

Women's Liberation

Interview with Eve Hinderer

Doris Fillion and Linda Lanphear

September, 1968

[The following is an interview with Eve Hinderer, a New Yorker active in the Women's Liberation Movement.]

Question: When did you first become interested in women's liberation?

Eve Hinderer: Last November I arrived at a regional SDS conference just before the afternoon workshops and I saw a sign that read "Women's Liberation." So I went to that workshop and, surprisingly enough, I felt not at all intimidated by the fact that only women were in the room. About 40 or 50 women were there and I opened up fantastically with a torrent of political and psychological viewpoints and became very enthusiastic about the whole thing.

Question: Why do women have to be liberated: what is women's liberation?

Eve Hinderer: Well, everyone has to be liberated because no one is free in this society. But women's liberation springs from the fact of women's secondary status to men. It is a recognition that this is a male-dominated society; that this is not natural and not correct; and that women have to liberate themselves from their secondary status.

Question: To some women, "liberation" comes to mean some sort of so-called "sexual freedom" and this usually turns out to mean that, now, we are not subjugated to just one man but to many men. How does this differ from your definition of the sexually liberated woman?

Eve Hinderer: I see a number of dichotomies in the movement and in society as a whole that come from the basic alienation upon which the society functions. The first one is the separation between politics and everyday life. This is obviously a product of alienation for there is no separating the two; you are either honest with yourself or you're neurotic. And there is also a dichotomy between sex, on one hand, and feelings, emotions and personal desires on the other. I don't mean only sensual desires but desires for life as a whole. And increasingly, it is becoming harder for me to just take sex as just a sensual experience isolated from everything else. I have my own growth and my own very intimate side of me. The more that I can reveal this to another person, the closer I become and the more involved I become with that person on all levels: on an intellectual level, on an emotional level, and ultimately, if the relationship becomes intimate enough, on a sexual level. And this to me is what sex is all about. I don't mean this in any Puritanical sense at all; it's just a very intimate sharing. With respect to the so-called sexual freedom, I don't think this means the freedom to just sleep with anyone; I think that's sick; it implies a basic lack of a sense of identity and integrity. There is an intimacy that is sacrificed in "sleeping

around.” The idea is that the only way that I’m ever going to get decent sex will be by my being more honest with myself and with other people; and it seems that this is something that people have not thought very much about. A lot of what I see, like the sleeping around of the hippies, is a very healthy rebellion against very rigid standards about when sex is good, like after you get a marriage license. This, of course, is obvious bull crap; but in the meanwhile, they haven’t been working out something really better and I think that it really has to be. People are discussing this question honestly, however; as in an article from the Notes from the First Year, “Women Rap About sex.” In this article the problem of dealing with one’s sexuality is discussed point blank. It’s just beautiful. All the humiliations, everything, it’s all brought into the open. And so you realize what women go through: they sacrifice themselves all the time. I’m sure that men do too. There is something really compromised in indiscriminate sexual behavior.

Question: Are there other such hang-ups that women are likely to get caught in?

Eve Hinderer: If you’ve ever read Frantz Fanon, he describes very beautifully the psychology of oppressed people. When people are not “enlightened,” so to speak, they often identify with the oppressor. In many cases this is true of women who, because they are in some ways “privileged” and able to develop themselves more than most women are, tend to withdraw in disgust from anything having to do with women. This is quite simply because they think of women in the same terms that men do; you know, frilly, knitting all the time, not really worth a damn. We’ve had many women completely shying away from women’s groups saying something like, “Ech, women’s groups, who wants to get involved in that?”

Question: Because children are a very important part of the life associated with women, what are your comments about women’s liberation with respect to children?

Eve Hinderer: Well, there are some very obvious hang-ups that women and parents in general have with their kids. Characteristically, parents in this society are very possessive toward their children because they have no lives of their own; they lead an alienated existence. This is especially true of women, who live vicariously through other people to begin with. Of course, when they have a child, that child becomes just another person to live through; and so women while away their lives waiting for the people in their families to come home so that they can learn what “they” did during the day.

My own outlook boils down to a very anarchistic view of society, a society where everyone lives an autonomous life. This alone is what allows people to relate to each other on a free basis; where you have the absence of any form of chains or repressive social structures. I think women’s liberation brings forth this whole possibility because at the root of many, many things is this basic oppression between men and women. If you can eradicate that, you are going to open an entirely new vista.

Question: It’s apparent that, as with any oppressed group, women are pitted against each other. To free women from that so they do not have to look at every other woman as an enemy would seem to be an aspect of women’s liberation.

Eve Hinderer: This goes back to the very possessive nature of the relationships between men and women. As one woman in my group pointed out once you get rid of this idea that you possess your husband and he owns you, then it’s ridiculous for all of these jealousies to exist because there just is no basis for them. And, again, this aspect of oppressed people being against each other and not recognizing the real enemy is another Fanon phenomenon. Of course, the “real enemy” of women would immediately seem to be men but actually the problem is a product of our present social structure.

Question: Since the situation springs from the social structure, do you conceive of certain steps that are necessary to change that social structure? How do you see the process of liberation taking place?

