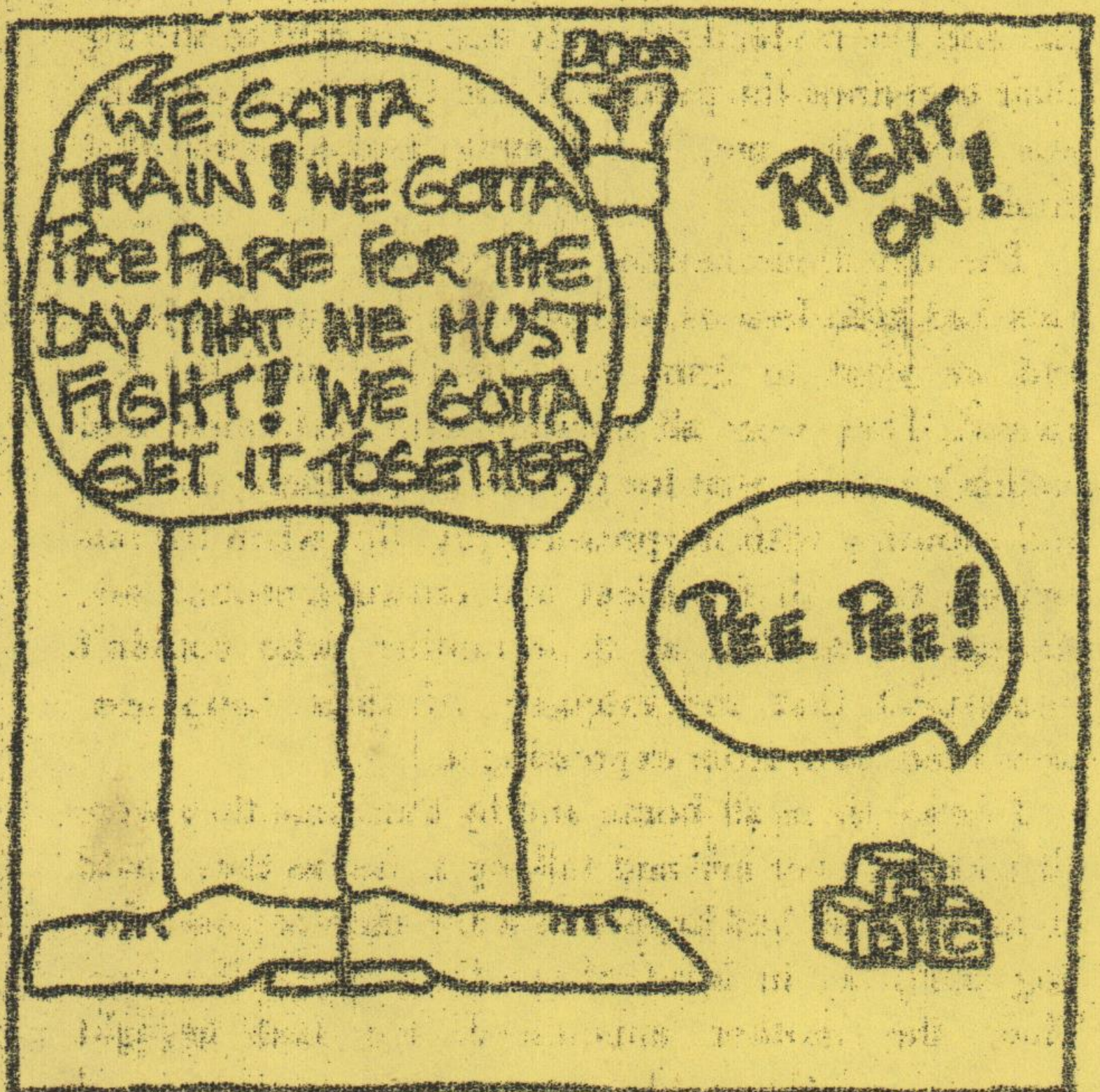


The



Reluctant



Patriarchs

The Reluctant Patriarchs

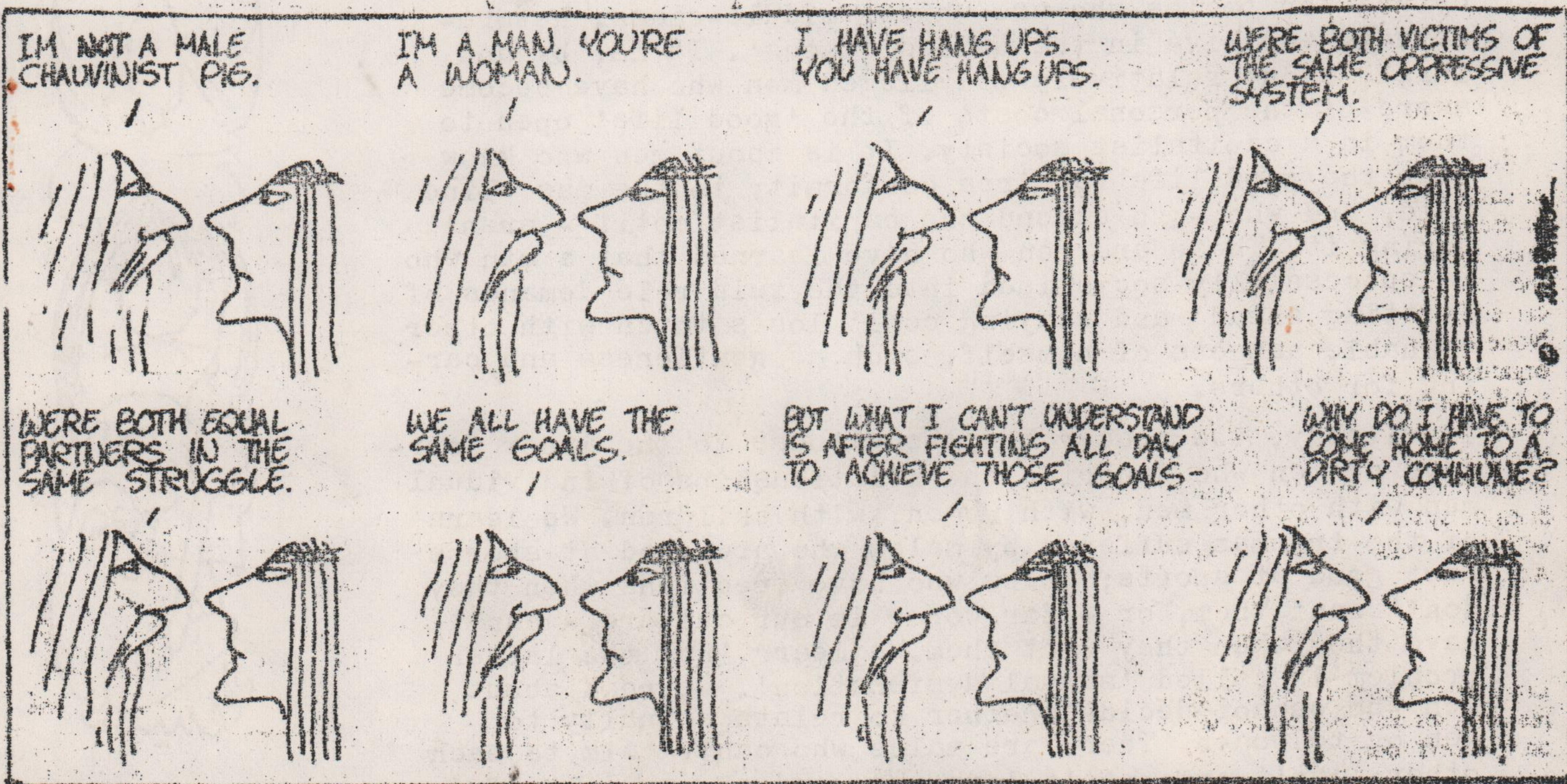
CAROL EHRLICH

"And so the Round People, proud strong, and independent, attacked the Gods. And Zeus punished them by cutting them in two. Now each half-person could no longer roll about with its four arms and four legs, but must walk upright on its two legs and lift its single face in supplication to the Gods. And in its weakness each half began the search for its other half, so that the twain could be re-united in the wholeness and strength."

