was a founder of Women Strike for Peace), Jeanne Lafferty, Lisa Leghorn, Abby Rockefeller (of the Rockefeller family), Betsy Warrior, and Jayne West. They reportedly read Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* "as their first order of business."¹⁰⁶

Cell 16 initially avoided the feminist-politico schism because it was a small group in which membership was contingent upon agreement with the group's politics.¹⁰⁷ In fact, when Meredith Tax and Linda Gordon—who later helped found the Boston socialist-feminist group Bread and Roses—tried to join, they were turned away. Dunbar conceived of Cell 16 as a vanguard cadre

group. In the first issue of *No More Fun and Games*, published in October 1968, Dunbar proclaimed:

A vanguard of women must operate to show women the possibility of a new society. . . . Our means, other than our educational efforts and the formation of communes will be secret. We shall not fight on the enemy's grounds—on his streets, in his courts, legislatures, "radical" movements, marriage, media.¹⁰⁸

And, in February 1969, Dunbar declared that at some point "warfare (guerrilla style)" would be necessary.¹⁰⁹ Despite the group's avowed commitment to egalitarianism, Dunbar was Cell 16's leader and major theoretician until she left the group in early 1970. Tax believes that Dunbar "wanted to be a charismatic leader in that very male style of charismatic leader. She basically believed that she was Lenin. And she was certainly very good."¹¹⁰

But while Cell 16 impressed many women as the most militant of all women's liberation groups, their theoretical efforts were, initially at least, sometimes more leftist than radical feminist. Indeed, Dunbar's thinking was a strange mélange of Marx, Mao, de Beauvoir, and Solanas. Group members agreed that men oppressed women and that all women, not just working-class women, were their victims. But unlike most radical feminists who maintained that Marxist thinking on the "woman question" was of limited use in understanding male dominance, Dunbar declared that "Marx, Engels, Bakunin, Lenin, and Mao have analyzed woman's condition and place in history accurately." According to Dunbar the problem with the new left's analysis of women's oppression was not its blind reliance upon Marxist theorizing, but, rather, its failure to follow Marx and Engels closely enough.¹¹¹ Following Engels, Dunbar argued that the family was the cornerstone of male supremacy and that women, by virtue of their status as "household slaves," represented the "proletariat" within the family.¹¹² But Dunbar did not identify those aspects of Engels's or Marx's thinking that contradicted her feminism, particularly their privileging of class over gender. And in contrast to most radical feminists, Dunbar at first seemed to envision women's liberationists taking over the larger Movement rather than establishing an independent women's movement. Indeed, she seemed to share politicians' concern that feminism be connected to other movements and not fought on "an exclusive, narrow front":

Ultimately, we want to destroy the three pillars of class (caste) society—the family, private property, and the state—and their attendant evils—corporate capitalism, imperialism, war, racism, misogyny, annihilation of the balance of nature.¹¹³

Whereas Redstockings argued that women's behavior was determined by their material conditions, Cell 16 attributed women's behavior to their sex-role conditioning. To Cell 16, women's interest in sex, fashion, make-up, and children demonstrated not only the extent to which they were damaged, but the extent to which they collaborated with the system.¹¹⁴ For instance, Lisa Leghorn contended that "one can only be conditioned insofar as one desires to be accepted by those who condition."¹¹⁵ Dana Densmore maintained that men would be unable to oppress women if women stopped believing in their inferiority:

If the minds of the women are freed from these chains, no man will be able to oppress any woman. No man can, even now, in an individual relationship; all the woman has to do is walk out on him. And ironically enough, that is exactly what would force the men to shape up fastest. . . . All that's needed is for the woman to learn enough respect for herself to be unwilling to live with a man who treats her with contempt.¹¹⁶

While Redstockings believed that men rather than women needed to change, Densmore argued that "it is the situation that men and women find themselves in, the structures of society and the attitudes of women, that make it *possible* for men to oppress."¹¹⁷ For Cell 16 the problem was women's diffidence and their dependence upon men, and the solution lay in women "unconditioning" themselves by taking off the accumulated emotional and physical flab that kept them enthralled to men. They exhorted women to swear off sex and relationships with men, to learn karate, and to live in communes—in all-female communes for those who were smart enough to still be single. With karate and celibacy, women, if not completely invulnerable and impenetrable, could at least achieve a degree of self-sufficiency and control over their lives.

As one might expect from exponents of the conditioning thesis, Cell 16 opposed biological explanations of gender differences. In the first issue of *No More Fun and Games*, Densmore maintained:

Men have constructed an elaborate rationalization of why women are naturally suited to their role. This is the whole fantasy of WOMAN'S NATURE: gentle, loving, unaggressive, tender, modest, giving, patient, naive, simplistic, simple, irrational, instinctual, home-centered.¹¹⁸

In the same issue, Dunbar attacked the ideology of maternalism:

The female human has no more maternity than any other animal. The characteristics usually attributed to women are the personality traits of Slaves—not the nature of the female. We have learned materialism and maternalism not from our closeness to reproduction, but from our experience as Slaves to men and children, our closeness to shit.¹¹⁹

However, by February 1969, when the second issue of their journal was published, Cell 16 seemed unsure whether feminism implied a repudiation of roles or a revaluation of femininity. Dunbar called on "men and women to reject their programmed roles," and in an editorial the group suggested that women who wanted children had "not achieved sufficient maturity and autonomy and [are] seeking a hopeless fulfillment through neurotic channels."¹²⁰ But Dunbar also defined feminism as "the liberation of the female principle in all human beings—the worldview which is maternal, materialist, and peaceful (noncompetitive)." Whereas Dunbar had equated maternity with slavishness only four months earlier, she now argued that women's programming for motherhood would "allow the female principle to take ascendancy over the male principle."¹²¹ This was in marked contrast to other radical feminists who held that women's socialization for motherhood ensured their subordination.¹²²

For Dunbar, feminism involved the supplantation of the male principle by the female principle. Indeed, she preferred the term "female liberation" to women's liberation because it suggested that the movement's goal was the liberation of the female principle. Since Cell 16 defined maleness as the problem, they worked at banishing it from their midst. According to Dunbar, "much of the meeting is spent in reminding ourselves to stop 'acting like men.' All of us seem to have been infected with the phallic structures to some extent."¹²³ Dunbar even maintained that poor, third-world women would make better leaders than college-

educated women because they were less likely to have been contaminated by masculine ideology.¹²⁴

While Cell 16 was obsessed with avoiding male behavior, their style was anything but stereotypically feminine. They pioneered the popular movement look of khaki pants, work shirts, combat boots, and short hair. In fact, at the November 1969 Congress to Unite Women in New York City, Cell 16 horrified many feminists in the audience when one member of the group ceremonially cut off Dunbar's long hair as a protest against male-defined standards of beauty. Their performance distressed many in the audience who felt that the length of one's hair had very little to do with one's feminism.¹²⁵ Susan Brownmiller, among those in attendance who found their repudiation of femininity somewhat troubling, remembers someone shouting from the audience, "Men like my breasts, too. Do you want me to cut them off?"¹²⁶

Although Dunbar was careful to define masculinity and femininity as socially constructed rather than biologically determined, some of the group's members were moving toward a biologicistic understanding of gender. For instance, in an article that borrowed heavily from Solanas's *SCUM*, Betsy Warrior argued that if men wanted to preserve the planet they would "have to control and subdue their inner nature as they have outer nature." She condemned men's "aggressive, destructive drives" and contended that those "qualities make [men] unfit for life today."¹²⁷ After Dunbar's departure from the group in early 1970, Cell 16 shifted slowly from constructionism to essentialism. Nowhere is this plainer than in the group's writings on sexuality. Originally, Dunbar had argued that sexual "needs" are "conditioned needs" which can be "unconditioned."¹²⁸ Densmore suggested that "healthy (free) people would engage in the act of sex only for reproduction." Densmore held that "happy, healthy self-confident animals and people don't like being touched, don't need to snuggle and huggle. They are really free and self-contained and in their heads."¹²⁹

However, by April 1970, the argument was becoming gendered. Densmore contended that while men do indeed experience a release from sex, for women "most of whom don't have orgasms at all . . . this physical issue is much less clear."¹³⁰ Moreover, Densmore argued that women have sex because they

desire "human kindness, communication, back-to-the-womb merging and oblivion," not sexual pleasure.¹³¹ While Densmore had argued in 1968 that people—male or female—who desired affection were the victims of mothers who had "trained [them] to be insecure and crave reassurance," by 1970 she found affection the only justifiable reason for sex. And in May 1973, Abby Rockefeller declared that "the real issue is simply that women *don't* like [sex] either with the same frequency or in the same way as men."¹³² She maintained that the origins of men's hypersexuality and women's hyposexuality were hormonal. As though this constituted scientific proof, she contended:

Even men who have no inclination to have sex with a reluctant woman find themselves experiencing a strong independent need for it. Many claim to experience physical discomfort to the point of pain if this need is not satisfied.¹³³

In a 1971 issue of *No More Fun and Games*, Densmore's mother, Donna Allen, attributed male supremacy to genetic differences between the sexes:

Being XX, a woman feels with total security that she is female. But the normal XY man does not have this same inner security about his identity. Vacillating between gentleness and aggressiveness, being genetically both, he tends to let himself be defined from outside.¹³⁴

Cell 16's growing reliance upon essentialist explanations of gender was not altogether unpredictable. Almost from the beginning Cell 16 had a schizoid position on sex roles—calling for their elimination, yet paradoxically making maternalism the cornerstone of their feminism. In this respect the group departed from other radical feminists who believed that feminism required the explosion or deconstruction of gender differences. For instance, Firestone maintained that

just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences would no longer matter culturally.¹³⁵

And Kate Millett declared that a feminist revolution entailed "uni-sex, or the end of separatist character structure, temperament and behavior, so that each individual may develop an entire—rather than a partial, limited, and conformist—personality."¹³⁶

Cell 16 prefigured cultural feminism not only in its essentialist formulations of gender, but in its antipathy toward sex. From the first issue of *No More Fun and Games*, Densmore argued that sex is "inconvenient, time-consuming, energy-draining, and irrelevant."¹³⁷ She contended that "sex is actually a minor need, blown out of proportion, misunderstood."¹³⁸ And Dunbar called for liberation from sex:

With all the talk of sexual liberation, one rarely hears talk of the liberation from sexuality, which many women privately voice. Such a sentiment reveals, so men say, "frigidity," "coldness," Brave New World surrealism. Yet for most women, right now, sex means brutalization, rape, submission, someone having power over them, another baby to care for and support.¹³⁹

Dunbar echoed Solanas when she declared that "[t]he person who has been through the whole sex-scene, and then becomes by choice and revulsion, a celibate, is the most lucid person."¹⁴⁰ However, by July 1969, less than a year later, the argument shifted somewhat—sex wasn't merely energy-draining and dangerous for women, it was deleterious to the movement as well. Warrior argued that women "won't be able to clearly analyze our position and we will have a vested interest in not making males too hostile," unless women forsake "personal relationships and group situations with men."¹⁴¹ In contrast to Redstockings' assumption that women's heterosexual needs would ensure their commitment to feminism, Cell 16 argued that women's hyposexuality was essential to the cause. Thus Densmore observed that "if it were true that we needed sex from men, it would be a great misfortune, one that might almost doom our fight."¹⁴²

Cell 16 was probably the first group to propose that women withdraw from men personally as well as politically. Although Cell 16's heterosexual separatism helped establish the theoretical foundation for lesbian separatism, the group never advocated lesbianism. For Cell 16, the fundamental problem with homosexuality was that "like heterosexuality it suffers from being sexuality." Densmore argued that homosexuality was a response to the per-

versity of heterosexuality, and strongly implied that homosexuality was "unnatural."¹⁴³ Dunbar and Leghorn advised women to separate "from men who are not consciously working for female liberation," but warned them against seeking refuge in lesbian relationships. "Homosexuality," they argued, "is nothing more than a personal 'solution.'" ¹⁴⁴ When lesbian-feminist activist Rita Mae Brown criticized Dunbar in February 1970 for ignoring the issue of lesbianism, Dunbar reportedly replied, "What I want to do is get women out of bed. Women can love each other but they don't have to sleep together."¹⁴⁵ Dunbar also articulated what was probably the earliest feminist critique of pornography, which she maintained, "expresses a masculine ideology of male power over females."¹⁴⁶ Like current feminist anti-pornography activists, she maintained that pornography is violence against women, and likened pornography to the lynching of blacks. In fact, Dunbar's excoriation of pornography sounds remarkably contemporary.

Cell 16's proto-cultural feminism co-existed rather awkwardly with its Marxist analysis. However, after Dunbar left Cell 16 in early 1970, the group moved away from a Marxist analysis as they elaborated Dunbar's notion of "the female principle." They devoted their energies to attacking "the male concept" rather than the family or the state. For instance, in April 1970, Leghorn identified "the male concept" as the source of all systems of domination:

The assertion of the male concept has created a chaotic world—massive powers destroying each other in the quest for more power, economies dependent upon wars of aggression, masses of oppressed peoples caught in intricate hierarchies of caste and class and ineffectual bureaucracies intent on the preservation of centralized modes of decision-making. Hierarchy, centralization and the patriarchal family are all manifestations of aggression.

Moreover, Leghorn maintained that these "male patterns of hierarchy" were unknown in matriarchal cultures.¹⁴⁷ The group also elaborated upon Dunbar's analysis of women as a classless caste. Densmore even asserted that "the unity of women exists already" because she claimed "[t]here are no classes among women."¹⁴⁸ Cell 16's shift from Marxism might have been related to the Socialist Workers Party's (SWP) attempted take-over of the group

sometime after Dunbar's departure. According to one account, two of the original members of Cell 16 became involved in the SWP while still involved in the group.¹⁴⁹ A schism arose and the group decided to disband amicably rather than allow themselves to be ravaged by factionalism. However, the non-SWP members discovered that the SWP women had tried to appropriate the files, mailing lists, and some funds from *No More Fun and Games*. At this point the non-SWP women circulated a letter throughout the movement alerting women to the SWP's efforts to "infiltrate" feminist groups. They re-established Cell 16 and resumed publication of *No More Fun and Games*. The group continued to function until 1973.

Interestingly, after Dunbar left the group, she became more committed to Marxism. She moved to New Orleans where she tried to organize southern women into the women's liberation movement. She formed the Southern Female Rights Union and then the New Orleans Female Workers' Union which was committed to building a "working-class base for the women's movement." In mid-1971 Dunbar's group, the Southern Female Rights Union, parroting the standard left line on the women's movement, proclaimed that the "programmatic demands" of the women's movement "were essentially white and middle-class demands designed to 'free' the typical single, white and middle-class woman from the tribulations which her working-class and Third World sisters cannot escape."¹⁵⁰ And in mid-1970, Dunbar even came out against legalized abortion, which, she argued, would be used to facilitate the genocide of black people. She asked an audience in Berkeley, "What are our individual lives (white women dying from illegal abortions), compared to the genocide of a whole people?"¹⁵¹ In subsequent years, the mercurial Dunbar became involved in organizing first Appalachian, and then Native American women.¹⁵²

In its revaluation of femininity, villainization of maleness, emphasis on personal rehabilitation, and belief in a global sisterhood, Cell 16 was the prototypical cultural feminist group. And, although Dunbar probably came to regard Cell 16's perspective as class- and race-bound, the seeds of that analysis were in Dunbar's original analysis, especially her equation of feminism with "the female principle."

The Feminists

One cannot discuss The Feminists without first discussing its founder, Ti-Grace Atkinson. Her biography is relevant not only because she so dominated the group while a part of it, but also because it can help illuminate why it was that Atkinson was so invested in being the most radical of all radical feminists. Atkinson was raised in an upper-class, Republican family in Louisiana. After marrying at the age of seventeen, she attended the University of Pennsylvania where she received her B.F.A. While living in Philadelphia she helped establish that city's Institute of Contemporary Art and wrote art criticism for *Art News*. She and her husband divorced in 1961, and in the mid-'60s she moved to New York and enrolled in Columbia's graduate program in political philosophy.¹⁵³ When she joined NOW in 1967, at the age of twenty-eight, she was a registered Republican with no prior political experience.¹⁵⁴ However, Atkinson was no novice to feminist ideas. She had read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1962 and, like so many other women who helped spark the second wave of feminism, she was profoundly affected by it.¹⁵⁵ Feeling isolated, she wrote to de Beauvoir in 1965, who suggested that she write to Betty Friedan. Atkinson did contact Friedan, who initially viewed her as her protégé. Indeed, Friedan claims that it was she who pushed Atkinson into NOW's leadership for she felt that Atkinson's "Main Line accent and ladylike blond good looks would be perfect . . . for raising money from those mythical rich old widows we never did unearth."¹⁵⁶ Before long, however, Friedan discovered that Atkinson was anything but an obedient acolyte.

Atkinson's turbulent relationship with NOW began in February 1967, when she attended the first organizational meeting of the New York chapter. In December 1967 she was elected president of New York NOW, by far the largest and the most radical of all the NOW chapters. Although there were forty-five other chapters, the New York chapter contained thirty percent of the organization's membership.¹⁵⁷ Kate Millett, author of the 1970 bestseller *Sexual Politics*, feminist playwright Anselma dell'Olio, and civil-rights lawyer Florynce Kennedy were among the more radical women who belonged to this chapter. As a result of her involve-

ment in NOW, Atkinson met women who politicized her about other forms of oppression and who introduced her to the "more radical factions" at Columbia University during the strike of 1968.¹⁵⁸ As Atkinson puts it, "my *feminism* radicalized me on other issues, not vice versa."¹⁵⁹

But as Atkinson became more radical she grew disillusioned with NOW, and the NOW establishment grew increasingly apprehensive about her. From the beginning, Atkinson wanted the organization to take "unequivocal positions . . . on abortion, marriage, the family"—the very issues which many members were anxious that NOW avoid. Increasingly, Atkinson staked out positions that were on the cutting edge of feminism. For instance, abortion-rights activist Cindy Cisler contends that it was Atkinson who first pointed out the inconsistency of supporting both the repeal and the reform of abortion laws.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, Atkinson's involvement with controversial figures like Valerie Solanas and abortion advocate Bill Baird made the NOW establishment extremely uneasy.¹⁶¹ Her very public show of support for Valerie Solanas in the aftermath of the Warhol shooting infuriated many NOW officers who feared that people might think the organization actually condoned the act.¹⁶² Years later, Friedan was still furious about Atkinson's behavior. "No action of the board of New York NOW, of National NOW, no policy ever voted by the members advocated shooting men in the balls, the elimination of men as proposed by that SCUM Manifesto!"¹⁶³ Of course, Atkinson's outrageousness delighted the press who seemed to hang on her every word. As early as March 1968, a *New York Times* reporter labeled Atkinson the movement's "haute thinker."¹⁶⁴

The situation came to a head on October 17, 1968, when Atkinson and other "younger dissenting" members tried to bring participatory democracy to NOW. They proposed that NOW scuttle elections and instead choose officers by lot and rotate the positions frequently to equalize power within the organization. However, the New York chapter defeated the proposed by-laws by a two-to-one margin. Atkinson claimed that the speeches given by those opposing the democratization of NOW

revealed unmistakably that the division in N.O.W. as well as in the feminist movement as a whole is between those who want

women to have the opportunity to be oppressors, too, and those who want to destroy oppression itself.¹⁶⁵

To Atkinson, the lopsided vote demonstrated beyond a doubt that NOW was part of the problem rather than the solution. She resigned that night as New York chapter president and from her four other NOW offices as well. In her press release, Atkinson explained that the dissidents wanted

to get rid of the positions of power, not get up into those positions. The fight against unequal power relationships between men and women necessitates fighting unequal power everywhere: between men and women (for feminists especially), but also between men and men, and women and women, between black and white, and rich and poor.¹⁶⁶

Although several other NOW members apparently had vowed that they too would resign from the organization if the proposed by-laws were defeated, only two other women besides Atkinson left the organization in protest.¹⁶⁷

With those two women, Atkinson formed the October 17th Movement, "named in honor of the day both of our departure from the rest of the Movement and our inception."¹⁶⁸ However, the October 17th Movement hardly represented a movement. As Atkinson herself remarked in 1971, she left NOW "essentially alone."¹⁶⁹ Indeed, within several months Atkinson was the only founding member left in the group. But by late winter, Anne Koedt from NYRW started attending meetings, and in the spring of 1969, when disaffected Redstockings members started to join, the group began to cohere. By early summer the group consisted of ten to fifteen core members including Atkinson, Koedt, Lila Karp, Nanette Rainone, Anne Kalderman, Sheila Cronan, Pam Kearon, Marcia Winslow, and Linda Feldman.¹⁷⁰ By June 1969, the group renamed itself The Feminists.¹⁷¹ That fall they were joined by Barbara Mehrhof, another malcontent Redstockings member. Interestingly, many of the women in the group—with the obvious exception of Koedt—came to the women's liberation movement with no prior experience in other movements for social change.

