Strength vs. Power

What seems to preserve us, to keep us going, might at the same time waste our energies and inhibit our development. In order to survive, women, scattered as we are throughout the economic classes and racial categories, and isolated from each other by intimate associations with individual men, women have had to bury their strengths and talents, to forego personal development and to pervert their natural desires for active accomplishment.

The human being is a constant struggle between its parts—the will to survive and the will to overcome the given situation and prevail—to fulfill potential. For most people these have always been mutually exclusive goals. The enemy extracts our complicity in our own oppression by forcing us to make this specious choice. Self-preservation, as the necessary ground for development, will always come first for the majority of individuals. So we fight individually to survive in the system and unwillingly reinforce the system.

Women exist powerless to control their own destinies in a world organized by and for men. Women are strong. We have endured all these millennia without losing spirit. We have been creative and active whenever it was at all possible. But for most women the opportunity never arises. We are not allowed to use our strength. After showing something of our abilities in industry, business and the professions in the 20's and 30's, women were summarily sent back to the kitchens following WWll. From whence erupted the strident, self-indulgent male outburst against MOMISM—the strong woman, even safely tucked away at home, was condemned. The current solution is the further debilitation and crippling of women via the psychiatrist's couch.

Women are strong. What we need is the chance to use our strength. Power is the ability to mobilize strength.

Power, unlike strength, is not the quality of an individual. Strength adheres in the individual, whether of the physical, intellectual or spiritual variety. Power exists only when two or more persons concur in a purpose. In complete isolation no personal qualities are utilized above mere animal level, i.e., survival level. Women are relatively isolated by marriage, by male-inspired prejudices, by competition for the male commodity. Therefore, women are powerless.

The Group Creates Power

The idea of the group is not simply to grab power. Power is more than a mere exchangeable commodity. In a coup d'état for instance, one group merely replaces another, takes over its power holdings. In a revolutionary situation the group creates its own power, its own institutions and social organizations. Power
itself is infinite in potential. If we think only in terms of grabbing existing power our cause seems hopeless because our thinking is confined to the present situation as interpreted by men. If we think rather in terms of creating power, of imposing a new interpretation on existing conditions, of projecting a new image of radical change for the future, the possibilities for action begin to emerge.

First Phase: the Group strengthens the individual

There is no place for women's strength in this world. Politics, the intellectual world, arts and sciences belong to men. They set the standards and the goals. Women in these fields may only appeal to male standards or pass into oblivion. First off then, the group creates a space, a stage for action and creativity. This space is not merely a physical enclosure but it exists wherever the group is. It is a province of the mind only, but it is something a woman can know she owns, like men know they own the world. It is the one place in the world where she can meet her equals and exchange ideas with them. It is a refuge from the male world where we are so conspicuous, where we cannot step out of line, be free, think free, where we are separated from each other.

This space belongs to us. We interpret it. It is up to us how the group will function, we say what a feminist is or isn't, we create the concepts that will become part of the feminist interpretation. The existence of the space reawakens the will to act. Action is itself a positive good apart from its practical utility. Only from feeling our strength does the will to struggle arise.

Second Phase: Collective strength—power

The conservation of the status quo is intimately related to a particular interpretation of the world, especially in terms of limits. (The whole idea of "going too far" involves an acceptance of the oppressors' definition of limits.) The way things are is referred to as REALITY; the prevailing interpretation of the world is known as TRUTH. If examined, whether from a rational or introspective point of view, it becomes obvious that the logical or psychological cogency of this "truth" depends on nothing so much as the power mobilized behind it. The male interpretation of the world has behind it the army, navy, marines and air force, billions of dollars, intricate bureaucratic traditions, ancient educational institutions and total control over scientific development. That is to say, it is extremely well-organized and institutionalized. Men can afford to say at this point that feminism is a joke and can't fulfill its ends, that women just don't have it and that the way things are and have been clearly attests to this TRUTH.

*For more on the idea of a space and its significance with respect to power see THE HUMAN CONDITION--Hannah Arendt

**This space belongs equally to each member. The method used to insure equal participation is the lot system for distributing all tasks, both those tasks which are stupid and boring and those which totally involve the individual in a creative way.
The group creates its own reality and its own truth. Knowing that reality is whatever is agreed upon by society, the group creates its own society and thereby its own power. Power is the organization of many wills with a common purpose and common interpretation. The group through its many individuals working together creates an interpretation and then stands collectively behind it. The meaning the group gives is not a static conceptual understanding but an active interpretation always including how things shall become and the means for effecting change. For instance the anti-woman woman is not seen as merely the result of such and such occurrences in her childhood or her present condition. Rather the group strives to adopt a consistent way of acting toward her with respect to our ultimate aim—the union of all women. An attitude of friendliness and concern might be decided upon, taking her side whenever she is in opposition to a male, while at the same time expressing feminist views consistently, in an effort to win her over without watering down our interpretation, to show her the meaning of being female.

The group adopts policies toward other classes in society and thereby strives to present a united front whenever possible. In this way the group insinuates its way into the society, creating a problem which no single individual has the power to effect. An individual can always be viewed as an aberrant, a criminal, an insane person, or even a genius or saint. (The society has provided prisons, insane asylums, monasteries and various other institutions like VISTA and the Peace Corps to take care of freakish people.) An individual cannot by himself cast doubt on the prevailing interpretation of the world. A group, opposed to society and existing within it, is a challenge to its idea of reality and the security of its truths. By living their lives on a basis at variance with the beliefs of the society, the group gives the lie to those beliefs. For example, it is a truth that women cannot live without marriage, that home and hearth are congenital longings, part of the female essence. A few freaks here and there manage to do without but only because of their masculine tendencies. We are constantly reminded that most women who are not married are rejects who would do so in a minute if only they could but, as it is, can only live bitter lives of unfulfillment. When a group rejects marriage and clearly states its case against it, and the members of that group do not shrivel up and die but soundly flourish, society's quarantine is lifted and a germ of doubt enters the good citizen's mind.

Commitment and Continuity

The group has a commitment which is continuous. No individual is a total feminist. We all escape now and again. In everyday life, we have, very often, to communicate in terms which we know are meddlesome and counter productive. The group, however, by means of the collective is always committed. It exists for a purpose and operates always with that end in view. The group creates continuity and continuous development for the ideas of its members.

The group preserves also the continuity of action. Acts of individuals which might otherwise be absorbed by the society or ignored or labelled aberrant, are salvaged and preserved in memory by means of the group. Powerless people are always ignored by those who write history and the meanings of their actions are distorted in their own times. A woman, having shot a male, can be interpreted as a mere mental case or as another penis envy victim. The group preserves
this deed as an act of resistance against the oppressor—and makes connections and awakens possibilities in women's minds.

A Program and a Structure

The group does not merely act haphazardly but it creates a program of action—a means for breaking down the present institutions founded on our oppression. It is because the group has continuity and because the individual acts of its members can be coordinated that a group can adopt a program with some hope of mobilizing strength to effect its ends. The program grows logically out of its (the group's) analysis, and as it unfolds, a new world, a counter-world emerges in the midst of a hostile society.

The group, resisting anarchy, declares its principles and lays down rules among its members to translate these principles into action, into reality. But the group need not bind itself to outmoded or ineffective rules or to those which obstruct individual development once they have been revealed as such. The group is responsive to its environment, particularly to women and their perspectives. In this way the group can provide both a reasonable amount of stability and security for its members and yet act as a vehicle for change.

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