Ancient myths die hard, and the Round People described by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium have come rolling back in 'Men and Masculinity', a collection of articles written largely since 1971, largely by men involved in what its practitioners call "men's liberation." Although there are a variety of perspectives represented among the 31 authors, the basic theme is that men and women are equally incomplete, equally limited by an oppressive set of learned sex role behaviours. If only men could become gentle, expressive, interpersonally sensitive - if only women could become assertive, independent, strong - then our present society of half-humans would have liberated themselves. And, by extension, they would have brought about the good society.

Most feminists, I think, believe that sexism will not be destroyed by the efforts of women alone. Although the majority of men undoubtedly will continue to resist any lessening of their power, there is a small (but hopefully increasing) number of men who are reluctant patriarchs - men who are searching for ways to reject the privileges automatically conferred upon them because they were born male.

These are men who genuinely care about ending sexual oppression so that women and men can one day live in a truly egalitarian manner. They must, of course, be sifted from the hip characters who drool



over the presumed opportunity to lay 'liberated women'; the opportunists who want to cash in on the literary action; the movement males who see political women as useful 'tools' for whatever brand of male-dominated actions they are pushing at the moment; those men - cynical? frightened? perhaps an unstable mixture of both? - who learn to recite the ritual disclaimers so that the heat will be off them; and the academic empire-builders who see a good new rip-off in 'Men's studies' (The Pleck-Sawyer bibliography indicates that MIT has 'an extensive archival 'men's studies' collection'. In its own way, this seems like the height of insensitive academic sexism: Women's Studies developed because all of academia already was 'men's studies')

My impression is that the editors of 'Men and Masculinity' and many (if not all) of the men anthologised in this short (184 page) volume do genuinely care. For that reason, they should be encouraged; and for that same reason, I feel a certain ambivalence about criticising 'Men and Masculinity'. Negative comments may be interpreted as an act of purism by an embittered feminist. After all, a good book - in fact, any number of good books - on the subject of sexism, written by and for concerned men, is badly needed. The Pleck-Sawyer anthology is well-intentioned start in that direction, but it is unbalanced and without scope.

Not only do most of the male writers assume something that cannot be assumed (i.e., that men and women are somehow equally oppressed - but, more of that later), but the focus is almost exclusively on the personal aspects of the masculine role. Perhaps this is because both of the editors are psychologists; or perhaps it simply reflects what Barbara Katz, one of the three female writers included in the book, said about male liberationists - they are 'more introspective than political'. Whatever the reason, few of those represented here look beyond the circumference of an individual man's navel.

Another cause of the overemphasis on the personal may be the class and race characteristics of most of these writers. As the editors state frankly, this is a book by and for 'males who are white, middle-class, heterosexual, and live in the United States'. It is, by and large, about relatively privileged men who have become aware of the personal costs of the 'good life' open to them in a capitalist society. It is about men who know that the good life requires conformity to the masculine role, and who - to extend the capitalist motif - aren't buying it. These are men who have learned that a man who is successfully socialised into the twin role demands of 'getting ahead' and 'staying cool' loses touch with other valuable aspects of himself, such as gentleness and caring for others.

Inevitably, the reader becomes witness to the inner journeys of men who describe the relationships of individual men with other men, with women, with children. We learn of the traumas suffered by males who are good at sports /not good at sports; males who have erections when they don't want them, or - far worse in our culture - can't have them when they want them. We learn that the latter problem is called 'sexual dysfunction'. We read about men who cannot decide whether to relate sexually to men or to women. There are males who can't talk to each other; can't cry; can't love. We read approvingly of



men who become involved in child care, but the emphasis in three out of four articles is on the man rather than the children, on men getting in touch with their inner selves. We read of men in relation to work, but with the exception of a provocative article by ex-sociology professor Michael Silverstein, the articles stress the personal problem's in tying one's masculine self-image to financial or corporate achievement. Of the three articles in the section on 'men and work', only Silverstein's questions whether men should want to be part of the capitalist political economy at all. Interestingly, the male author who most successfully describes the 'fit' between masculinity and our political economy (I.F. Stone, 'Machismo in Washington') is one of only two who does so from outside the perspective of 'self-absorbed male-liberation'. There is a political lesson here: the personal is not self-evidently political. People must make the connections between their individual problems and the inhumanity of our political and social institutions. As long as we live in a capitalist society, the stress on hierarchy and dominance will operate in some ways to the detriment of most men, and in many more ways to the detriment of most women. And then, once they have made that crucial connection, they must decide what they are going to do to change the political economy as well as end the crippling effects of sexism in their every day lives.