In January 1969, the group undertook its first action—a demonstration at New York City's Criminal Court to support local abor-

tionist Dr. Nathan Rappaport and to demand the repeal of all abortion laws.¹⁷² They did not stage their next action until September 23, 1969, when five members stormed into New York City's Marriage License Bureau to charge its officials with fraud. They distributed a leaflet at the action which asked women:

Do you know that rape is legal in marriage? Do you know that love and affection are not required in marriage? Do you know that you are your husband's prisoner? Do you know that, according to the United Nations, marriage is a "slavery-like practice?" So, why aren't you getting paid? Do you resent this fraud?¹⁷³

According to *Rat* writer Jane Alpert, they then descended upon City Hall to confront Mayor Lindsay "as an official representative of male society which uses force to suppress women into monogamous relationships dangerous to their individual identities."¹⁷⁴ The one question which reportedly fascinated the media was whether or not any of the demonstrators were married. Unable to elicit an answer from the five women, one reporter covering the protest noted that "Miss or Mrs. Atkinson had runs in her stockings."¹⁷⁵

As should be obvious from the foregoing passage, Redstockings and The Feminists developed very different positions on marriage. They parted company on many other issues as well. (Indeed, the two groups even wrote differently, as The Feminists developed a style as turgid and abstruse as the Redstockings' was straightforward and accessible.) While Redstockings appropriated Marxist categories and concepts, The Feminists appropriated much of the style and the rhetoric of the new left. In fact, The Feminists embraced the very aspects of the new left (or certain sectors of it) which Redstockings found most deplorable—its elitist stance toward non-Movement people and its vanguardism. Moreover, The Feminists rejected Redstockings' view that theory and action should follow from consciousness-raising. Instead they argued that consciousness-raising with its "detailing of reactions and feelings" and its "eschewal of judgment as moralistic" was retarding the movement's growth.¹⁷⁶

For Redstockings the problem was one of power—who had it and who lacked it; for The Feminists it was a matter of sex roles—who conformed and who refused.¹⁷⁷ Thus to dismantle the sys-

tem of male dominance, feminists would have to, in the words of their manifesto, "annihilate" the sex-role system.¹⁷⁸ In contrast to Redstockings' materialism, The Feminists developed a highly psychological analysis of male supremacy. They proposed that men oppress women "to extend the significance of their own existence as an alternative to individual self-creativity."¹⁷⁹ While Redstockings argued that men oppress women for the material benefits they received, The Feminists' analysis suggested that men oppress women out of some undefined psychological need. And by contrast to Redstockings who believed that women's behavior was the result of material necessity, The Feminists believed it was largely the result of internal coercion. In other words, "women were messed up" as well as "messed over" because they had internalized their oppression.¹⁸⁰

Thus Atkinson contended that if women wanted to change their situation they would have to "eradicate their own definition," would have to "commit suicide," would, in effect, have to stop acting like women.¹⁸¹ Indeed, for The Feminists the problem was, in a very real sense, women themselves and the extent to which they collaborated in their oppression. What this meant was that The Feminists spent most of their time upbraiding women for their quiescence and urging women, not men, to shed their role. For instance, at the February 1969 disruption of the New York legislative hearing on abortion reform Ellen Willis recalls having had a "huge argument with a member of [The Feminists] who was yelling at the committee's female secretaries and clerks that they were traitors for not walking out on their jobs and joining us."¹⁸²

But to The Feminists, the pro-woman line's contention that all choices represented compromises of one sort or another was nothing more than a cop-out that allowed women to feel allright about not taking the necessary steps to change themselves.¹⁸³ They argued that radical feminists "must not only deal with what women want; we must change women's ideas of themselves and in that way change what women want."¹⁸⁴ But as we shall see, The Feminists seemed to think that the most effective way to get women to transform themselves was by "setting standards" for what constituted proper feminist behavior.

Like Redstockings, The Feminists rejected biologicistic explanations of gender differences. They named men the enemy, but

they maintained that "it is the male role . . . that must be annihilated—not necessarily those individuals who presently claim the role."¹⁸⁵ And Atkinson contended that "the sex roles—both male and female—must be destroyed, not the individuals who happen to possess either a penis or a vagina, or both, or neither."¹⁸⁶ But despite this explicit social constructionism, there were essentialist underpinnings to their analysis of sexuality. The Feminists maintained that the institution of heterosexuality, with its emphasis on the apochryphal vaginal orgasm, existed to ensure that women reproduce and mother:

It is in the interest of the male in the sexual act to emphasize the organ of reproduction in the female because it is the institution of motherhood, in which the mother *serves* the child, which forms the pattern (submission of her will to the other) for her relationship to the male.¹⁸⁷

They also believed that heterosexuality, in Atkinson's words, "acts as a reassuring reminder" of men's "class supremacy" and as a "convenient reminder to the female of her class inferiority."¹⁸⁸ Mehrhof and Kearon made the argument even more explicitly in their 1971 article on rape:

There is, then, no unique *act* which affirms the polarity Aryan/Semite or white/black. Sexual intercourse, however, since it involves the genitals (that particular difference between the sexes selected by the Ideology of Sexism to define superiority/inferiority), provides sexism with an inimitable act which perfectly expresses the polarity male/female. The Reality created by the Ideology makes the sexual act a renewal of the feeling of power and prestige for the male, of impotence and submission for the female.¹⁸⁹

Their understanding diverged sharply from Anne Koedt's pioneering analysis of normative heterosexuality in "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." Koedt attributed the cultural obliteration of the clitoris to men's preference for penetration and their fear of becoming sexually expendable. Most important, Koedt distinguished between the institution of heterosexuality and heterosexual sex; for The Feminists the two were essentially indistinguishable from each other. Finally, Koedt advocated the exploration of new sexual techniques that would maximize women's sexual pleasure, while The Feminists maintained that masturbation

would fulfill any sexual needs women might have. For The Feminists the fact that "physical pleasure can be achieved in both sexes through auto-eroticism" demonstrated that the major function of sex "as a social act" is to reinforce male dominance and female subordination.¹⁹⁰ And to those who argued that "sexual contact" is a "biological need," Atkinson replied that it was "formerly only the means to satisfy the social need of the survival of the species."¹⁹¹

Nor did The Feminists advocate lesbianism as an alternative to heterosexuality. Atkinson contended that lesbianism

is based ideologically on the very premise of male oppression: the dynamic of sexual intercourse. Lesbians, by definition, accept that human beings are primarily sexual beings. If this is the case (that human beings are primarily sexual), one would have to grant that women *are*, in some sense, inferior.

Inferior, according to Atkinson, because "'sex' is based on the *differences between* the sexes." [her emphasis]¹⁹² Atkinson even suggested that feminism and lesbianism might be oppositional, "that lesbianism, in fact *all* sex, is reactionary, and that feminism is revolutionary."¹⁹³ As Irene Peslikis notes, their point "wasn't to give up men for women, it was just to give it up!"¹⁹⁴ Indeed, The Feminists argued that once male supremacy had been defeated, opposite and same-sex "physical relations . . . would be an extension of communication between individuals and would not necessarily have a genital emphasis."¹⁹⁵ But if the problem were one of ideology not biology, as Mehrhof and Kearon suggested, why would genitally-oriented sex remain suspect even after the elimination of male dominance? As Willis observes, the implication that genital sexuality was merely a function of male supremacy seemed rooted in the "unconscious acceptance of [the] traditional patriarchal assumption . . . that lust is male."¹⁹⁶ But to The Feminists, it was *they* who had broken through the confines of patriarchal thinking; those other feminists who thought female sexual pleasure important failed to see that men had deceived them into believing it was. In other words, it was a problem of false consciousness.

The Feminists' analysis of sexuality, especially their equation of sexual desire with maleness, owes more to Valerie Solanas than to Anne Koedt who was, of course, briefly a part of the group.

One finds little, if any, evidence of Koedt here because she withdrew from the group before it articulated its stance on sexuality. The debt to Solanas is, by contrast, quite clear. In fact, Atkinson began her November 1968 article, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," with a short quotation from Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*. And in 1974, she characterized Solanas's polemic as "the most important feminist statement written to date in the English language."¹⁹⁷ In *SCUM*, Solanas had declared:

Sex is not part of a relationship; on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, non-creative, a gross waste of time. The female can easily—far more easily than she may think—condition away her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral and free to pursue truly worthy relationships and activities. . . . When the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male, whose ego consists of his cock, will disappear.¹⁹⁸

For Solanas, Cell 16, and The Feminists sex was something that women needed to be liberated from. It is important to note that this was not the position typically taken by radical feminists. Radical feminists agreed for the most part that the sexual revolution had done little to liberate women. Women may have the right to have sex, but do they have the right to say "no," they asked? They maintained that by transforming sex into a duty, the sexual revolution had only made women more exploitable. Nor had it really challenged the male-centered bias of normative heterosexuality. Indeed, radical feminists tended to ignore the ways in which the sexual revolution expanded women's sexual horizon and instead focused on the increased sexual exploitation that accompanied it. But if most radical feminists were highly critical of the sexual revolution, they did not believe that freedom lay in the denial of women's sexuality. Rather, they were convinced that the repression of female desire was central to women's oppression, and sexual liberation essential to women's liberation. Firestone maintained that in a feminist society "humanity could finally revert to its natural polymorphous sexuality—all forms of sexuality would be allowed and indulged."¹⁹⁹ Boston feminist Karen Lindsey warned feminists against rejecting casual sex out of their frustration with the sexism of the sexual revolution.²⁰⁰ Kate Millett declared that women's liberation would bring about "an end to sexual repression."²⁰¹ And, of course, the reason abortion

loomed so large in the early radical feminist agenda was that without it there could be no such thing as sexual freedom or self-determination for women.