Eve Hinderer: Well, first of all, the country is going to need a revolution for any decent change to take place; that's been obvious to me for a long time. And how this is done is by making people realize that their own lives are suffocating and that they themselves are oppressed. Until you get this across, you are not going to go anywhere in the direction of radical change in this country. With women's liberation it's been very beautiful, in this respect because the problem has become obvious within a very short period of time. Women go through all the necessary steps; like becoming angry and then really becoming mobilized and fighting tooth and nail for their liberation. They begin to tackle these problems every day and grow in the consciousness of them. And once they start this, their social and political consciousness keeps growing. For instance, my personal involvement with the women's groups in the last few months has dropped off because I've found that the groups have served an end to their purpose for me. I don't think that I'm a liberated woman but I've discussed these issues and I've gone through a lot of anger and emotions about them and now I'm at another stage of growth, so to speak, and the society poses new obstacles to me. This is because I now recognize the more basic causes of social oppression. And that's just what social consciousness is; to realize that real life and growth are both impossible for anyone in this society.

And when you realize that there are no alternatives, you realize the need for total social revolution.

Question: What do you mean by "going through stages" in developing a conscious need for women's liberation?

Eve Hinderer: For instance, the anger that I went through sprang from a deep-seated resentment of being used by men, which, in turn, resulted from my own lack of identity and the necessity of living through men. When you realize that and become humiliated by such facts, you become very angry. From there it's a gradual process of getting in contact with your own desires, your own thoughts, and your own feelings and then carrying out on them.

Question: It seems that both men and women have always been victims of social structures that pressure them into living up to a stifling, unnatural image of a human being.

Eve Hinderer: Yes, for example, there is this false dichotomy between male and female characteristics where women are supposed to be passive and uncreative, receptive and also receptacles; and men, on the other hand, are the ones who are creative, spontaneous, aggressive, run their own lives, etc. Upon reflection, however, one realizes that every person is an admixture of all of these things.

Throughout history, woman's lot has been characterized by limited choices; she has always been hemmed in by the social structure and concepts of social norms. For instance, it's entirely in the realm of human experience for any human being, male or female, to wish to have an intimate relationship with another but not wish to make the relationship permanent by marriage. It is considered wrong in this society if a woman should want to ask a man for a sexual relationship; it would be considered that something is wrong with her. These concepts must be changed. Men and women have to start communicating their human desires to one another, being open and free with their minds.

Question: What has the women's liberation movement done?

Eve Hinderer: Many groups have been forming around the country. There are three or four in the Bay Area that I've heard about; there are three in New York and probably one at Columbia University which makes four; there are a few in Chicago also. The nature of the groups is that of an affinity group: people getting together due to a human need that they share, not due to some abstract idea or purpose. They get together on a warm, human level and, in this atmosphere, they can freely discuss their problems and go from there. Then, once individuals start fighting the battle in their everyday lives, the groups serve as a center of reference to which they can return to discuss the losses and the victories. They can return to regain strength, figure out strategies, and so forth. As I see it, when you have this human contact, then concrete actions can take place.

Question: Is it necessary for a woman to have political awareness before she can understand her own oppression within the system? For instance, is the typical suburban housewife harder to get through to than women who already have a political consciousness?

Eve Hinderer: Through understanding your own oppression, you have a sympathetic attitude towards all of your other oppressed brothers and sisters, no matter what color or nationality they may be. This is because you are able to empathize with their situation and you therefore are in allegiance with them. Now, if you can get a suburban housewife to this level, then you've got her. But I have my doubts about that, very realistic ones too, because I've tried to talk with them and, in a short amount of time, it's impossible. You have to shell-shock them. Of course people understand things on differing levels; perhaps the average woman would not understand the oppression of women on a political level but would on an emotional-psychological level. And it would be on this level that they could be reached. They can talk in terms of their daily activities and how they feel about them; on that level they could be brought to understand new things.

Here I would like to bring up a point on which I disagree from most of my sisters. I think that this deeper social consciousness that we have been talking about has to come sooner or later and, therefore, I don't see the women's liberation movement as an end in itself. I don't see a "Women's Column" in the revolution; women are going to be fighting in it but the possibility of there being a women's movement in this isolated sense is something I do not see as being a reality. I would not like to see a women's brigade, a black brigade, or any other brigade. I would like to think that the revolution would be a whole movement. And if it's not, if the thing about comradeship is just a farce, then maybe it hasn't gone far enough. The brigades are what we had before and, as it said in Anarchos, "You have to live the revolution." This is very important to realize. You have to get people together for the cause of humanity. It's taken me a few months to work out the fact that I do have a serious difference with some of my sisters. They are very serious and very militant about women's rights; they see the women's revolution as such and they say that "Women's rights have to be assured within the revolution." Now, basically, I agree with this statement but something bothered me and I finally figured out that I objected to the anti-male attitude that has come to characterize the thinking of many of my sisters. This seemed to me to be going off in the wrong direction and then suddenly I realized that they kept talking about the rights women would have after the revolution without actually having a revolutionary vision. They couldn't incorporate their problems so as to see a larger liberated society for everyone. All they could talk about was women's rights, especially with respect to menial things like doing the laundry and the dishes. But it occurred to me, once you get rid of these things, what have you got left? They really haven't worked out their revolution. They're simply negating something and they really haven't carried it any further than that. I want to go beyond the simple "anti" stand; I want to go to something positive.

You know, women seem to become interested in women's liberation almost over night. What this amounts to is a revolution in perspective, a change from viewing women's problems in an individual, introverted way, thinking that they are only personal problems, and then seeing them as a social illness. And, of course, this is like suddenly realizing that you're not sick after all, that it's society that's sick and you're caught up in it. Such realization constitutes a release that allows one to develop a larger political perspective.

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