Yet, most of these writers seem barely aware of the power of institutionalised sexism, and relatively little space is given to its discussion. As a result, any politically aware reader has to struggle with contradictory reactions of sympathy for the personal pain expressed by these men, and anger at their apolitical self-indulgence. Here, for example, are some excerpts from the Berkeley Men's Center Manifesto:

We as men, want to take back our full humanity. We no longer want to strain and compete to live up to an impossible oppressive masculine image - strong, silent, cool, handsome, unemotional, successful, master of women, leader of men, wealthy, brilliant, athletic, and 'heavy'. We no longer want to feel the need to perform sexually, socially, or in any way to live up to an imposed male role, from a traditional American society or a 'counterculture'

We want to love ourselves.....We want to express our feelings completely.....We want to enjoy masturbation without feeling guilty or that masturbation is a poor substitute for interpersonal sex.....

We are oppressed by conditioning which makes us only half-human. This conditioning serves to create a mutual dependence of male (abstract, aggressive, strong, unemotional) and female (nurturing, passive, weak, emotional) roles. We are oppressed by this dependence on women for support, nurturing, love, and warm feelings. We want to love, nurture, and support ourselves and other men, as well



and support ourselves and other men, as well
as women...

We believe that Human Liberation does not stem from individual needs alone, but that these needs are part of the same process. We feel that all liberation movements are equally important; there is no hierarchy of oppression...

How are men to find their lost halves (and where did women lose theirs?) Our society must become co-operative. Profit-making must end. How? They don't say.

The Manifesto makes clear something that is disturbingly present in many of the articles' and editors' commentaries. It is a patronising attitude toward women. There is an attempt - doubtless inadvertent, but nonetheless arrogant and ugly - to trivialise the women's movement (and, by extension, all other movements) by insisting that 'all liberation movements are equally important; there is no hierarchy of oppression'. Parallel to that, the very necessary search of aware men for another way of life is raised to the status of a 'liberation movement'. Or, as co-editor Sawyer neatly puts it, 'being a master has its burdens'. Imagine the reaction if this column comment were translated into a situation of racial or economic dominance! Imagine white telling black, boss telling worker, slave-owner telling slave - 'Being a master has its burdens'

Here is a passage from Sawyer's essay 'On Male Liberation,' which was originally printed in Liberation. I have changed the words 'Women' and 'Men' to 'Worker' and 'Capitalist'. (The effects are also interesting if one substitutes 'Black' and 'White'.)

In the increasing recognition of the right of (workers) to participate equally in the affairs of the world, then, there is both a danger and a promise. The danger is that (workers) might end up simply with an equal share of the action in the competitive, dehumanising system that (capitalists) have created. The promise is that (workers) and (capitalists) might work together to create a system that provides equality to all and dominates no-one. The (workers) movement has stressed that (workers) are looking for a better model of human behaviour than so far has been created. (Workers) are trying to become human, and (capitalists) can do the same. Neither (capitalists) nor (workers) need be only limited by work-role stereotypes that define 'appropriate behaviour'. The present models for (capitalists) and (workers) fail to furnish adequate opportunities for human development. That one-half of the human race should be dominant and the other half submissive is incompatible with a notion of freedom. Freedom requires that there should be no dominance and submission, but that all individuals be free to determine their own lives as equals.

Who could quarrel with the last two lines? But however they look on paper, their goal cannot be achieved in practice by anyone who holds Sawyer's basic assumptions. In addition to the idea that men and women are somehow equally oppressed (at the same time that men dominate women!) Sawyer and most of the other males anthologised here seem to believe that personally restrictive role demands are the most important kind of sex-related oppression there is. Further, there is a strange assumption that individual sexism causes institutional sexism. Here is Sawyer again:

The acceptance of sex-role stereotypes not only limits the individual but also has bad effects on society generally...The main effect now is to help sustain a system in which private 'virtues' become public vices.