Much of The Feminists' theorizing had to do with how the movement might develop "standards" of feminist behavior. From the beginning, The Feminists used the lot system in an effort to equalize power within the group. However, by the summer of 1969, some members, including Atkinson, were pushing for The Feminists to become a disciplined, revolutionary, vanguard group with strict membership and attendance regulations and even more draconian rules to ensure egalitarianism. They maintained that the group should take precedence over all else. To test members' allegiance to the cause, they even proposed that the group begin meeting for social purposes every Saturday night in addition to the weekly business meeting. Other members objected on the grounds that the Saturday night meeting would exclude those women who were unable or unwilling to attend, especially those who were involved in primary relationships. Of course, this was in some sense the point, for if they couldn't part with their husbands or lovers for one night, what kind of feminists were they?

The group had discussed taking a break from meetings that summer, particularly because Koedt, Karp, and several others were leaving town during the last part of summer. However, those who wanted The Feminists to become a vanguard cadre felt that the group should forge ahead and construct an analysis because the movement was constantly accused of lacking one. Indeed, they believed that the group must exploit the historical moment, must "seize the time," in the vernacular of the day, and they resented that others had gone on vacation at so critical a time. So despite the fact that half the membership was absent, the group drafted most of its manifesto and passed a series of membership requirements.²⁰² The manifesto stated:

Membership must be a primary commitment and responsibility; no other activity may supersede work for the group. . . . Outside study, participation in discussions, completion of individual assignments *and* attendance at actions are equally important and compulsory.²⁰³

The manifesto put a premium on "maintaining discipline" and even provided for the expulsion of refractory members. If a member missed more than one-quarter of the meetings in any given month, she forfeited her voting privileges "until the third consecutive meeting of [her] renewed attendance." And if this happened three times in a three-month period, the woman would be expelled from the group.

Moreover, all tasks were to be distributed by lot. Women with writing or speaking skills were encouraged to withdraw their names from the "privileged" lot where those tasks were assigned so that others could cultivate these skills. Koedt and the other vacationing members reportedly denounced the rules as fascistic.²⁰⁴ According to one insider, Koedt maintained that the rules would effectively silence those members, like herself, who were just beginning to find their voices.

The Feminists voted in another membership requirement that summer which sent shockwaves throughout the New York movement. Contending that the institution of marriage was "inherently inequitable" and that "the rejection of this institution both in theory and in practice [was] a primary mark of the radical feminist," they decreed that:

no more than one-third of our membership can be participants in either a formal (with legal contract) or informal (e.g., living with a man) instance of the institution of marriage.²⁰⁵

Of all their many rules and requirements, the quota was surely the most controversial. It was widely condemned in other parts of the movement, and the group lost a number of its most vital members when Koedt, Karp, and Rainone—all of whom opposed the rule—decided to quit.²⁰⁶

Most radical feminists felt that the quota wrongly attacked married women rather than the institution of marriage. However, one of the members who pushed for the quota denies that it in any way implied that married women were less trustworthy feminists. She claims that the quota was adopted to spare married members participating in the Marriage License Bureau demonstration from ridicule by the press. But if this were the case, why did the demonstrators refuse to reveal their marital status to those

reporters who inquired? Indeed, others in the group dispute this explanation. For instance, Nanette Rainone contends:

There were those who said that marriage was debilitating to women, therefore we couldn't have a lot of married women in our group because they would be damaged and would affect the thinking of the group. They felt that married women would cause the group to compromise.²⁰⁷

Kearon admits that the quota was "a bit of an embarrassment" for married members, but thinks that it was good to have "as few of those women" as possible who would go home to discuss the meetings with their husbands. She believes that those who supported the quota wanted the group to take more militant positions, which they felt married women might oppose.²⁰⁸ Mehrhof, who joined the group immediately following the group's marriage action in September, corroborates Kearon's view:

In those days, which you have to remember were very, very different, we were incredible fanatics. It might be a terrible thing to say, but we just felt that some women were more prepared to move out than others. We had to take the responsibility of saying we can only have a certain percentage of women who are married and locked into men in the group.²⁰⁹

In their view, feminism was synonymous with separatism and marriage with collaboration. In fact, Kearon argued that "men are able to exert a powerful and constant pressure on their wives which can be dangerous to the movement."²¹⁰ At about the time the quota was established, Kearon wrote:

In rejecting marriage we are setting up a standard for ourselves based on what we believe feminism must be in order to succeed. In rejecting marriage and fidelity to the male, we are cutting off our retreat from radical feminism and *creating* the necessity for female unity and trust.²¹¹ [her emphasis]

But the policy engendered feelings of mistrust and betrayal, not the solidarity and trust they had hoped for. By the time Mehrhof became a member that fall, there were no longer any married women left in The Feminists. Redstockings member Irene Peslikis, who is married, briefly joined The Feminists in the spring of 1970 in part to challenge the quota.²¹² She recalls that "it was an incredibly humiliating experience to have people condescend to

you." Peslikis found their condescension especially galling since "they didn't speak on national television about their abortions," as she courageously had following the Redstockings' abortion speak-out.²¹³

Atkinson's writings suggest that she may have had other things on her mind besides shielding the group's married members from criticism by the press. Atkinson, who referred to married women as "hostages," maintained that "the proof of class consciousness will be when we separate off from men." To Atkinson, marriage, or for that matter any relationship with a man, was perilous for women:

The price of clinging to the enemy is your life. To enter into a relationship with a man who has divested himself as completely and publicly from the male role as possible would still be a risk. But to relate to a man who has done any less is suicide.²¹⁴

But Atkinson appears to have been more concerned with the movement's image than with the welfare of those feminists who continued to "consort with the enemy."²¹⁵ Atkinson desperately wanted the movement to be taken seriously, to be regarded as revolutionary, yet she felt that "so far, the feminist movement has, primarily, been women coming together to complain."²¹⁶ And in her view, radical feminists who continued to associate with men undermined the movement by making it appear ludicrous:

The basic issue is consistency between belief and acts. Of course, you know that every woman in the movement is married to the single male feminist existing. That's why we're funny. Contradiction is the heart of comedy. A woman saying men are the enemy with a boy friend sitting next to her is both humiliating and tragic.²¹⁷

Atkinson herself refused to appear with men in public when it might be construed that they were friends. She made an exception for any man who had "disassociated himself from the male role and from the male class as much as possible."²¹⁸ Later, she reportedly refused to appear with *any* man in public except to engage in a "class confrontation."²¹⁹

Atkinson seems to have been motivated not only by a desire to demonstrate the movement's seriousness, but by the desire to es-

tablish The Feminists as the most militant radical feminist group. In April 1969, Atkinson referred to the October 17th Movement as "the first radical feminist group."²²⁰ In February 1970, she claimed that the group had "formed the radical feminist wing of the movement."²²¹ And a month later she made the incredible claim that "the most radical feminists [from NYRW] came to The Feminists."²²² Perhaps The Feminists' vanguardism was a hyper-correction for their inexperience with radical politics. Or perhaps they mistook militant vanguardism for radicalism because they lacked any real background in other radical movements for social change. Whatever the reason, the quota made married women feel as though they were the enemy.

The Feminists' fondness for rules didn't subside after the summer. In fact, the rules seemed to proliferate, thus bearing out Koedt's pessimistic prophecy that the group was moving toward fascism. Although the group professed its commitment to "individual self-development," the rules and the equalizing techniques seemed designed to obliterate differences. At some point in the group's history, Mehrhof and Kearon even proposed that the group adopt a uniform as an equalization measure. But as long as Atkinson, the famous feminist, remained in the group, the differences between them would remain annoyingly obvious.

Sometime in the fall or winter of 1969, the group established the disc system to facilitate equal participation during discussion. Each member was given a designated number of chips at the beginning of the meeting and was required to throw a disc in the middle of the room every time she spoke. Once a member had exhausted her supply of chips, she could no longer participate in the discussion. Mehrhof and Kearon admit that the group instituted the disc system largely because of Atkinson's loquacity. Atkinson technically abided by the system, "but now," according to Kearon, "each time she spoke, she spoke for so long."²²³

Despite the plethora of rules and systems, the problem of who wrote the papers and who initiated the ideas apparently persisted. So, in the winter of 1969-70, the group decided to form the Creativity Workshop to tackle the problem. Atkinson writes that the workshop was established "to encourage and support individual members in seeking out and developing their creative potentialities."²²⁴ People were expected to analyze and write

about issues of particular interest to them. However, the Creativity Workshop lasted but two meetings before it was transformed into the Class Workshop.

The Class Workshop, which was instigated by Mehrhof and Kearon, quickly decided that Atkinson should be excluded from the group because she was upper class. Atkinson's writings indicate that she was initially supportive of the Class Workshop. In February 1970, she proudly claimed that in contrast to the rest of the women's liberation movement, "The Feminists . . . with the exception of myself . . . are lower- or lower-middle-class and/or black."²²⁵ And Atkinson began to explore class differences among women. Although she denied that women belonged to any other political class but their sex class, she claimed that women "do evidence certain expressions characteristic of the members of power classes in relation to subordinates."²²⁶ She conceded that women who were attached to upper or middle-class men lacked power within the economic class system, but she maintained that they could exploit other women within their own sex class.

