

AHP Activities

SEXUAL POLITICS

In this issue is printed a remarkable piece by Keith Paton - one of the few contributions by a man which get anywhere near the insight and intensity of the best writers of the Women's Movement. (Incidentally, some of the most remarkable of these latter are to be found in the two issues of the Women's Liberation Review, published in this country.)

In January of this year, for the first time in this country, the AHP put on a day seminar on 'Male/Female Energy and Gender Identity' which attempted to get into the same area. It was led by Maureen Forrester (just back from a long trip to California, where she was in a women's group) and John Rowan (who has been in a men's group and participated in the recent conference called 'Men against Sexism').

It seems as though, at long last, the AHP is beginning to wake up to the fact that there is such a thing as sexism, and that it is closely tied in with many of the concerns of the Human Potential movement. Someone in California recently pointed out that while 80% of the Esalen Institute leaders were men, 80% of the participants were women. This is clearly nothing to do with the good intentions of those concerned - or is it?

The point is this. Our society has a dominant ideology, which is an ideology of domination. Bosses dominate workers, whites dominate blacks, parents dominate children - and men dominate women. In the personal sphere, the intellect dominates the emotions. In each case one side is separated and then elevated by putting the other side down. Topdog lords it over underdog. The human potential movement opposes this separation and domination in the personal case - most obviously in Gestalt therapy but less obviously in every other discipline to be found in the movement. (Possible exceptions would include psychosynthesis and some forms of Yoga.) It opposes dominance in education - see Carl Rogers, George Leonard and many others on this. It also opposes domination in organisational settings, and favours a high degree of genuine participation in decision-making, as witness Argyris, Beckhard, Bennis, etc. It is, therefore, logical that it should oppose domination in every other sphere.

What the women's movement has done is to see that domination, in this sense, is a specifically male outlook. It is the way in which men have constructed social reality. It is a masculine pattern of behaviour, one of the main purposes of which is to put down women. And because it is so all-pervasive, it affects women at every turn with an alien and oppressive distortion of their experience.

'I agree with Shulamith Firestone that sexism, in the sense of 'male qualities' like dominance and competitiveness, is the basis of the rot in the whole structure of society.' (Chandra Masoliver)

Seeing things in this way makes a whole difference to the way we look at politics. It puts women into a particularly salient position - as Keith Paton says elsewhere, 'Women are the real Left.' It is women's consciousness which can guide us now, if we want to alter the patterns of domination in our society.

But I personally find it hard to see much appreciation of any of this within the human potential movement. Both men and women in it seem to treat experience solely in terms of a here-and-now I-and-thou relationship which unconsciously assumes a social vacuum. It is as if society were basically OK, or at least not to be worried about. I find this unrealistic and disappointing, because my experience is much like that of Keith Paton. I find it hard and painful and a continual struggle to deal with my own tendencies to dominate and oppress my own wife. No matter how much I see and try to change, there always seems to be still more. And this is partly because it is not just something inside me - it is also a whole lot of things out there, which make my very presence oppressive, almost irrespective of what I do as an individual.

And this means I need to change the structures out there too. I can't do this on my own. It needs a lot of people working together to change a social pattern. And this makes it political. That is why I HAVE to lay my trip on you, even though I know that this also makes me feel bad. I feel sometimes like the fox who had lost his tail, trying to persuade the other animals to cut off theirs.

It isn't pleasant to look at the world with the eyes of this new consciousness. It isn't pleasant to go to a new Bunuel film and only be able to feel - how incredibly male this film is - how 'look at me, what a brilliant and superior film maker I am' it comes out. It isn't pleasant to look at the Bronowski series on 'the ascent of man' and only to be able to see the enormous male bias ignoring all the impossibilities of what Elaine Morgan has called 'the Tarzan theory' of human development and calmly assuming its truth. It isn't pleasant to play a game about co-operation and competition with radical and enlightened friends and find that they are just as pushy and competitive and male-oriented as everyone else. So it doesn't feel easy for me to ask you to try and look at things in this way too.

But unless a lot more people feel this way, it isn't going to change. And I desperately want it to change. If anyone who reads this would like to start or join a women's group, or a men's group, within the AHP, or has any alternative ideas which might be better, please write to: 'Sexual Politics', c/o AHP, 57 Minster Road, N.W.2.

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