If the personal causes the political, then it follows that all one needs to do is to identify these self-destructive behaviours and choose to give them up. Presto!- No more sexism! Thus, even when Sawyer and his co-editor Pleck draw connections among capitalist

institutions, hierarchical behaviour, and the masculine role (for example, in their introduction to the section on 'men in society') their only real suggestion for action is that men reject 'getting ahead' and 'staying cool'. This is hardly an adequate response to the inhumanity of our political economy. Of course, if men get in touch with their emotions, learn to cry and to express gentleness, reject aggression and violence and phallic dominance, do housework and care for children, and stop measuring their self-worth by the size of their bank account, this will greatly enrich their lives and make things easier for those who live with them. For this reason, self-change is well worth the try.

As many feminists have pointed out - I think correctly - men are a privileged caste. An individual man may reject what he sees as undesirable elements of his role, but because he is male, he will still retain certain privileges of his caste, even if he does not want them. He will still be part of a group that by birthright has more power and is more valued than is the lower caste - women.

Another way of putting this is in terms of institutional versus personal sexism. A man may refuse to oppress the woman he knows; he may share the housework and childcare; he may try to reject every unsavoury element of his machismo. Yet, if he makes more money than his fellow co-worker, or is hired in preference to an equally qualified woman, or is promoted because he has a family to support, or qualifies for a job because of an irrelevant height requirement, or is listened to in a discussion because he is a man, or sees that men are featured in the mass media, or can pick up a textbook in his high school or college class and know that all human achievement is ascribed to him, or can routinely walk past strangers without being whistled at or propositioned or fearing rape, or doesn't have to cope with the horrors of trying to stretch welfare payments so he and his children can survive another day, or need never worry about the ill effects of contraceptives on his body - he is still part of a privileged group.

For all these reasons, Sawyer is only partly correct when he says: 'The battle of women to be free need not be a battle against men as oppressors. The choice about whether men are the enemy is up to men themselves' He is right when he says men can choose which side to be on. But that choice must entail something more than just modifying inappropriate behaviour. Sawyer will make no friends among the women he wants to join by trying to lay equal responsibility for their own oppression on them. Nor will women take as face value a man who announces that he 'joins his feminist sisters in a common struggle' when that same man relates how he dropped his first girlfriend when he decided she was 'simple-minded and boring' (After two years), and criticising another for becoming 'too dependent and weak'. (Jeff Keith, 'My Own Men's Liberation') Our only rational self-protective response is to find out whether or not he has ever discovered what women's struggle is all about. Until we can make sure, women cannot be blamed if we find it hard to take men's liberation seriously.



Those men who are reluctant patriarchs have an obligation to become revolutionaries. Now, then, how does a white, middle-class heterosexual American male become a revolutionary? For these men, a revolutionary life style has often meant a rhetorical or gun-toting machismo - a radical-hip version of the 'hairy chest syndrome' - mentioned in Gloria Stein's description of America's belligerent political and military elite ('The Myth of Masculine Mystique'). As political women know all too well, male-dominated left organisations have tended to produce patterns of class and sexist dominance, and the editors and writers represented here rightly reject such a model. But what they present as an appropriate alternate model is not enough.

