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Anarchism, feminism and economics

You can't have your pie and share it too

Peggy Kornegger

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We want to make money. In five years we'd like to have \$5 million. Women have got to have economic clout and generate more money for other women if we are to get a piece of the pie.

— Laura Brown Feminist Economic Network Detroit

We oppose "feminist" business because its a lousy economic and Political Strategy for getting what we want which is a feminist revolution.

— Brooke L. Williams and Hannah Darby Off Our Backs, March 1976

Recently, many women's periodicals have printed editorials or articles on the controversial issue of "feminist" businesses (see in particular the sense of articles and letters in the January through June Issues of Off Our Backs), and even the Boston Globe ran an article with the offensive title "Feminism is Good

Business.” Women’s growing awareness of the need for economic as well as political analysts and action is an Important phenomenon within the feminist community. Our survival, as Individual women and as a revolutionary movement, is directly connected to how we deal with money and the capitalist economy. We have to talk about work, how we make money to survive, how race, class, and privilege affect what choices women have for jobs, and most important, how to confront and ultimately abolish an economy based on competition, hierarchy, and patriarchal (i.e. authoritarian) concepts of social and political organization.

The words that we use to talk about our economic oppression as women are extremely important. It is crucial that we define clearly such words as feminism, revolution, power, control, business, etc. In our discussions and disagreements about economics We have to spell out the politics behind our word choices if we are to understand each other and come to even a small scale working consensus about how to confront an oppressive economy.

The articles that I have read recently on “feminist businesses” (both pro and con) use many of the same words — economic power, control, feminism, revolution, alternative, business — but use them in different ways and often without defining them. Different political perspectives behind identical language can lead to confusion and contradiction. What do we mean by those key words of the women’s movement — “revolution” and “feminism”?

For some, the women’s movement does not stand for “revolution.” Such women as NOW’s Karen DeCrow (“What I’d like to see eventually is women entrepreneurs getting beyond these periphery businesses and into the mainstream”) do not see feminism as the key revolutionary vision. For them, “feminist business” is clearly not a contradiction in terms, and they will continue to fight (men and each other) for a bigger piece of the American pie.

There are, however, many women who consider themselves revolutionary feminists and who believe that “feminist” businesses can be effective, non-oppressive alternatives to the male capitalist model. It is here that disagreement and confusion begin. It is here that the thorny question arises: “Where does revolution end and cooptation begin?” And it is here that I would like to begin — first with my own definition of feminism and revolution, and then with some tentative thoughts on what that means about how we deal with economics in the women’s community. This is certainly no definitive, highly refined economic analysis. It is merely an attempt to define terms, eliminate some contradictions, and explore possibilities for an anarchist perspective of women’s economic oppression.

For me, feminism implies revolution: my radical feminism includes an anarchist vision of political transformation. That is, what I want as a feminist and as an anarchist is 1. the dissolution of all power (personal, political, and economic) and all hierarchy (leader/follower, employer/employee, governor/governed) and 2. a revolutionary process which equates the means with the ends and emphasizes the necessity for a balance between spontaneity and organization and between collectivity and individuality. This is a highly condensed definition, but it is, I hope, adequate for the purposes of this discussion. The point I want to make is that if I believe that all power should be abolished and that the means always create the ends, then it would be contradictory and counter revolutionary to talk about getting economic or political power and control.

And, likewise, it is a contradiction to refer to businesses as “feminist.” Business is an invention of a capitalist system based on hierarchy, power, and competition. It can’t be “used” by feminists for their own purposes. That’s the same old myth that tells us we can “change the system from within” (elect a woman senator, vote for the ERA). The political economic system we live under (and I do mean under) does not admit change; it will change anyone or anything to suit its own purposes. Thus, the

“capitalist business, operating as it does under the strict law of survival at any cost, will twist and bend any political theory to the obedience of the laws of business.” And the laws of business are the laws of capitalism made to benefit a few at the expense of many.

This is not to say that all women who run for office or start a “feminist” business are authoritarian, power-hungry individuals. But the best intentions and the most humanitarian principles can be destroyed by a system based on authority and power. And that is not the way to make a successful feminist revolution. We need new ways and new words for the world we hope to create. Power is neither the word nor the way. To quote Bakunin, “whoever says political power says domination.” And the same goes for economic power.

I realize that many women use the word “power” to mean “autonomy”, “the ability to feed, clothe, and shelter ourselves”, but I think that it is important that we choose another word, one that cannot so easily be confused with “control over” (other people, other people’s money). Part of the confusion that characterizes many of the discussions about “feminist businesses” comes from this lack of distinction between “autonomy” and “control over.” Some women want the former, others want both. Still others think they can achieve autonomy without participating in control or domination, while still “using” capitalism. This is the contradiction I am trying to point out: you don’t challenge an authoritarian political economic structure by using authoritarian methods (i.e. the capitalist model). To repeat the old adage: the means create the ends. If we use capitalism, we get capitalism. And if we don’t want capitalism, then we have to come up with ways that will help us get what we do want. And what is that?

What I want, as an anarcha-feminist, is an egalitarian, non-authoritarian society, and I believe we can only achieve that if we begin to create these structures now. This means the invention of real alternatives, totally new, unheard-of methods

printing facilities and 2. to print on their flyers, posters, or pamphlets “this publication is free to you if you do not have the money, even tho’ contributions are needed.” All of their work also bears the statement.

