

# NEWSLETTER

## The Center for the Study of Women and Sex Roles

THE GRADUATE CENTER  
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### WORK IN PROGRESS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFERENCE ON THE SECOND SEX

This issue of the Newsletter offers some reflections and comments on the impact and experience of "The Second Sex—Thirty Years Later: A Commemorative Conference on Feminist Theory," held at New York University on September 27-29. Because the conference raised crucial issues for all of us, this section of "Work in Progress" is devoted to a discussion of what took place and what the events mean for us as we continue to work on feminist theory. For some, including the conference organizers, who were invited to give their thoughts for this issue, more time is needed to develop a perspective on the event. Therefore, in a succeeding issue other reactions and other observations will be published. Contributions of up to 500 words are welcome; they should be sent to Martha Nelson, Center for the Study of Women and Sex Roles, 33 West 42nd Street, New York NY 10036, before January 1.

### THE SECOND SEX CONFERENCE: A PERSONAL VIEW

It would have been impossible ten years ago, much less thirty, when Simone de Beauvoir wrote THE SECOND SEX, to imagine a three-day conference for two hundred participants to discuss "Feminist Theory." I attended, therefore, with a heightened sense of curiosity and expectation. I found there were more like five hundred people in attendance, and "discussion," whether on the platform or from the floor, was rarely possible. After three days of listening, absorbing, and reflecting, I felt caught in an emotional tailspin. With the distance of time, several conclusions occur to me.

The organizers of the conference and their audience tried to break down the usual barriers to discussion endemic at large-scale meetings; they were only partially successful. The level of personal pain expressed by many who spoke from the floor was partly a pain of frustration. Different speakers had different reasons for their frustration, but they did not choose to suffer in silence. In fact, since formal panelists were generally united in calling for an airing of differences in order to shape shared goals--a feminist vision that would energize each person to renewed commitment--they were calling forth an audience response. They got it. Speaker after speaker from the floor rose to protest that she was being left out of the formal presentations. Lesbians, activists engaged in the practical politics of rape centers and battered-wife shelters, women decrying the absence of black feminists at the conference, all addressed the need to include these experiences in feminist practice and feminist theory. Their disruptions and their passionately articulated criticism was a demand for the recognition of the experiential--in all its variety of forms--within the realm of the theoretical. Dramatic outbursts attested to the high level of personal involvement at this conference; but pointed, directed discussion between panelists and audience proved impossible.

Altogether, however, panelists and audience did raise crucial issues that must be addressed to ensure the survival of contemporary feminism. I can only enumerate what I believe them to be:

- How should particularist experience inform feminist theory?
- What are the origins of gender identity and do we really seek to break it down?
- How can we theorize significantly about feminist goals when we are forced to use concepts and language that reflect male perceptions of reality?
- Can we ignore the physical body and erotic needs we take with us into the feminist future?
- To what extent must the concept of "self" reflect significant others and social scripts?
- How can we arrive at a shared feminist vision in which differences are celebrated and not merely tolerated or actually condemned?

As the products of one social reality we must communicate with each other while constructing a new world. Our greatest danger is not that we shout each other down, but that we stop shouting because each of us fails to understand what the other is shouting about.

Dorothy O. Helly  
Hunter College, CUNY

The Second Sex Conference was the feminist event of the year. Seven hundred women, representing diverse tendencies and concerns, gathered to identify and discuss the central questions that preoccupy American and European feminists devoted to political theory and action. In commemoration of Simone de Beauvoir's substantial theoretical contribution, three days were set aside to present theoretical work on women's definition and condition in society.

Most of the women I talked to approached the conference with an uneasy mixture of expectation and apprehension. Because we have seen how many feminist demands have been reduced to civil liberties/discrimination issues, we look to theory to provide a vision for social action that cannot be so easily subsumed by the capitalist patriarchy. Theory also provides a space for our desires to float free of the constraints of everyday worries. Frustrated in our actual struggle, making theory helps us to design models which can explain the condition of women and the mechanisms by which it is reproduced; then we can more clearly plan the changes that will need to be made. By women, in society.

At the same time many women had a vague sensation of fear in approaching a conference devoted to theory and wondered who the women were who were scheduled to speak. Were they THE theoreticians of the Movement? If so, what relationship were we to have to them. Making theory had always been presented to us as a male elite activity, and few of us had labelled our thinking about our lives as women, theorizing. What if we did not understand what was being said? What if it was too abstract? Did that make us the "Masses"? Despite these hesitations, no one I knew wanted to be left out of what appeared to be a crucial historical moment, the first feminist conference in the United States devoted entirely to feminist thought and feminist thinkers.

Two months have passed since that conference and the women who attended are still discussing if conferences are the most productive settings for talking theory. The deep reactions of disillusion and anger that were provoked there push us to analyze further what we expect from conferences, what happens to us when we attend them, and how, in light of this, we can evaluate them and experiment with new forms of public discourse.