Mehrhof elaborated upon Atkinson's ideas about class. She, too, argued that the "secondary class system," by which she meant the economic class system, failed to give any real power to women. "Women," Mehrhof argued, "will always be defined by their minor position in the primary class structure."²²⁷ However, she contended that class differences would assume importance as women organized themselves. In fact, she maintained that the women's liberation movement "has become the occasion whereby these class antagonisms will make themselves known." Mehrhof's analysis reduced the problem of class to male values. In fact, she attributed all forms of social domination to "the male value system," and argued that women who exploit other women in the movement have "internalized male values."²²⁸ Here we see the identification of power with maleness. While this analysis acknowledged the existence of class differences among women, it viewed them as inauthentic, as male derived and defined. Thus, upper- or middle-class women derived tangible benefits, but not real *power*, from their fathers' or husbands' position in the class system. The problem for The Feminists was that these women

would undermine female solidarity by pretending, as Atkinson put it, to be "kings" when they were really "beggars."²²⁹

During the winter and spring of 1970 relations between Atkinson and the Class Workshop worsened. "What happened," Mehrhof asserts, "is that we began to challenge her on theory. Ti-Grace felt that she was The Feminists' theoretician."²³⁰ Then, on April 5, 1970, The Feminists passed a resolution which criticized Atkinson for allowing the media to define her as the group's leader.²³¹ They argued that Atkinson had circumvented and undermined the lot system by distinguishing her activities as a group member from her activities and appearances as an individual. They contended that Atkinson's growing stature in the media made a mockery of The Feminists' much-vaunted egalitarianism. Finally, they declared that " 'feminist-ideas' arise out of the common condition of women and are not therefore the exclusive property of any individual."

To ensure that the group was truly "leaderless," they resolved that "all contact with the media on feminist issues by a member of The Feminists is to be decided upon by the group and chosen by lot." The resolution warned that flagrant disregard for the rule would result in expulsion from the group. An addendum to the resolution required that all members "appearing on the media" be identified by their group affiliation rather than by name. Two days after it was passed, Atkinson condemned the resolution as "wrong on principle," and withdrew from the group.²³² Both Mehrhof and Kearon insist that the group did not want Atkinson to resign and were surprised when she did.²³³

The resolution was probably prompted by a March 1970 *Newsweek* article which described Atkinson as the group's spokeswoman. *Newsweek* wasn't the only magazine or newspaper heralding Atkinson as a movement leader. By 1970, both the movement and Atkinson were receiving a great deal of publicity. Atkinson's high profile confounded the group's attempts to erase all power differentials between members. All their egalitarian measures could not prevent the press from singling out Atkinson as a leader. If all members were truly equal, why was it that only Atkinson was pursued by the press and sought after for speaking engagements? Why were they treated like ciphers? Since The Feminists could deal with differences only by muting them, the

celebrity in the group had to be muzzled. Atkinson was an anomaly, a constant reminder of difference and privilege. Kearon even suggests that "Ti-Grace functioned . . . as our man in The Feminists. I don't know how upper-class she was, but she certainly gave off that she was, and that comforted a lot of people."²³⁴ Of course, it is more than a little ironic that the very thing the group was struggling against was what enthralled them.

After Atkinson's departure, the group passed more rules. Members were penalized for tardiness; digressions were no longer permitted during meetings; liquor and drugs were not to be used during or before meetings; and members were encouraged to develop "personal living habits . . . consistent with good health." A year later, in 1971, the group voted to exclude *all* married women from membership in The Feminists.²³⁵ This last decision was prompted by Mehrhof, Kearon, and Cronan's participation in the Detroit Radical Feminist Conference in the spring of 1971. The Feminists' proselytizing on behalf of separatism upset both conference planners and attendees. In the midst of one heated exchange, Robin Morgan, who opposed the separatist strategy, pointed out that even The Feminists allowed one-third of their members to be married. Upon their return to New York, Cronan promptly proposed that the group bar all married women to establish complete consistency between theory and practice.²³⁶

In the post-Atkinson era, The Feminists did not diverge from the group's original analysis of sexuality. At a December 1972 Lesbian-Feminist Conference at Columbia University, members contended that "aside from rape, prostitution and marriage, sex just is not all that important." In other words, sexuality was important only insofar as it was used against women. They argued that "ethically and morally, feminists must strive to love each other and not be confused with the distractions that sex offers."²³⁷ If women were to have sex, The Feminists urged them to embrace "Amazon Virginity," "where you have sex but don't take it real seriously."²³⁸

After Atkinson's withdrawal, The Feminists seemed to lose interest in being a vanguard group. Instead, they committed themselves to developing a female "counter-reality" and counterculture. In October 1971, Kearon and Mehrhof contended:

The first step toward breaking the debilitating hold on us of the Sexist Ideology is the creation of a counter-reality, a mutually guaranteed support of female experience undistorted by male interpretation.²³⁹

The group succumbed to essentialism as it explored matriarchy and developed a "female religion." Kearon and Mary Lutz developed a religious rite in which wine and marijuana were the sacraments and the chant was "Momma." They constructed an enormous and anatomically correct, papier-mâché man which they tore apart during the ritual.²⁴⁰ In 1973, The Feminists maintained that "a female religion could provide the same 'faith' that Marxism, humanism, and liberalism provide: a sense that we are not doomed to failure. Someday women will rule the world."²⁴¹ Kearon argues that the ritual was an important outlet for women's misandry and insists that regardless of whether or not matriarchy ever existed, "it was a good thing for women to harken back to a world of their own."²⁴²

The Feminists continued to function until late 1973. By the time of its dissolution, Mehrhof, Kearon, and Cronan were no longer with the group. Cronan was the first to leave, dropping out in 1971 to enter law school. Mehrhof and Kearon stayed long enough to become victims themselves of the equality issue. They believe that they were resented because they lacked Atkinson's "aura" and "prestige."²⁴³ They, apparently, weathered the attacks, but had a falling-out. Mehrhof left the group in June 1972 and Kearon followed suit sometime within the year to attend law school.²⁴⁴ After Kearon left The Feminists, the group became even more absorbed in the question of matriarchy. In June 1973, The Feminists "presented the case for matriarchy" at a New York NOW-sponsored panel discussion entitled "Matriarchy vs. Humanism." At the event, the group proposed a "new plan for feminist revolution [which included] the long-term goal of building permanent institutions which would move away from personal, humanistic solutions."²⁴⁵

The Feminists' interest in female mysticism, matriarchy, and female counter-institutions—all of which were predicated upon an essentialist view—certainly prefigured cultural feminism. But the Feminists would never have followed this trajectory had Atkin-

son remained active in the group. Atkinson would not have tolerated the group's explorations into female mysticism and patriarchy because, unlike Mehrhof and Kearon, who sought "the restoration of female rule," Atkinson had always doubted that women would wield power differently from men.²⁴⁶ Indeed, by 1970 Atkinson had grown so cynical about sisterhood that she proclaimed, "Sisterhood is powerful. It kills sisters."²⁴⁷ Moreover, Atkinson believed that feminism entailed confrontation, not retreat into spirituality. In 1974, Atkinson declared:

whenever "religion"—whatever its alleged genesis—has resurfaced in a Movement, it has historically been a sure sign of decadence and reaction. *Any religion is too much religion!*²⁴⁸

Finally, Atkinson was moving away from implicitly essentialist explanations of male dominance which, she contended, had blinded feminists to women's capacity to oppress others. In fact, in 1971 Atkinson confounded virtually everyone when she became involved with the Italian-American Civil Rights League, an organization formed by Mafia kingpin Joseph Columbo. In August 1971, shortly after Columbo was gunned down, Atkinson participated in a panel discussion on violence in the women's movement. When it was her turn to speak, Atkinson taped a picture of the slain Columbo to the podium and harangued the audience of feminists for having failed to support "Sister Joseph Columbo."²⁴⁹ This was not what the audience expected of Atkinson, and many women in the auditorium jeered her. To them Columbo was nothing more than a gangster who trafficked in drugs and prostitution. But Atkinson claimed, much to their dismay, that Columbo was a revolutionary committed to building a working-class movement in America. In fact, Atkinson suggested that it was he who was the revolutionary whereas women's liberationists were hopeless "phonies" who talked about violence instead of "hanging out" in "the street with people [who were] fighting for their own asses."²⁵⁰ Again we have the familiar refrain—the women's movement has radical pretensions, but no real revolutionary substance. Several days later, Atkinson wrote:

The irony of it! . . . I, the Super-Feminist, Extremist, Man-Hater, divorced you [the women's movement] over the picture

of a working-class, uneducated, criminal, second-generation immigrant, male corpse. I stood by the irrefutable evidence of his Revolutionary spirit, *in spite of* his maleness.²⁵¹

Kate Millett later observed that Atkinson "is the best teacher we have—she will give us the hardest case, a Mafia boss, and impose his humanity upon us. Rub our noses in his bullet wounds. Teach us humanity."²⁵² But Atkinson was doing more than simply imposing Columbo's humanity on the audience, she was excoriating women's liberationists for failing to "pick up the gun." This was, of course, what Weatherman was saying to the rest of the left, and it is not coincidental that Weatherman was the one leftist group Atkinson singled out for praise in her speech. This was a militant vanguardism that seemed to grow out of a contempt for the people, that indeed made an enemy of the people.

In important respects, though, The Feminists' proto-cultural feminism followed from the group's and Atkinson's original conceptualization of the problem. Atkinson admitted that while she had always "tried to maintain the distinction between *men* (as biological entities) being the enemy, and the *behavior* of men being the enemy," that even she at times had lost sight of the distinction.²⁵³ Moreover, by identifying female acquiescence as a large part of the problem, The Feminists made the process of re-creating oneself the central feminist task. Their conflation of the political and the personal made lifestyle synonymous with political struggle. But while The Feminists invoked "the personal is political" in the interests of intensifying the struggle, it could also be invoked by those escaping political struggle. And over time, personal transformation did become a substitute for political action.

The Feminists were the first of many radical feminist groups to interpret "the personal is political" prescriptively. For The Feminists, one's personal life was a reflection of one's politics, a barometer of one's radicalism and commitment to feminism. While The Feminists proscribed heterosexual relationships rather than heterosexual sex, it was just a matter of time before the standard became even narrower and more confining. Indeed, The Feminists' advocacy of separatism established the theoretical foundation for lesbian separatism.

