
The Personal Is Political

by Carol Hanisch

INTRODUCTION

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The paper, “The Personal Is Political,” was originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* in 1970 and was widely reprinted and passed around the Movement and beyond in the next several years. I didn’t know just how much it had gotten around until I did a Goggle search and found it being discussed in many different languages.

I’d like to clarify for the record that I did not give the paper its title, “The Personal Is Political.” As far as I know, that was done by *Notes from the Second Year* editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt after Kathie Sarachild brought it to their attention as a possible paper to be printed in that early collection. Also, “political” was used here in the board sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics.

The paper actually began as a memo that I wrote in February of 1969 while in Gainesville, Florida. It was sent to the women’s caucus of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) a group for whom I was a subsistence-paid organizer doing exploratory work for establishing a women’s liberation project in the South. The memo was originally titled, “Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie’s Thoughts on a Women’s Liberation Movement,” and was written in reply to a memo by another staff member, Dottie Zellner, who contended that consciousness-raising was just therapy and questioned whether the new independent WLM was really “political.”

This was not an unusual reaction to radical feminist ideas in early 1969. WLM groups had been springing up all over the country—and the world. The radical movements of Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, and Old and New Left groups from which many of us sprang were male dominated and very nervous about women’s liberation in general, but especially the spectre of the mushrooming independent women’s liberation movement, of which I was a staunch advocate. Arriving in New York City after ten months in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, I had found SCEF to be one of the more mature and better progressive groups around. It had a good record of racial, economic and political justice work since New Deal days, and I joined its staff in 1966 as its New York office manager. SCEF allowed New York Radical Women to meet in its New York office, where I worked, and at my request agreed to explore setting up a women’s liberation project in the South. However, many on the SCEF staff, both men and women, ended up joining the criticism of women getting together in consciousness-raising groups to discuss their own oppression as “naval-gazing” and “personal therapy”—and certainly “not political.”

They could sometimes admit that women were oppressed (but only by “the system”) and said that we should have equal pay for equal work, and some other “rights.” But they belittled us no end for trying to bring our so-called “personal problems” into the public arena—especially “all those body issues” like sex, appearance, and abortion. Our demands that men share the housework and childcare were likewise deemed a personal problem between a woman and her individual man. The opposition claimed if women would just “stand up for themselves” and take more responsibility for their own lives, they wouldn’t need to have an independent movement for women’s liberation. What personal initiative wouldn’t solve, they said, “the revolution” would take care of if we would just shut up and do our part. Heaven forbid that we should point out that men benefit from oppressing women.

Recognizing the need to fight male supremacy as a movement instead of blaming the individual

woman for her oppression was where the Pro-Woman Line came in. It challenged the old anti-woman line that used spiritual, psychological, metaphysical, and pseudo-historical explanations for women's oppression with a real, materialist analysis for why women do what we do. (By materialist, I mean in the Marxist materialist (based in reality) sense, not in the "desire for consumer goods" sense.) Taking the position that "women are messed over, not messed up" took the focus off individual struggle and put it on group or class struggle, exposing the necessity for an independent WLM to deal with male supremacy.

The Pro-Woman Line also helped challenge the "sex role theory" of women's oppression that said women act as we do because "that's how we were taught" by "society." (We all can think of things we were taught to think or do that we rejected once the forces that kept us thinking or doing them were removed.) It was consciousness-raising that led to the emergence of the Pro-Woman Line with its scientific explanation based on an analysis of our own experiences and an examination of "who benefits" from women's oppression. Understanding that our oppressive situations were not our own fault—were not, in the parlance of the time, "all in our head"—gave us a lot more courage as well as a more solid, real foundation on which to fight for liberation.

"The Personal is Political" paper and the theory it contains, was my response in the heat of the battle to the attacks on us by SCEF and the rest of the radical movement. I think it's important to realize that the paper came out of struggle—not just my struggle in SCEF but the struggle of the independent WLM against those who were trying to either stop it or to push it into directions they found less threatening.

It's also important to realize the theory the paper contains did not come solely out of my individual brain. It came out of a movement (the Women's Liberation Movement) and a specific group within that movement (New York Radical Women) and a specific group of women within New York Radical Women, sometimes referred to as the Pro-Woman Line faction.

Of course there were women within New York Radical Women and the broader feminist movement who argued from the beginning against consciousness raising and claimed women were brainwashed and complicit in their own oppression, an argument rooted in the sociological and psychological rather than the political. They, too, helped in the formulation of Pro-Woman Line theory. By arguing the then "standard wisdom" against us, they forced us to clarify and hone and develop and refine and articulate the new theory so that it could be spread more widely. After New York Radical Women meetings, the Pro-Woman Line faction would usually end up at Miteras, a nearby restaurant that served fantastic apple pie a la mode. There we would discuss how the meeting had gone and the ideas that had been talked about until two or three in the morning, both agreeing with and challenging each other in wonderful, lively debate among ourselves.