The content of the Conference, the workshops and the panels were topically and politically diverse. Conflict, produced and contained in the historical contradictions women face daily, was a hallmark of the event. Some areas of continuing conflict revolve around the following:

- 1) What is the nature of a feminist revolution?
- 2) What is the current and future relationship of feminists to Left groups?
- 3) Does feminism adequately challenge capitalism?
- 4) What is feminist political action?
- 5) Can feminism create a constituency of non-white women?
- 6) What do we expect theory to give us, do for us?
- 7) What issues are operating in the Lesbian/heterosexual divergence?
- 8) What are the sources of women's power?
- 9) Will the destruction of gender free women?
- 10) What is a woman?

In order to answer these pertinent questions and others that are central to the task of creating unity among feminists and a consistency of feminist theory, we must continue the discussion that was sparked by The Second Sex Conference and proceed in defining political priorities. The real utility of conferences and the theories they offer will be demonstrated by our future political activity.

Paula Webster  
Associate, CSWSR

#### IMPRESSIONS OF THE SECOND SEX CONFERENCE

International meetings are important to strengthen the political-theoretical dialogue which we need to answer the problems facing the feminist movement all over the world. At the Conference on The Second Sex, the first day's discussion seemed to me too academic, but the second and third days became more interesting. In saying this, I mean that the problematic concerning existentialist philosophy, the topic of discussion the first day, is really one of style. I agreed with Michelle LeDoeff not only in her position about The Second Sex, but also in her desire to jump quickly over the question of existentialism.

The sessions which were most important to me were "Developing Feminist Theory," run by French feminists, and "Heterosexuality and Power." I agreed with the French feminists of Questions Feministes that a materialistic interpretation of the contradiction between the sexes is necessary. As yet this position has many unclear points, but I think it could produce significant developments in the future. The session on Heterosexuality and Power was interesting in its focus on the criticism of the role of mothers as the major agents of female victimization, even though not enough mention was made of how this process also prepares women for the totally self-annulling role of motherhood. I found the speeches of Linda Gordon, Charlotte Bunch and Kate Young particularly strong.

I would also like to comment on the organization of the conference, particularly on the contradictions which blew up on the last day. The way in which the conference was organized reflected the contradictions which emerged. I speak mainly about those between whites and Blacks, but also between lesbians and straights, and between theoreticians and activists. The absence of Black feminists was a serious error, which was probably avoidable. (As an aside, I still wonder why the feminist representation from England and Italy was so poor; I wonder on what basis the representatives were chosen.) Most of us expected the explosions before the last day, when these contradictions, which are real, broke the sometimes fictitiously peaceful and abstract tone. Exactly because such conflicts are old and difficult to solve, exactly because their origins are social and historical rather than a difference in ideas, as Gerda Lerner pointed out, I consider it impossible to deal with them either through reciprocal accusations, or psychological mechanisms of aggression and passivity or through

reciprocal vindications. In this regard, what shocked me most was the way in which the division between Blacks and whites was faced. The responses to Black criticism were either guilty applause or intolerance, with very few attempts to get to the heart of the problem. Even though it is completely understandable to be weary of these same old problems, still I believe that the only right thing to do is to face them. To continue this debate in a political, useful way, it will be necessary to start exactly from the last day of the conference.

Mariagrazie Rossilli  
Rome, Italy

## JOB NOTICES

Interested in improving education in the humanities at the community college level? An opportunity to work now with Professor Saul Touster on a small project in humanities education could be the basis for further full-time employment. Post-doctoral scholar in humanities with educational interests preferred. An application from someone seeking mentorship under the Educational Research Opportunities Program, directed by Dr. Deanna Chitayat, would be welcome. For information, write to Dr. Chitayat or Dr. Touster at the Graduate Center.

The Illinois Humanities Council, an agency devoted to bringing the humanities to the out-of-school adult public, seeks an Executive Director. The Director is responsible for policy, supervising funds, directing staff and preparing proposals for funding. Send a letter of interest, resume with salary history and letters of recommendation to Victoria Ranney, Chair, Illinois Humanities Council, 67 East Madison, Chicago, Illinois, 60603.

### UPDATE ON MAILING LIST

If you did not send in the notice of your current address, which appeared in last month's Newsletter, please do so now. You may use the form we provided, or just write to us, but if we do not receive some notice, your name will be dropped from the mailing list. It is important to keep the list accurate and up-to-date, and we appreciate your help.

### MAILING COSTS

Since we began to publish the Newsletter regularly, the mailing list has grown by 25%. We're delighted that we can reach so many people, but the cost of mailing to addresses outside the CUNY system is high. If you receive the Newsletter at a non-CUNY address, please send \$2.00 to defray postage costs. Thank you. With this assistance we can continue to mail to all our readers.

Asian Women United and the Center for the Study of Women and Sex Roles will co-sponsor a conference on Asian/Pacific Women's Educational Equity on March 14, 15, and 16, 1980. The next planning meeting is December 12, in Room 1401, at 6:30. Call Angie Cruz, 790-4306 or 790-4435 for more information on planning or attending the conference.