New York Radical Feminists

By mid-1969, one of the most pressing problems facing the women's liberation movement was, paradoxically, its success. In New York City alone, there were thousands of women clamoring to become involved in the movement. Yet none of the existing radical feminist groups seemed ready or willing to organize them. The Feminists, as an avowedly vanguard group, was obviously for women who were combat-ready, rather than for neophytes. And after months of debate on the advantages and disadvantages of expansion, Redstockings was just beginning to undertake organizing groups for new women. Most radical feminists feared that vitiating groups would accompany expansion. But as interest in women's liberation grew, some women realized that the movement had to face the challenge. Minda Bikman, who joined a Redstockings group in July, remembers Shulamith Firestone, whom she knew from Washington University in St. Louis, complaining that Redstockings was missing the opportunity to organize masses of women.²⁵⁴ Of course, Firestone was also deeply dissatisfied with Redstockings' dogged commitment to consciousness-raising and the pro-woman line. Rather than remain in the group, Firestone decided to form a new group with Anne Koedt, who had recently departed The Feminists.

When Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt launched New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) in the fall of 1969, it was in the hope that they were building "a mass-based radical feminist movement."²⁵⁵ Ann Snitow remembers Firestone explaining at an early planning session that this group would "seed itself," rather than remaining closed and self-contained like other radical feminist groups.²⁵⁶ Firestone and Koedt were also anxious that this group avoid what they considered to be the Redstockings' and The Feminists' ideological and organizational flaws.²⁵⁷ To that end, Koedt wrote the group's manifesto and Firestone its organizing principles, and they virtually "hand-picked" the members of their new group. Snitow attended the group's first formal organizational meeting and remembers it as "an ecstasy of discussion. These were the people who were going to be the new group. We were there with the understanding that this would be better than whatever had been."²⁵⁸

During October and November a group of about five women met to plan NYRF. By the end of November, the group consisted of seven women—Minda Bikman, Diane Crothers, Marsha Gershin, Ann Snitow, Cestelle Ware, Firestone, and Koedt. All of its members—with the exception of Snitow, who had been in England for two years—had been involved in other feminist groups. The founding "brigade" of NYRF took the name, the Stanton-Anthony Brigade. (They had planned to call their cell groups "phalanxes" until someone astutely pointed out that the fascists had called themselves "phalangists" in the Spanish Civil War.²⁵⁹) On December 5, 1969, Koedt and Firestone presented a draft of the group's manifesto and organizing principles to a group of forty women.²⁶⁰ The first group to be organized, West Village-1, contained a number of writers, including Grace Paley, Susan Brownmiller, Sally Kempton, and, later, Alix Kates Shulman. The group's organizing efforts were made considerably easier when writer Vivian Gornick announced the formation of NYRF and listed a contact phone number in a November issue of the *Village Voice*.²⁶¹ Soon the group was swamped with mail from women all over the country. By February, there were eleven brigades, three of which were in the Village.

The group's manifesto, "Politics of the Ego," favored a highly psychological analysis of male supremacy, not unlike that of The Feminists. The Feminists had argued that men oppress women "to extend the significance of their own existence as an alternative to individual self-creativity." Koedt stated the same idea with considerably less obfuscation in NYRF's manifesto:

We believe that the purpose of male supremacy is primarily to obtain psychological ego satisfaction, and that only secondarily does this manifest itself in economic relationships.²⁶²

The manifesto's sole reference to economic factors was thus largely dismissive. According to the manifesto, male supremacy was a psychological dynamic in which men dominate women "out of a need for a sense of power."²⁶³ The root of the problem was what Koedt called the "male ego identity" which sustained itself by destroying women's egos. Koedt even suggested that the more powerless a man, the more likely he would be to oppress women. Although Koedt rejected biologism—she described femi-

ninity, for instance, as a "skill"—her contention that men oppress women for "ego fodder," that the services men extracted from women were "services to the male ego," implied that the desire for power was singularly male. As Willis observes:

NYRF proposed in essence that men wanted to exercise power for its own sake—that it was intrinsically satisfying to the ego to dominate others. According to their formulation men do not defend their power in order to get services from women, but demand services from women to affirm their sense of power.²⁶⁴

NYRF's explanation of male dominance, clearly an elaboration of *The Feminists'* analysis, conceptualized the problem as one of maleness rather than of unequal power relations. Indeed, the manifesto's "ahistoricism and timeless categories of inequality" so concerned both Snitow and her friend Evelyn Frankford that they proposed revising the manifesto. However, when they broached the idea at the December 5th meeting, they encountered resistance from Koedt, Firestone, and others as well. Interestingly, Snitow thought that she and Frankford had succeeded in carrying the majority, but concedes that the final, published version of the manifesto makes no mention of history.²⁶⁵ Willis contends that NYRF's analysis implied that "men, by virtue of their maleness, had an inherent predilection for power."²⁶⁶ While it is true that NYRF targeted maleness as the problem, I think the group conceptualized maleness as culturally constructed rather than biological determined. It is true, however, that the manifesto's conflation of male supremacy with maleness did set the stage for essentialist explanations of male supremacy. In other respects their manifesto departed from *The Feminists'* analysis. For instance, in contrast to *The Feminists*, Koedt did not suggest that either heterosexuality or love were intrinsically demeaning or oppressive to women. The problem for Koedt was the compulsory nature of heterosexuality which prevented women from viewing sex as "just a voluntary act which [women] may engage in as an expression of [their] general humanity."²⁶⁷

The manifesto was also an explicit repudiation of the Redstockings' pro-woman line. Although Koedt conceded that alternatives to the female role were both "prohibitive and prohibited," she maintained that women have also, unfortunately, come to see themselves as men's inferiors. Indeed, she argued that "it is pre-

cisely through the destruction of women's egos that they are robbed of the ability to act." According to the manifesto, the female socialization process was so thoroughgoing that woman's "ego is repressed at all times to prepare her for this future submissiveness."²⁶⁸ As Willis pointed out, the NYRF manifesto treated women like "passive recipients of social indoctrination."²⁶⁹ Koedt concluded the manifesto by exhorting women to "destroy the notion that we are indeed only servants to the male ego . . . by constructing alternate selves that are healthy, independent and self-assertive."²⁷⁰

Although the manifesto stressed the importance of personal transformation, NYRF's organizing principles made it clear that the organization's primary goal was to effect radical structural change. NYRF's organizing principles were an implicit repudiation of *The Feminists'* organizational rigidity:

we have proposed a structure designed to promote the development of an organic group cohesion as opposed to a cohesion forced by external rules and regulations: a group in which people will become radicalized feminists of their own accord and at their own pace rather than being pressured into it by a group line imposed from above; a group women will attend because they need to and want to, and not because they fear the consequences of missing a meeting; a group which will enrich its members personally and not just drain them for the sake of The Cause.²⁷¹

Firestone designed NYRF as an umbrella group which would consist of geographically based, "nuclear leaderless/structureless" cell groups, or brigades. Each brigade would be named after a different radical feminist or, if possible, a "team of radical feminists," like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the Grimké sisters or the Pankhursts. The brigades would consist of no more than fifteen women to achieve "a working internal democracy" and to engender intimacy and a common political consciousness. Firestone favored the small group for she felt it allowed women to "seal up the gaps between them." She encouraged women within the new brigades to pair off in order to give each other positive reinforcement. She maintained that the "Sister System," as she called it, had been used by first-wave

feminists and had proven useful as well in the Stanton-Anthony Brigade.²⁷²

To ensure that NYRF would be composed of *radical* feminists, new brigades were subject to a six-month probationary period. During this "formative period," the "conditional brigades" were expected to spend three months doing consciousness-raising and another three months reading and discussing feminist literature from the first and second waves. Firestone envisioned consciousness-raising as a crucial component of NYRF's program. But in contrast to the Redstockings who argued that the purpose of consciousness-raising was to change the system not to change women, Firestone recommended consciousness-raising:

to increase personal sensitivity to the various levels and forms that the oppression takes in our daily lives. We have all, in order to adjust to our condition, had to develop elaborate blinkers. . . . Before we can remove the structures of oppression, we must remove our own accommodations to them.²⁷³

Firestone hoped that this intensive course of study and consciousness-raising would give new members an adequate grounding in feminist theory and history, and an understanding and appreciation of radical feminism. At the conclusion of this six-month period, the brigade could apply for full membership in NYRF. Acceptance was contingent on approval of the brigade's name and each individual's signature to the manifesto, "Politics of the Ego." It was also expected that new brigades would elect delegates to NYRF's Coordinating Body, research and produce a booklet biography of the feminist whose name they had chosen, and initiate an action from beginning to end. At this point a brigade had "full autonomy and independence to begin the serious work of an experienced brigade."²⁷⁴

Koedt and Firestone believed that they had devised an organization which would prove that a "mass-based radical feminist movement" need not be oxymoronic. However, their enthusiasm was not universally shared. Their first action—a protest against the sex-role stereotyping of Christmas toys—had to be abandoned because of conflicts and disorganization.²⁷⁵ Moreover, many of the "conditional" members objected to the probationary period and felt "colonized" by the Stanton-Anthony Brigade. Brownmiller, for one, felt that Stanton-Anthony members

took the position that "they were the feminists, the rest of us were the colonies. We all thought that we were equal, and already full members." In fact, many women reportedly wanted their brigades to be named Stanton-Anthony.²⁷⁶ Snitow thinks that the probationary period might have been excessively long given those hypertrophied times when revolution seemed around the corner:

So great was the explosion of both interest and commitment that to tell someone who had been in NYRF three months that they couldn't yet vote was insulting because you could remake the world in three months.

However, she stresses that the impulse behind the membership rules had more to do with political education than with vanguardism. According to Snitow, they believed that membership restrictions were necessary to ensure that "everyone would be an experienced feminist, everyone would have thought through the enormous implications of feminism." Snitow recalls that "Shulie, in particular, was so tired of square one."²⁷⁷ Although Stanton-Anthony envisioned its leadership as temporal, the brigade nonetheless assumed leadership of the organization, and this at a time when all leadership was seen as nefarious. Snitow suspects that Stanton-Anthony was also resented by the others because they were seen as "the fancy girls," "the flashy bunch," whose brigade was "a thrilling intellectual cauldron."²⁷⁸ Indeed, Stanton-Anthony was quite a dazzling group. Firestone and Koedt, as founders of the women's liberation movement in New York, were the best known. Both had written influential articles, and people within NYRF knew that Firestone's book *The Dialectic of Sex* would be out that fall. Snitow regularly did feminist reviews for radio station WBAI's "Womankind" program. However, Brownmiller claims "we didn't resent Stanton-Anthony. As Sally Kempton always used to say, 'They add a lot of class to our group.'"²⁷⁹ But it was precisely Stanton-Anthony's "class" and authenticity that engendered the resentment. The rules, which formalized the distinction, came to symbolize Stanton-Anthony's authenticity and the newcomers' status as acolytes.