In September of 1968—six months before "The Personal Is Political" was written, the Miss America Protest brought home to many why the Pro-Woman Line theory we were developing was so important when it came to taking action outside the group. In another paper entitled "A Critique of the Miss America Protest" I wrote about how the anti-women faction of the protesters detracted from our message that ALL women are oppressed by beauty standards, even the contestants. Signs like "Up Against the Wall, Miss America" and "Miss America Is a Big Falsie" made these contestants out to be our enemy instead of the men and bosses who imposed false beauty standards on women.

Political struggle or debate is the key to good political theory. A theory is just a bunch of words—sometimes interesting to think about, but just words, nevertheless—until it is tested in real life. Many a theory has delivered surprises, both positive and negative, when an attempt has been made to put it into practice.

While trying to think how I would change "The Personal Is Political" paper if I could rewrite it with today's hindsight, I was actually surprised how well it stands the test of time and experience. There are a few things I would elaborate on, like my simplistic definition of class, and there are a

few statements in the paper that are badly in need of further development. Perhaps the two that bothers me the most are: “Women are smart not to struggle alone” and “It is no worse to be in the home than in the rat race of the job world.”

The first statement doesn’t mean that women are smart not to struggle at all, as some have interpreted the Pro-Woman Line. Women are *sometimes* smart not to struggle alone when they can’t win and the repercussions are worse than the oppression. However, individual struggle does sometimes get us some things, and when the WLM is at low tide or invisible, it may be the best we can do. We need to always be pushing the envelope. Even when the WLM is at high tide, because our oppression often takes place in isolated circumstances like the home, it still takes individual action to put into practice what the Movement is fighting for. But individual struggle is *always* limited; it’s going to takes an ongoing Movement stronger than any we’ve seen so far to put an end to male supremacy.

On the second point, I have come to agree with Susan B. Anthony that to be free, a woman must have “a purse of her own.” Women can’t be independent without participating in the public workforce. That also means uniting in a fight for public childcare and for a restructuring of the workplace with women’s equality in mind, while insisting men share the housework and childcare on the homefront, so that women don’t end up having to do it all.

I wish we could have anticipated all the ways that “The Personal Is Political” and “The Pro-Woman Line” would be revised and misused. Like most of the theory created by the Pro-Woman Line radical feminists, these ideas have been revised or ripped off or even stood on their head and used against their original, radical intent. While it’s necessary that theories take their knocks in the real world, like everything else, many of us have learned that once they leave our hands, they need to be defended against revisionism and misuse.

What follows is the original version of “The Personal Is Political” as edited from the memo for the 1970 anthology, *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt. — *Carol Hanisch*

The Personal Is Political

by Carol Hanisch

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For this paper I want to stick pretty close to an aspect of the Left debate commonly talked about—namely “therapy” vs. “therapy and politics.” Another name for it is “personal” vs. “political” and it has other names, I suspect, as it has developed across the country. I haven’t gotten over to visit the New Orleans group yet, but I have been participating in groups in New York and Gainesville for more than a year. Both of these groups have been called “therapy” and “personal” groups by women who consider themselves “more political.” So I must speak about so-called therapy groups from my own experience.

The very word “therapy” is obviously a misnomer if carried to its logical conclusion. Therapy assumes

that someone is sick and that there is a cure, e.g., a personal solution. I am greatly offended that I or any other woman is thought to need therapy in the first place. Women are messed over, not messed up! We need to change the objective conditions, not adjust to them. Therapy is adjusting to your bad personal alternative.

We have not done much trying to solve immediate personal problems of women in the group. We’ve mostly picked topics by two methods: In a small group it is possible for us to take turns bringing questions to the meeting (like, Which do/did you prefer, a girl or a boy baby or no children, and why? What happens to your relationship if your man makes more money than you? Less than you?). Then we go around the

room answering the questions from our personal experiences. Everybody talks that way. At the end of the meeting we try to sum up and generalize from what's been said and make connections.

I believe at this point, and maybe for a long time to come, that these analytical sessions are a form of political action. I do not go to these sessions because I need or want to talk about my "personal problems." In fact, I would rather not. As a movement woman, I've been pressured to be strong, selfless, other-oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my own life. To admit to the problems in my life is to be deemed weak. So I want to be a strong woman, in movement terms, and not admit I have any real problems that I can't find a personal solution to (except those directly related to the capitalist system). It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say.

