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2. Editorial Statement (1993)

The Trouble & Strife Collective¹

In the first *Trouble & Strife* editorial, in 1983, the collective gave a definition of women's oppression which foregrounded the benefits men get from the oppression and exploitation of women, and which suggested that the existence of 'men' and 'women' as social categories must be seen in relation to this: 'all women are oppressed as women' and 'all men have advantages that flow from belonging to the category male ..'. Whilst recognising that women experience other oppressions, the collective argued that women's oppression should not be seen as secondary to other oppressions, nor as being derived from, or produced by other oppressions.

Multiple oppressions

Some ten years later, developments in radical feminist analysis have changed this understanding of women's oppression in some very important respects. Although the central insight — that women are oppressed as women and this is not secondary to any other oppression — still holds, the analysis of other oppressions and the relationship of these to women's oppression is now seen as flawed.

Specifically, the idea that oppressions such as class, race and disability are somehow 'added on' to women's oppression (making you working class and a woman, or Black and a woman, etc) has been challenged. That approach implicitly assumed that these oppressions were somehow ungendered or gender neutral, and that gender is class and race neutral. But this is not the case.

Capitalism, for instance has been exposed as a gendered system. Being able 'freely' to exchange one's labour power for wages (to be a proletarian in Marx's class analysis), is not a universal, but rather a male 'privilege'. Women are simply not as 'free' as men to sell their labour to an employer. Women *do* work for wages, of course, but under different and worse terms and conditions than men. And this is integral to the capitalist labour process.

This increasing recognition that oppressions of race and class are in fact also, in and of themselves, patriarchal; and conversely that gender is classed and raced, has led to an increasingly more sophisticated analysis of women's oppression.

The institution of heterosexuality

Ten years ago the *T&S* collective also insisted that radical feminism is not, and should not be, a lesbian-only movement. This, we would argue, is still central: it is still a defining feature of radical feminism that we see heterosexual and lesbian oppression as two sides of the same coin. But here too there is not only continuity but also change. Radical (and other sorts of) feminists now have a much more developed analysis of the central significance of heterosexuality in all manner of social phenomena — in the creation of nations and nationalism, in economic development, in religious movements, and so on.

Activism

Ten years ago the *T&S* collective commented that radical feminism was central to the women's movement's practice and that change can only come about through women's collective action. While we would agree that radical feminism is still central to movement practice, *the movement itself* has obviously changed enormously. Some have claimed it has disappeared altogether; and this apparent disappearance of an organized women's movement has been seen as either signalling the dawning of a post-feminist age, or as indicating a decline: a loss of power and a lack of interest in activism among women.

However, this not only ignores the existence of a whole range of feminist organisations — including some new ones (such as the Campaign Against Pornography and Women Against Fundamentalism) and women's concern to understand their own situations, as evidenced by the growth in Women's Studies; it also, and more importantly, ignores the way in which social conditions have changed.

Quite rapid social change — in particular changes in the nature of employment and unemployment — have made it more difficult for women to participate in social movements and to organise politically. Many now work much longer or more irregular hours; they are more likely to be the only employed member of the households in which they live; and they are more likely to have increased obligations to care for children and elderly or sick relatives who are now 'out in the community'.

It is not that feminism is no longer required, nor that women no longer want it and are not interested in activism. Rather, the decline of the highly visible women's movement is a question of feminist political activity being differently constituted in the 1990s.

The death of many forms of collective political activity, including consciousness raising, is often lamented by radical feminists — not simply nostalgically, but because they see it as the only form of 'authentic' feminist political activity. As a

consequence, women who are new to feminism, and who have never taken part in such forms of collective action, find their feminism put in doubt by the 'old guard'.

Many women discover feminism today individually (rather than by joining a local CR group or specific campaign) by, for example, reading books or by doing a women-only course, but we need not interpret this as a sign of a failing movement. Rather it may be a shift in the points at which politicisation can take place, connected to broader social changes.

Given that there appears to be a revitalised interest in radical feminism amongst young women — many of whom would have been too young to have taken part in the collective activities of the 1970s, or not born at all — surely what we need (and this piece is a very small contribution to answering the need) is an analysis of the social conditions in the 1990s which form women's relationship to feminism.

Different not dead

If we recognise that the old forms of political practice were possible because of the particular social conditions of ten and twenty years ago (and not just because of the particular qualities of the people who were present), and that these conditions have changed, we can see that there is perhaps not so much a demise of the women's movement, as a change in its form or expression.

However, if, as we have argued here, points of politicisation have shifted and many forms of collective activity have dwindled, we are going to have to rethink the claim made in *T&S* ten years ago 'that change can come about only through mass women's collective action.'

If social conditions have changed and if, in particular, it is increasingly difficult to organise collectively — then our strategies will also need to change. We need new forms of activism — ones that don't necessarily depend on hundreds or thousands of women taking part in one particular event or being organised around one particular issue and which use new possibilities. Lesbians abseiling into the House of Lords comes to mind — one action by a few women which was seen by millions on TV in Britain.²

This is not to argue for ad hoc pieces of action which are disconnected from radical feminist analysis — far from it. But it needs to be recognised that huge marches, protests or conferences may not be possible in the way they were ten or twenty years ago, and also that they may not be as effective as tools of change today.

In some ways there have already been changes in feminist organisation. Whilst it may be increasingly difficult to organise nationally, we have many more international contacts than ten years ago, and we think much more globally.

Why we still need a journal

Another issue which stands out in the original editorial statement is its apologia for writing, and for providing a journal. A similar sentiment was also expressed in other radical feminist publications set up around the same time. In the French journal *NQF* which started in 1977, for instance, there was a long justificatory note on why the founders believed writing was an important part of radical feminist activism, which now seems extremely outdated.

Ten years ago, whilst radical feminism had a strong oral culture, very little was written down — and there was suspicion of those who did write. They often got accused of trying to take personal credit for collective ‘movement’ ideas, or (paradoxically) of giving their personal view instead of everybody’s (differing) views. This antagonism has had some unfortunate consequences. There are, for instance, very few (no?) histories of radical feminism available; and grievous omissions and misrepresentations in the ‘general’ (mostly socialist feminist) histories which do exist.

We no longer feel the need to apologise for writing or to justify its significance, perhaps because the benefits of radical feminist writing are now far clearer, and perhaps also because of the kinds of social change discussed earlier. Since we don’t have the conferences, the campaigns and the oral culture that we used to have, we can’t rely simply on hearing about what’s going on. This also has the advantage of making radical feminist ideas more accessible to ‘outsiders’. However, just as it was ten years ago, it is central to *Trouble & Strife*’s position that radical feminism retains a commitment to written ideas being simply expressed and accessible to all women.

Notes

1. The members of the *T&S* collective in 1993 were Lisa Adkins, Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Marian Foley, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard, Joan Scanlon and Sara Scott.
2. The reference is to a protest against Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill (1988) which prohibited local authorities from ‘intentionally promoting homosexuality’ or condoning any teaching at a state maintained school which promoted ‘the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. The bill became law, and the clause was not repealed in the whole of the UK until 2003 [Eds].