Tensions finally exploded in early summer of 1970—about six months from the date of the organization's founding—at a general

meeting of NYRF when Stanton-Anthony was attacked for its alleged elitism, and the rank and file abrogated the membership rules. Snitow recalls the meeting was like "a palace revolution. We were really being drawn up. They were throwing out their leaders."²⁸⁰ Brownmiller thinks that "Anne and Shulie decided they were victims of a putsch led by me." Brownmiller admits that she may have spoken out against the rules, for she believed that the very notion of a "vanguard brigade was unnecessary, extraordinarily presumptuous, and silly and demeaning to the rest of us." But Brownmiller maintains that she was not attempting to wrest control of the organization from its founders:

Shulie and Ann thought I was a comer whom they couldn't control. They were probably right about this, but wrong about my scheming to snatch the leadership from their hands. I never thought in those terms. But neither did I believe that they were the leaders and that I and the rest of us were the followers. They did think this, and so the seeds of destruction were there.²⁸¹

Certainly, this revolution was aided by those within the palace. Both Bikman and Crothers—who had bonded with each other over their problems with Koedt and Firestone, respectively—spoke in favor of rescinding the membership rules. In fact, Brownmiller claims that it was Diane Crothers who accused Firestone and Koedt of being "dictatorial" and "elitist."²⁸²

Immediately following the vote, Stanton-Anthony retreated to the basement to figure out how to respond to the rebellion. Snitow remembers that they all felt "exhausted and burned up" by this "intense and incandescent period" of activism. But Firestone, for one, was more than exhausted. She was fed up with NYRF and, according to Snitow, had been disenchanted with the group for some time:

Shulie was more globally furious at the [newer members] for not being good, or for being off. She felt the new groups were vitiating and adulterating. This wasn't the organization she had planned.²⁸³

Firestone wanted to let the membership know how she felt, she wanted to harangue them. But Snitow counseled against it for she "was terrified of the rift." She also suspects that she was "protecting some fantasy I had of the group's need not to be utterly

repudiated by its founders." Snitow prevailed, but she now regrets having "quelled" Firestone for she thinks that Firestone probably "knew a lot about the ways in which the movement was being vitiated."²⁸⁴ When they returned to the meeting, they launched no tirades, but simply announced that they were disbanding their brigade and withdrawing from the organization. Brownmiller contends she was shocked by their pronouncement and maintains that "most of the people in the room, including me, wanted them to stay."²⁸⁵

For most of those attending the tumultuous meeting, it was an issue of elitism and powermongering, not an issue of the movement's attenuation. However, Firestone's concerns were not unwarranted. As in Redstockings, many of the middle-class and upper-middle-class women joining NYRF seemed more interested in self-improvement than in the radical restructuring of society. Their feminism was narrower, more individualistic, and more self-interested. The newcomers often lacked the founders' radical perspective on other forms of social domination. For instance, Firestone, who was uncompromising in her criticism of the organized left's sexism, nonetheless maintained that radical feminism "refuses to accept the existing left analysis not because it is too radical, but because *it is not radical enough*."²⁸⁶ Although radical feminists did not think that socialism was sufficient to liberate women, neither did they believe that feminism was compatible with capitalism. Indeed, Firestone called for a "feminist socialism."²⁸⁷ Radical feminists assumed that radical feminism would politicize newer women about other forms of social domination. But, as Willis points out, radical feminism made the newcomers aware of their oppression as women; it did not automatically transform them into radicals who were "committed to overall social transformation."²⁸⁸ It was disillusioning for women like Firestone to see some of these new women grasping onto feminism as an ideology of self-improvement.

After the dissolution of Stanton-Anthony, West Village-1 became the unofficial leadership brigade of NYRF. By early 1971 the group totaled 400 members.²⁸⁹ NYRF did important educational work, especially around the issue of rape. Their January 1971 speak-out and April 1971 conference on rape were enormously successful in raising consciousness about the issue. Susan Brown-

Miller was a driving force behind these events and they helped inspire her landmark book on rape, *Against Our Will*.²⁹⁰ However, NYRF was now quite different from what its founders had envisioned. With the abolition of the three-stage membership structure, the group was no longer the rigorous, demanding, cadre-like organization Firestone and Koedt had imagined. In fact, Hole and Levine contend that "without any formal structure through which to measure their growth, define and refine their politics, and initiate actions, most of the groups lost any sense of the larger organization."²⁹¹ Although NYRF continued to sponsor conferences through 1974, the remaining brigades had dissolved by the beginning of 1972.

With the break-up of the founding brigade, the organization moved in a different political direction as well, sometimes accepting rather than challenging dominant cultural assumptions. The December 1971 prostitution conference which they co-sponsored with The Feminists was a case in point. From the beginning, the few prostitutes who attended the conference complained that the organizers assumed a judgmental stance toward them. Most incredible of all from the prostitutes' standpoint was that the organizers had entitled one panel, "Toward the Elimination of Prostitution," and yet had failed to include one prostitute on it. The place finally erupted when a member of The Feminists declared herself an "honorable woman" because she lived in a tenement, worked as a secretary, and yet refused to sell her body. As Millett noted, "the accusation, so long buried in liberal goodwill and radical rhetoric—'You're selling it; I could too, but I won't'—was finally heard. Said out loud at last."²⁹² Alix Kates Shulman found the conference organizers' moralizing "untenable," and Kathie Sarachild criticized the conference for "veering away from feminism . . . into some kind of social work."²⁹³ Sarachild took the planners to task for assuming that they could theorize about prostitution without consulting the women with first-hand experience—prostitutes themselves. Snitow was also critical of the conference and doubts that such a conference could ever have emerged from Stanton-Anthony.²⁹⁴ Despite the fact that many feminists were critical of the conference, the organizers insisted on attributing the dissension to leftists, particularly those

from the sectarian group Youth Against War and Fascism. According to Sarachild, the organizers claimed that

"The prostitutes weren't *really* the kind of feminists they were putting themselves forward to be. Actually they were 'Leftists' who had been sent by their underground groups to disrupt the conference."

While Sarachild acknowledged that "sections of the male supremacist pseudo-left" might have played a role in the tumult, she maintained that women's participation in the left "does not *in itself* contradict that they are feminists."²⁹⁵

The dissolution of Stanton-Anthony marked the end of Firestone and Koedt's involvement with the organized movement. Reportedly they felt they had been deposed because their analysis was too radical. By the time Firestone's book was published in October 1970, she had already dropped out of the movement. Koedt co-edited *Notes from the Third Year* in 1971 and the aboveground anthology *Radical Feminism*, which was published in 1973, but she kept her distance from the movement. Brownmiller believes that

there is no other explanation for [Firestone and Koedt's departure] except the phenomenon of certain kinds of personalities that are brilliant and prescient about starting things, but then leave when the movement becomes popular (and no longer in their control).²⁹⁶

Brownmiller's analysis suggests that Koedt and Firestone sought personal control. But it seems just as likely that they wanted the power to define the movement and prevent its attenuation. However, by 1970, this was a power the founders were rapidly losing.

For many veteran radical feminists in New York City, the most striking evidence of the movement's attenuation was the March 18, 1970 *Ladies Home Journal* sit-in. Although the sit-in was organized by a group called Media Women—to which both Kempton and Brownmiller belonged—women from Redstockings, The Feminists, and NYRF actively participated in planning and carrying out the action. Between 100 and 200 women poured into editor-in-chief John Mack Carter's office and presented him with a lengthy list of demands which included:

that Carter be replaced by a woman; that all editorial sales and advertising personnel be women; that black editorial workers be hired in proportion to black readership; that a daycare center be established on the premises for working mothers—to be run as a collective by the mothers; that the policy of the magazine be changed to: eliminate all degrading and useless advertising . . . and focus on the real issues facing women today; that the *Journal* publish an issue on women's liberation written by members of the movement.²⁹⁷

Not surprisingly, Carter proved intransigent. After hours of arguing, the women had made no headway whatsoever. Firestone, Atkinson, and Ros Baxandall were by this point extremely frustrated with the imperious Carter and with the demonstration's organizers who seemed uninterested in making contact with the clericals who worked at the *Journal*. Firestone took it upon herself to speed up the negotiations process by climbing onto Carter's desk and shredding copies of the *Journal*.²⁹⁸ Firestone's dramatic gesture apparently provided Carter with the incentive he needed to negotiate. However, Carter refused to negotiate with a group larger than twelve. A small delegation did confer with him over the objections of many women who felt that all the protestors should be present during the negotiations.²⁹⁹

The radicals' worst fears were realized when the delegation emerged from hours of negotiations having secured only one of their fourteen demands—the publication of an eight-page supplement on the movement to be penned by the protestors. The women had also succeeded in wrangling \$10,000, joint editorial control of the supplement, and collective by-lines from Carter.³⁰⁰ But many women felt that the negotiating team had allowed itself to be cleverly manipulated by Carter. After all, they reasoned, hadn't many major women's magazines already run articles on the new movement? And wouldn't the *Journal* stand to profit from the publicity surrounding the sit-in? Some women also thought that the action was self-aggrandizing, perhaps a way for some writers to "break into print and get themselves known to a few top editors."³⁰¹ Indeed, the organizers' willingness to abandon their more radical demands suggested to many radicals that the action was merely a "group job interview."³⁰² Baxandall even claims that some women showed up for the sit-in with their vitae in hand.³⁰³ At the time Baxandall harshly criticized the action:

I was at the *Ladies Home Journal* action and it was repulsive in that several professional writers were conducting job interviews and convincing the man they were expert writers, furthering their careers. This turned me off and severed the solidarity. . . . When some of us objected to this type of elitism and individualism we were put down for not being sisterly. Who are our sisters—what does it mean to say we define our best interest as that of the poorest, ugliest and most brutally exploited?³⁰⁴

One *Rat* writer argued that the action was "effective as publicity," but suggested that Media Women "would do well to examine their commitment to the liberation of all sisters, in order to assure their interest in fame or fortune do not take precedence." She also contended that the demonstration proved that "it is not feasible for radicals to participate in joint actions with those who do not share our understandings [*sic*] about the nature of the power structure."³⁰⁵ Even Karla Jay, a member of Media Women who praised aspects of the action, contended that they had

folded under the offer of a few goodies! Somewhere, despite all our good intentions, the action had become elitist. What good had we done? Aside from the publicity . . . we had only succeeded in getting Vassar girls higher paying jobs in publishing.