So the reason I participate in these meetings is not to solve any personal problem. One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my "political discussions," all my "political action," all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me. I've been forced to take off the rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman. I am getting a gut understanding of everything as opposed to the esoteric, intellectual understandings and *noblesse oblige* feelings I had in "other people's" struggles.

This is not to deny that these sessions have at least two aspects that are therapeutic. I prefer to call even this aspect "political therapy" as opposed to personal therapy. The most important is getting rid of self-blame. Can you imagine what would happen if women, blacks, and workers (my definition of worker is anyone who has to work for a living as opposed to those who don't. All women are workers) would-stop blaming ourselves for our sad situations? It seems to me the whole country needs that kind of political

therapy. That is what the black movement is doing in its own way. We shall do it in ours. We are only starting to stop blaming ourselves. We also feel like we are thinking for ourselves for the first time in our lives. As the cartoon in *Lilith* puts it, "I'm changing. My mind is growing muscles." Those who believe that Marx, Lenin, Engels, Mao, and Ho have the only and last "good word" on the subject and that women have nothing more to add will, of course, find these groups a waste of time.

The groups that I have been in have also not gotten into "alternative life-styles" or what it means to be a "liberated" woman. We came early to the conclusion that all alternatives are bad under present conditions. Whether we live with or without a man, communally or in couples or alone, are married or unmarried, live with other women, go for free love, celibacy or lesbianism, or any combination, there are only good and bad things about each bad situation. There is no "more liberated" way; there are only bad alternatives.

This is part of one of the most important theories we are beginning to articulate. We call it "the pro-woman line." What it says basically is that women are really neat people. The bad things that are said about us as women are either myths (women are stupid), tactics women use to struggle individually (women are bitches), or are actually things that we want to carry into the new society and want men to share too (women are sensitive, emotional). Women as oppressed people act out of necessity (act dumb in the presence of men), not out of choice. Women have developed great shuffling techniques for their own survival (look pretty and giggle to get or keep a job or man) which should be used when necessary until such time as the power of unity can take its place. Women are smart not to struggle alone (as are blacks and workers). It is no worse to be in the home than in the rat race of the job world. They are both bad. Women, like blacks, workers, must stop blaming ourselves for our "failures."

It took us some ten months to get to the point where we could articulate these things and relate them to the lives of every woman. It's important from the standpoint of what kind of action we are going to

do. When our group first started, going by majority opinion, we would have been out in the streets demonstrating against marriage, against having babies, for free love, against women who wore makeup, against housewives, for equality without recognition of biological differences, and god knows what else. Now we see all these things as what we call "personal solutionary." Many of the actions taken by "action" groups have been along these lines. The women who did the anti-woman stuff at the Miss America Pageant were the ones who were screaming for action without theory. The members of one group want to set up a private daycare center without any real analysis of what could be done to make it better for little girls, much less any analysis of how that center hastens the revolution.

That is not to say, of course, that we shouldn't do action. There may be some very good reasons why women in the group don't want to do anything at the moment. One reason that I often have is that this thing is so important to me that I want to be very sure that we're doing it the best way we know how, and that it is a "right" action that I feel sure about. I refuse to go out and "produce" for the movement. We had a lot of conflict in our New York group about whether or not to do action. When the Miss America Protest was proposed, there was no question but that we wanted to do, it. I think it was because we all saw how it related to our lives. We felt it was a good action. There were things wrong with the action, but the basic idea was there.

This has been my experience in groups that are accused of being "therapy" or "personal." Perhaps certain groups may well be attempting to do therapy. Maybe the answer is not to put down the method of analyzing from personal experiences in favor of immediate action, but to figure out what can be

done to make it work. Some of us started to write a handbook about this at one time and never got past the outline. We are working on it again, and hope to have it out in a month at the latest.

It's true we all need to learn how to better draw conclusions from the experiences and feelings we talk about and how to draw all kinds of connections. Some of us haven't done a very good job of communicating them to others.

One more thing: I think we must listen to what so-called apolitical women have to say—not so we can do a better job of organizing them but because together we are a mass movement. I think we who work full-time in the movement tend to become very narrow. What is happening now is that when non-movement women disagree with us, we assume it's because they are "apolitical," not because there might be something wrong with our thinking. Women have left the movement in droves. The obvious reasons are that we are tired of being sex slaves and doing shitwork for men whose hypocrisy is so blatant in their political stance of liberation for everybody (else). But there is really a lot more to it than that. I can't quite articulate it yet. I think "apolitical" women are not in the movement for very good reasons, and as long as we say "you have to think like us and live like us to join the charmed circle," we will fail. What I am trying to say is that there are things in the consciousness of "apolitical" women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have. We should figure out why many women don't want to do action. Maybe there is something wrong with the action or something wrong with why we are doing the action or maybe the analysis of why the action is necessary is not clear enough in our minds.

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