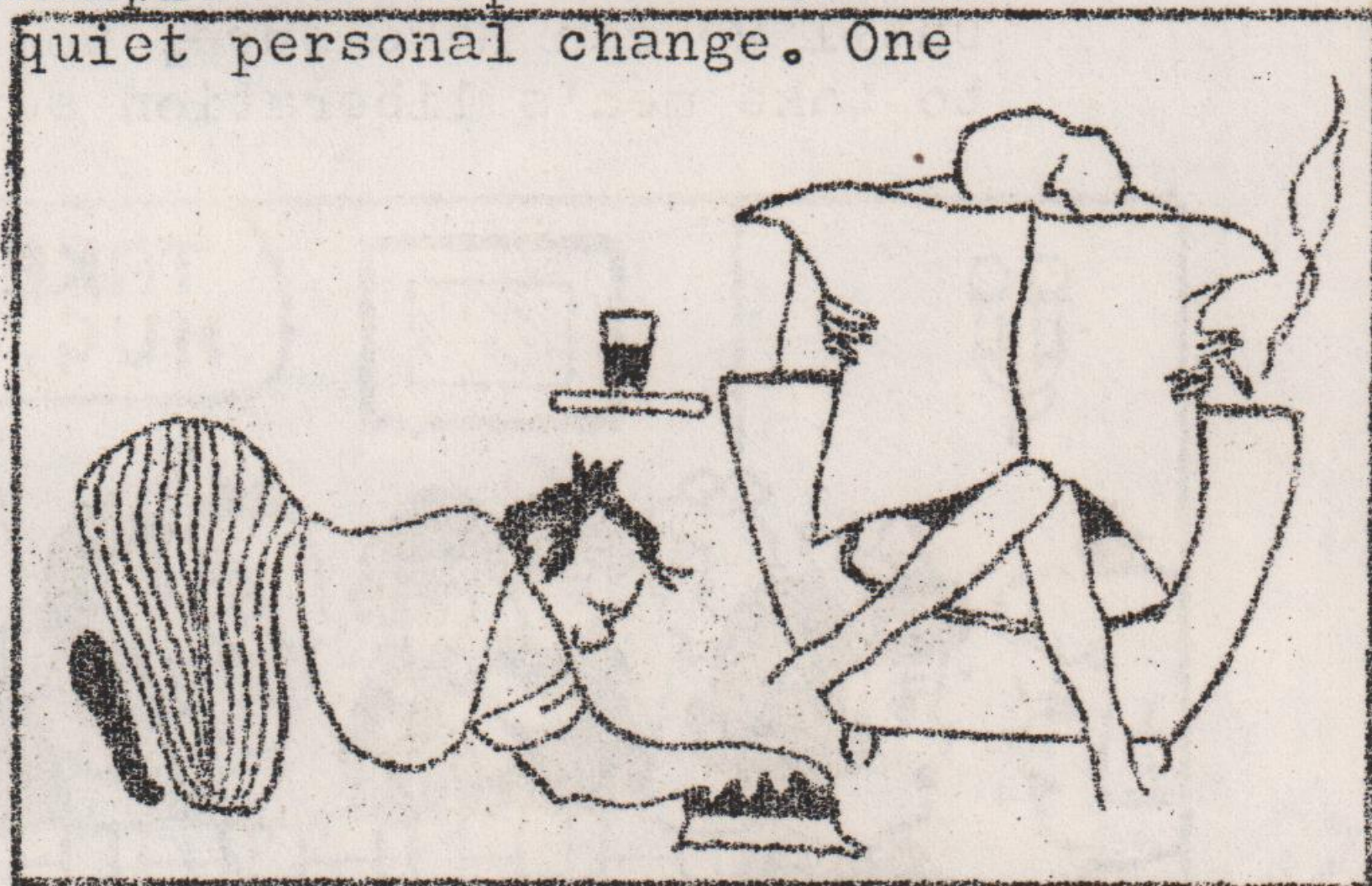
It is not enough because men must work simultaneously to change their individual relationships with women (and other men) and to change our political-economic system that thrives on the power of a few privileged men over the masses of Americans, both men and women. Changing our political economy will be immensely difficult, and it will not come about through a few men rejecting the demands of masculinity. So, Sawyer, Pleck, and their male friends, 'give up power' over others. Then what? Outside their own immediate circles, where it will undoubtedly make a considerable difference, what differences can it make in the lives of everyone else? Will it end American manipulation of the economies of the Third World countries? End our support of military dictatorships? Prevent another intervention such as the one against the socialist government of Chile? End the widening income disparities between white men and everyone else? Destroy institutional sexism and racism?

It will not change these and other things, because - to make an obvious point - most persons in privileged positions do not want to give up their power over others - even assuming that they are fully aware of the extent of their power. And if they do not want to give it up, it must be taken from them. Not from a few of them, but from all of them and not by individuals but by people acting together.

For this reason, when we look at what has to be done to create a non-hierarchical society, telling men that their choice is to join a consciousness-raising group is grotesque. Consciousness raising is one important means to an end - the end of personal and social change - but it is not the end itself. To act as though it is, is a copout.