And Jay noted that as the day wore on, the protestors had "started more and more to appeal to [Carter's] capitalist self-interest—how much money he would make on a women's liberation issue."³⁰⁶ A number of movement veterans were disenchanted with the action. Baxandall remembers resolving to leave the movement after the action because she was so angry at Media Women for ignoring the secretaries at the *Journal*.³⁰⁷ Nor was Atkinson or Firestone pleased with the action.³⁰⁸ According to Bikman, Koedt "hated" the sit-in.³⁰⁹ And novelist Alix Kates Shulman believes the action demonstrated that the "movement had reason to worry about writers coming in and ripping off the movement."³¹⁰ For veteran radical feminists who had always maintained that no woman would ever be free until all were free, the sit-in raised disturbing questions.

In the early '70s radical feminism seemed to be flourishing. Certainly, the women's liberation movement was having an enor-

mous impact on the nation. In July 1970, New York State liberalized its abortion law, making it the most progressive in the country. Three years later, in *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state laws forbidding abortion violated the constitutional right to privacy. In August 1970, the House of Representatives, after only an hour of debate, passed the Equal Rights Amendment; it was subsequently passed by Congress in March of 1972. And on August 26, 1970—the fiftieth anniversary of woman suffrage—feminists staged the largest demonstration for female equality in American history. The Women's Strike for Equality drew between 35,000 and 50,000 women in New York City alone.³¹¹ Talk of women's liberation (or more often, women's lib) was everywhere. There was an explosion of radical feminist literature—both aboveground and underground. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Robin Morgan's anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* were all published in 1970 and were all best-sellers. Radical feminist groups and projects cropped up everywhere, not only in major urban centers.

But by 1973, the radical feminist movement was actually in decline. The groups responsible for making the important theoretical breakthroughs were either dead or moribund. Certainly, The Feminists, Cell 16, and NYRF had evolved in ways which their founders had never intended—Cell 16 and The Feminists toward cultural feminism, and NYRF toward liberal feminism. A number of movement pioneers had withdrawn from the movement, often, as Sarachild and Leon observed in mid-1971, as a result of being attacked as “elitist,” “middle class,” or “unsisterly.”³¹² In fact, in the summer of 1970 a small group of self-named “feminist refugees,” among them some of the women responsible for establishing the first women's liberation groups in the country, met in New York to discuss the leadership “purges.”³¹³ Then there were the divisive struggles over class, elitism, and sexual preference which started to consume the movement in 1970. By 1972, the women's movement was so fractured that it made, in the words of Nora Ephron, “the American Communist Party of the 1930's look like a monolith.”³¹⁴ The radical feminist wing of the movement became so absorbed in its own internal struggles that it sometimes found it difficult to look outside itself, to focus on the larger problem of male supremacy.

Among some of the founders, there was a growing uneasiness about the movement's direction. For instance, Sarachild, Hanisch, Leon, Mainardi, and Colette Price revived Redstockings in December 1973, in large part because they believed that while “the trappings of the early radical upsurge remain . . . the content and style have been watered down. Operating on its initial momentum only, the movement is slowing down.”³¹⁵ A few of the founders even began to question certain initial premises of the movement. Roxanne Dunbar was among those who moved decisively toward Marxism. And in mid-1973, Ellen Willis criticized the increasingly popular movement idea that women constituted a classless caste. In fact, Willis maintained that women's liberation required an “economic revolution” and could be achieved only through an alliance with men.³¹⁶

By 1973 radical feminism was beginning to give way to cultural feminism and liberal feminism. In the early '70s liberal feminism broadened its analysis as it moved away from Friedan's economic and legalistic approach and embraced aspects of radical feminism. In contrast to Friedan, who had disparaged radical feminists' focus on the “personal,” many liberal feminists came to agree with radical feminists that there was a political dimension to personal life. NOW chapters even began to establish consciousness-raising groups for interested women. But liberal feminists remained determinedly individualistic and in this respect their feminism diverged from radical feminism. While radical feminists were committed to social transformation, liberal feminists spoke of self-improvement. *Ms.* magazine, which began publishing in 1972, was quite successful in promulgating this “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” brand of feminism and many women came to embrace it.³¹⁷ Equally attractive to many women was that liberal feminists indicted sex roles rather than men. From the beginning Friedan had presented feminism as a sex-role revolution in which both men and women would benefit. Indeed, for Friedan feminism was but “a stage in the whole human rights movement.”³¹⁸ And in 1970, Gloria Steinem, *Ms.* editor and the best-known exponent of this new liberal feminism, deployed radical rhetoric, but like Friedan implied that women's liberation was men's liberation as well. “Men will have to give up ruling class privileges, but in return they will no longer be the

ones to support the family, get drafted, bear the strain of responsibility and freedom."³¹⁹

Women joining the movement turned to NOW for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was its liberalism. But NOW was also nowhere nearly as fractious as most radical feminist groups, and it was considerably more accepting of women who did not yet know that in some feminist circles high 'heels and make-up were evidence of collaboration.³²⁰ And by comparison to radical feminists who must have seemed as though they were engaged in a long and tedious encounter session with each other, liberal feminists seemed models of efficiency and effectiveness. Of course, to many women's liberationists it seemed that the legislative and judicial victories that liberal feminists were claiming were nothing but concessions designed to co-opt the movement. For instance, in September 1970 The Feminists sent a message to the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments denouncing the ERA and advising feminists "against squandering invaluable time and energy on it."³²¹ A delegation of Washington, D.C. feminists invited to testify about the ERA before the same committee, declared, "We are aware that the system will try to appease us with their [*sic*] paper offerings. We will not be appeased. Our demands can only be met by a total transformation of society which you cannot legislate, you cannot co-opt, you cannot *control*."³²² And Firestone went so far (in fact, further than many other radical feminists) as to dismiss child-care centers as attempts to "buy women off" because they "ease the immediate pressure without asking why the pressure is on *women*."³²³ But the totalism of radical feminism's vision and its cynicism toward reform struck many women as futilitarian.

Although cultural feminism was still quite inchoate in 1973, there was within the radical feminist wing of the movement more talk of essentialism and a greater antagonism toward the left. One also finds the emphasis shifting in certain quarters from political confrontation to personal transformation and the construction of a specifically female culture and community. There was less activism, especially around abortion and child care—two issues central to early radical feminism. But this followed in large part from the way in which radical feminism was defined by groups such as The Feminists and Cell 16. If radical feminism required separation

from men in one's personal life, those issues that seemed very connected to women's relationships with men were no longer the burning issues. Beginning in 1971 the focus of radical feminist activism started to shift to the issue of rape. Previously when radical feminists spoke of violence, they were often referring to, in the words of Ann Snitow, "the violence of the mind."³²⁴ In demonstrating against beauty pageants, women's magazines, and the media, feminists were challenging the cultural representation of women which, they argued, caused untold psychic damage to women. And while radical feminists sometimes acknowledged the role played by physical violence in maintaining male supremacy, they tended to emphasize other factors—marriage, the family, normative heterosexuality, women's economic dependence, and lack of reproductive freedom.³²⁵ Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar suggests that as the enormity of the problem of male violence became known, some radical feminists began to turn to biologicistic explanations of male dominance.³²⁶

Although cultural feminism was fundamentally distinct from radical feminism as it was articulated by Firestone, Atkinson, Sarachild, or even Dunbar, the seeds of cultural feminism were in all the varieties of radical feminism. The characterization of "woman" as a unitary category, the depiction of men as irrevocably sexist and of women as powerless victims, and the conviction that feminism was the single transformative theory—all helped to pave the way for cultural feminism. And although radical feminism was unalterably opposed to personal solutions, its frequent conflation of the personal and the political made it easy for the cultural feminist commitment to personal transformation or the liberal feminist concern with self-improvement to be defined as political. While the radical feminist movement as a whole was social constructionist and committed to maximizing women's sexual pleasure, there were radical feminists whose views of gender and sexuality prefigured cultural feminism. In fact, the tendency of some radical feminists to blame maleness rather than power relations not only encouraged essentialism, but also helped shift the focus away from confronting men to building a female counter-culture as a refuge from contaminating maleness. Yet radical feminism's demise did not follow inevitably from either its theoretical shortcomings or even the increasingly conservative cli-

mate of the '70s. To understand the decline of radical feminism and the ascendance of cultural feminism, we must look more closely at the period of 1970–1973 when the movement was ravaged by intense factionalism over the issues of elitism, class, and lesbianism.

5

The Eruption of Difference

The first wave of radical feminism was, as Ann Snitow observes, characterized by the belief that "we are one, we are woman."¹ But by 1970, the rhetoric of universal sisterhood had given way to wrenching discussions of women's differences, as lesbians and working-class women challenged the assumption that there was a uniformity to women's experiences and interests. From 1970 onward, excoriations of the movement as racist, classist, and heterosexualist became routine if not obligatory at feminist gatherings. Some feminists, like Robin Morgan and Kathleen Barry, reacted by claiming that class was a male-defined category irrelevant to women.² Barry even argued that the women raising it were interlopers from the "male left" intent upon sabotaging the women's movement.³ Similarly, the reorganized Redstockings alleged that the women pressing the issue of lesbianism were politicians who had initially disparaged women's liberation and were now using lesbianism "to replace feminism or eliminate it, or else . . . dilute it."⁴ While it is true that leftist women stressed class, the women who initially questioned the movement's class dynamics were veteran radical feminists, not outside agitators. Nor was Redstockings' depiction of lesbian feminists as antifeminists accurate. Although the most influential early lesbian-feminist collective, The Furies, was composed of former politicians, the conjoining of feminism and lesbianism proved logical and compelling to many radical feminists as well. However, those feminists who believed in a global sisterhood found it easier to attribute the conflicts to political adversaries than to acknowledge the formidable obsta-