Done at Come! Unity Press, a cooperative where we learned to do this printing. The press does not demand dollars from us or other movement people who print materials that provide equal access to the poor. The press needs the broad support of many donations. monthly pledges of \$2, \$5. \$?, energy, food, skills, joint benefits, etc to continue movement access to printing facilities. Don’t let this be the last month! YOUR MOVEMENT.

A description of Come!Unity Press and their own statement are on the following page. I visited the press last October, and although their financial precariousness and energy burn out were similar to Second Wave’s, their dedication (several of the collective live at the press — a crowded loft in downtown New York) and their persistent challenges to an economic system that discourages sharing and concern for those without money were inspiring. Come!Unity Press’s “survival by sharing” has gone on now for four years, which certainly demonstrates, If nothing else, that there are ways of confronting capitalism that don’t involve either power or control — and that work!! What we need now are more women trying to incorporate this vision into their lives, whether they’re working at an alienating job or with an “alternative” women’s group. This could mean anything from sliding “payment” scales to exchange arrangements to free access to “products” and “services” for women without money. Our politics affect our perspective on economic survival. If we choose feminist revolution as our goal process, then we have to choose SHARING over competition. In every phase of our lives: personal, political, and economic.

for confronting the economic/political oppression which batters our daily lives. We have to get away from the idea that we must somehow “use” capitalism and its principles in order to survive. We have to invent new means of survival that do not involve the capitalist concepts of control and power. I agree with Brooke and Hannah that “the solution to the money problem in the movement is not to be found in starting separate businesses, but in political organization.” “Workplace organizing,” as discussed by Brooke and Hannah, is one essential activity, if initiated by the women workers themselves and not by transitory theoreticians who come to “organize the workers.” But there are other ways and other places to confront an oppressive economy; what is necessary is that we clarify our “ends” and create our “means” with that clarification in mind.

Political organization, wherever it occurs, means that revolution is our first priority, whether we are working at a shit job to get money to survive or attempting to create alternatives outside the system. This raises two vital questions: “Is there ever really an outside?” and “If there is, what about those who don’t have the option to be anywhere but inside?” Our answers to these questions are crucial, because they indicate how (or if) we see the women’s movement as a revolutionary tool. I have been one of the Second Wave collective for nearly two years now. For me it has been part of a larger commitment to feminist revolutionary transformation. I see Second Wave as an important tool for effecting this kind of change — through words, through communication, and through shared thoughts and actions. I’m sure each Second Wave member’s definition of the magazine and of herself in relation to it differs somewhat. We have never given ourselves a collective political definition. Yet, the way Second Wave functions as a collective does have political/economic implications.

At a recent workshop at the Mt. Holyoke College Women’s Weekend, Second Wave was asked by another women’s group if we considered ourselves a “business” or “service” group.

Those of us who attended said we thought of ourselves as a political group. But what exactly does that mean about the economics of Second Wave? How does it (and its members) survive?

All members of the Second Wave collective work full- or part time at other jobs for survival money; the magazine does not pay us it can't even pay production costs without fundraising. The fact is, that Second Wave has put more emphasis on politics than money making and it shows in our continually precarious financial position. It has survived five and a half years, but it has survived because of a long series of staff members who burned themselves out after one or two years on the magazine. The fact that the survival of Second wave depends on the individual survival of its members cannot be avoided. And if those members are forced to squeeze in never ending Second Wave work after they've exhausted themselves at a shit job all day, the continued existence of the magazine will always be totally dependent upon a fresh supply of volunteers who in turn get burned out and leave. So, how can Second Wave (or any women's group) continue as a political group, not become a business, and still keep members from dying off from exhaustion and split lives?

There is no clear-cut answer to that question. Second Wave is still struggling along trying to find one. I personally don't believe the answer is striving to pay all staff members (or even one or two) a living wage (other SW staff may disagree). To me, this is an elitist alternative that only benefits a few, threatens the collective process, and certainly changes the focus of the magazine from politics to money making. In addition, it fails to take into account that most women don't have the option of barely subsisting in an "alternative job"; they have to work full time at oppressive jobs and may not even have enough money to buy a single copy of Second Wave. For these women, so-called feminist products (whether records or restaurants) are not even in the range of the possible. Any feminist theory of economics or plan of action has to include these women in its

utopian vision. Feminist groups have to provide concrete options for women without money. Women who can't afford to buy a book or even a meal aren't interested in the addition of the word "feminist" to "business"; for them business still means that they (and their basic survival needs) are ignored. There is no provision for those without money in a capitalist business framework. The basic nature of any business is hierarchy and thus economic oppression. If we are working toward the creation of a totally egalitarian society, in whatever work group or political group we find ourselves, then we have to act upon this realization.

Perhaps one option would be to pay each collective member a minimal amount, allowing her more time to work in the group, but not providing the option of quitting the world of shit-work entirely. The problem with this (aside from that of actually getting enough money to pay staff) is that it once again puts the primary emphasis on an "individual solution"; women with part-time jobs or on unemployment or welfare are often isolated, always vulnerable, and never financially secure. How do we respond to those women without money whether we are in an "alternative" work group or doing "workplace organizing"? This seems to be the key question in any attempt to deal with an economic system where poverty is the basis of all wealth.

Financial security is probably an impossibility right now, but there have to be ways of responding to the economic system that don't put us in competition with each other and that do take into account those women without any economic options at all.

One group who is attempting some really revolutionary economic actions is the Come!Unity Press, a gay anarchist printing collective in New York City. Their logo says "survival by sharing," and they operate under the principle of "more if you can, less if you can't." They ask all groups: 1. to decide for themselves how much they can afford to pay for the use of their