Changes in men's lives are usually quiet ones, so far unheralded by the media, savoured privately and many times passionately. These changes...have no large scale economic or institutional forms: they are not generally recorded in national economic or social trend data. Increasingly, however, men are speaking of their inner journeys and wishes. (Robert A Fein, 'Men and Young Children')

The Pleck-Sawyer reader has too many examples of hip academics and gentle drop outs who are striving for quiet personal change. One wishes them well. But Pleck and Sawyer, at least, should know that this social system can easily accommodate a few renegades, especially if these renegades confine themselves to Getting Their Heads Together, alone or in concert with like-minded men. And today, tomorrow, in the foreseeable future, nothing else has to change very much.



IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

The woman who wrote this article is reviewing an American book on 'men's liberation'. She criticises a tendency to focus on the strains of being a man, almost forgetting the fact of male chauvanism over women and gay people. In fact, one of the editors of the book (Men and Masculinity, Joseph H Pleck and Jack Sawyer, eds., Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice-Hall, 1974) states:
"Being a master has its burdens".

In this country, too, this emphasis is popular, in reports of 'men's groups', conferences and publications.

This article, along with some pointed cartoons, is reprinted to encourage discussion of the validity of 'the men's movement'. Carol Erhlich doesn't say that personal change by men is not 'worth a try' but she does point out that the objective oppression and exploitation of women still exists in spite of this.

What she doesn't do is make much sense of how male chauvanism is part of capitalism. Politics, economics and sexuality are all described as isolated from one another. For example, in substituting capitalist/worker for male/female in a quote from Sawyer forgets that capital is entirely created by workers (women and men) and male chauvanism acts to maintain capitalism. In this sense, the struggle against male chauvanism is part of and fundamental to the struggle against capital.

"Without women there can be a revolution, but without women there cannot be communism"

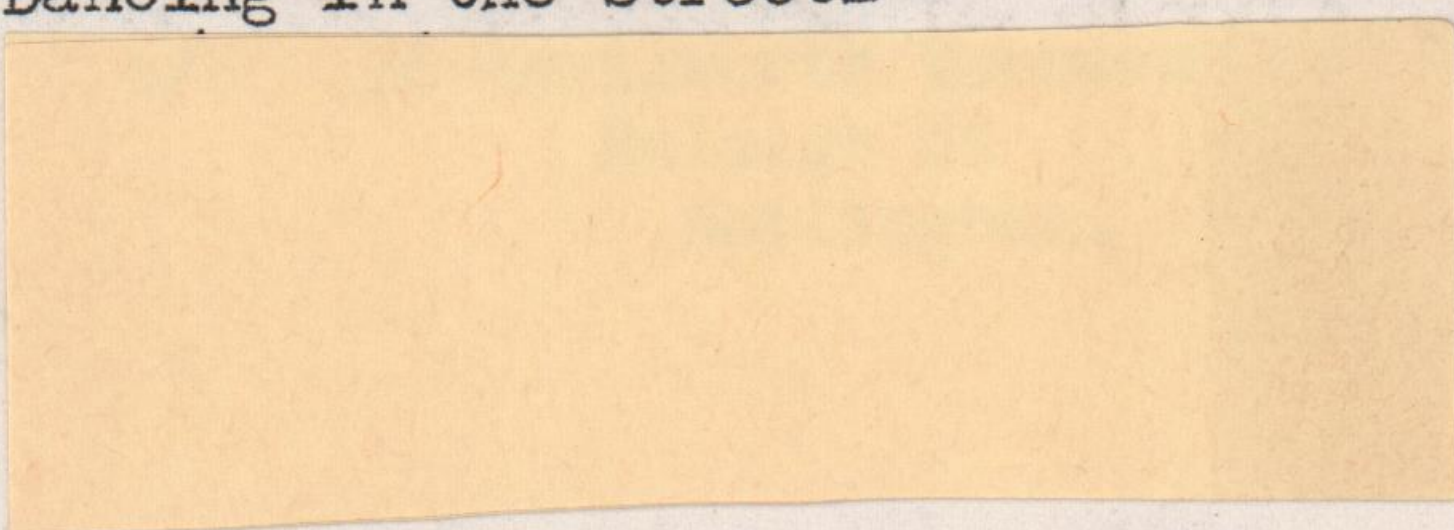
from a member of the Women's
Commission, Lotta Continua.

This review is from WIN, Feb 6th 1975. Box 547/Rifton/
New York 12471/USA.

The cartoons are from Red Rag (UK), Shrew (UK) and
Pedestal (Canada).

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