Professor Moshe Shokeid, of Tel Aviv University, will speak on "Women's Position and Ethnic Identity Among Arabs in an Israeli City" on Dec. 7 at 1 p.m. in Room 1437.

# NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

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A special issue of WOMEN'S STUDIES edited by a committee from the Center will examine the question of how feminist theory and questions have challenged intellectual traditions in general and the framework and traditions of specific disciplines. Topics will include an exploration of the relationship between feminism as a political movement and scholarship as a non-feminist, "objective" intellectual enterprise. We hope for articles that present new research or a fresh theoretical viewpoint. No review articles will be considered. WOMEN'S STUDIES is an interdisciplinary journal and therefore articles should have sufficient breadth to be of interest to readers from all disciplines. Criteria for acceptance in addition to scholarly merit, will be: 1) How centrally does the paper address the theme of the issue; 2) General significance of the topic; 3) A balance of disciplines and points of view. Submissions will be reviewed blind at every stage. The first reading will be done by the editorial committee. Papers which may be appropriate for the issue will be sent out for review to experts in the field. Authors of accepted articles will be asked to meet to discuss their work and the issue as a whole. Although we will make every effort to return decisions as soon as possible, the process may take as long as four months.

Send three copies of the submission, typed double-spaced, to The Center for the Study of Women and Sex Roles, Room 1400, The Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036. In order to insure blind review, the author's name should appear only on a detachable cover sheet. The deadline for submission is: SEPTEMBER 1, 1980. Papers should be 25-35 pages double-spaced, including notes. To assist us in the editorial process, please send an abstract of your proposed submission by JUNE 1, 1980.

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Graduate Students interested in a dissertation support group--a small, supportive group to read each other's work, help each other through impasses, provide encouragement and stimulation and keep each other going--call Laurie Phillips, 865-6879. The group would meet weekly or biweekly. Laurie Phillips is working on a dissertation that explores how heterosexual women who have identified as feminists for eight to ten years understand the interplay of feminism and their primary relationships with men.

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The Feminist Student Organization is a new group forming to meet the political and academic needs of feminist doctoral students. An organizational meeting will be held on Wednesday, December 12 in the 8th Floor Lounge at Noon. For information, call Claire Riley, 258-8929.

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In a future issue of the Newsletter, we will publish a list of special collections and sources of material on women in and around New York City. We ask for suggestions of especially good libraries, archives, special collections and resource centers to add to this list. Please call or write the Center with your ideas.

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The fifth Berkshire Conference on Women in History will be held at Vassar College on June 16, 17 and 18, 1981. Panel proposals for the 1981 conference should be sent to JoAnn McNamara, 500 West 11th Street, New York, NY 10025 before March 15, 1980. The proposal should include a title for the panel, names of participants and the titles of the papers. A brief abstract of each paper and a brief vita of each participant should accompany the proposal. Include a self-addressed postcard for acknowledging receipt of proposals.

# DECEMBER 1979

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN AND SEX ROLES

All events will take place in room 1400, unless otherwise noted.

- Tuesday, December 4 11:45-1:15 Tuesday Noon Lunch. All are welcome to this weekly informal discussion and meeting in the 18th Floor Dining Room.
- Thursday, December 6 3:00-5:00 Associates Meeting, Room 1401.
- Thursday, December 6 11:30 Film Showing: Babies and Banners. Women workers and wives of workers in the Detroit auto industry talk about their union activities in the thirties and their continuing struggle for women's rights in work. Third Floor Studio.
- Friday, December 7 2:00 Seminar on the Impact of Multinational Corporations on Women. New Members welcome. Room 1401. For details call Ruby Rohrllich, 874-6884.
- Tuesday, December 11 11:45-1:15 Tuesday Noon Lunch. 18th Floor Dining Room.
- Tuesday, December 11 5:00-6:30 Film premiere. A Man's Place produced by Deanna Chitayat, looks at men who live or work in a setting that requires them to expand their traditional male role. 3rd Floor studio.
- Wednesday, December 12 Noon Meeting of the Feminist Students Organization, a newly formed group of feminist doctoral students. 8th Floor lounge. Contact Claire Riley, 258-8929 or leave message in Center.
- Thursday, December 13 11:30 Film showing: Social Change and the American Woman. The evolution of the American woman from 1900 to the present. Third Floor Studio.
- Friday, December 14 3:00 Feminist Methods of Inquiry will meet to discuss The Mamie Papers, and explore the way in which personal memoir is both social history and literature. Room 1629. For more details call Trudy Berger, 539-8444.
- Friday, December 14 3:00 Women and Health Seminar. Charlotte Muller, economist at The Graduate Center, will talk about her work on economic issues affecting women and health. This will be followed by wine and a discussion/brainstorming session on issues relevant to the physical and mental health of working women. Room 1712.
- Friday, December 14 4:00-6:00 Conversation Hour. Natalie Sokoloff will speak on "The Sociological Approach to Women and Work: a Marxist-Feminist Critique." Room 1401.
- Tuesday, December 18 11:45-1:15 Tuesday Noon Lunch. 18th Floor Dining Room.