Sometime in the nineteen twenties, feminism died in the United States. It was a premature death. Feminists had only recently obtained their long sought for tool, the vote, with which they had hoped to make an equal place for women in this society. But it seemed like a final one. By the time the granddaughters of the women who had sacrificed so much for suffrage had grown to maturity, not only had social mythology firmly ensconced women in the home, but the very term "feminist" had become an epithet.

Social fact, however, did not always coincide with social mythology. During the era of the "feminine mystique" when the percentage of degrees given to women was dropping, their absolute numbers were rising astronomically. Their participation in the labor force was also increasing—even while their position within it was declining. Opportunities to work, the trend toward smaller families, plus changes in status symbols from a leisured wife at home to a second car and TV, all contributed to a basic alteration of the female labor force from one of primarily single women under 25 to one of married women and mothers over 40. Added to these developments was an increased segregation of the job market, a flooding of traditional female jobs (e.g. teaching and social work) by men, a decrease of women's percentage of the professional and technical jobs by a third and a commensurate decline in their relative income. The result was the creation of a class of highly educated, under-employed women.
In the early sixties feminism was still an unmentionable, but its ghost was slowly awakening from the dead. The first sign of new life came with the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women by President Kennedy in 1961. Created at the urging of Esther Petersen of the Women's Bureau, in its short life the Commission came out with several often radical reports thoroughly documenting women's second class status. It was followed by the formation of a citizen's advisory council and fifty state commissions.

Many of the people involved in these commissions became the nucleus of women who, dissatisfied with the lack of progress made on commission recommendations, joined with Betty Friedan in 1966 to found the National Organization for Women.

NOW was the first new feminist organization in almost fifty years, but it was not the sole beginning of the organized expression of the movement. The movement actually has two origins, from two different stratas of society, with two different styles, orientations, values, and forms of organization. In many ways there were two separate movements which only in the last year have merged sufficiently for the rubric "women's liberation" to be truly an umbrella term for the multiplicity of organizations and groups.

The first of these I call the older branch of the movement, partially because it began first, and partially because the median age of its activists is higher. In addition to NOW it contains such organizations as the PWC (Professional Women's Caucus), FEW (Federally Employed Women) and the self-defined "right wing" of the movement, WEAL (Women's Equity Action League).

The participants of both branches tend to be predominantly white, middle-class and college educated, but the composition of the older is much more heterogenous than that of the younger. In issues, however, this trend is reversed with those of the younger being more diverse. While the written programs and aims of the older branch span a wide spectrum, their activities tend to be concentrated on the legal and economic difficulties women face. These groups are primarily made up of women who work and are substantially concerned with the problems of working women. Their style of organization has tended to be formal with numerous elected officers, boards of directors, bylaws and the other trappings of democratic procedure. All started as top down organizations lacking in a mass base. Some have subsequently developed a mass base, some have not yet done so, and others don't want to.

In 1967 and 1968, unaware of and unknown to NOW or the state commissions, the other branch of the movement was taking shape. Contrary to popular myth it did not begin on the campus; nor was it started by SDS. However, its activators were, to be trite, on the other side of the generation gap. While few were students, all were "under 30" and had received their political education as participants or concerned observers of the social action projects of the last decade. Many came direct from New Left
and civil rights organizations where they had been shunted into traditional roles and faced with the self-evident contradiction of working in a "freedom movement" but not being very free. Others had attended various course on women in the multitude of free universities springing up around the country during those years.

At least five groups in five different cities (Chicago, Toronto, Detroit, Seattle and Gainesville, Fla.) formed spontaneously, independently of each other. They came at a very auspicious moment. 1967 was the year in which the blacks kicked the whites out of the civil rights movement, student power had been discredited by SDS and the New Left was on the wane. Only draft resistance activities were on the increase, and this movement more than any other exemplified the social inequities of the sexes. Men could resist the draft. Women could only counsel resistance.

There had been individual temporary caucuses and conferences of women as early as 1964 when Stokeley Carmichael made his infamous remark that "the only position for women in SNCC is prone." But it was not until 1967 that the groups developed a determined, if cautious, continuity and began to consciously expand themselves. In 1968 they held their first, and so far only, national conference attended by over 200 women from around this country and Canada on less than a month's notice. They have been expanding exponentially ever since.

This expansion has been more amoebic than organized because the younger branch of the movement prides itself on its lack of organization. Eschewing structure and damming the idea of leadership, it has carried the concept of "everyone doing their own thing" almost to its logical extreme. The thousands of sister chapters around the country are virtually independent of each other, linked only by the numerous journals, newsletters and cross country travelers. Some cities have a coordinating committee which attempts to maintain communication between the local groups and channel newcomers into appropriate ones but none have any power over group activities, let alone group ideas. One result of this style is a very broad based, creative movement, which individuals can relate to pretty much as they desire with no concern for orthodoxy or doctrine. Another result is a kind of political impotency. It is virtually impossible to co-ordinate a national action, assuming there could be any agreement on issues around which to co-ordinate one. Fortunately, the older branch of the movement does have the structure necessary to co-ordinate such actions, and is usually the one to initiate them as NOW did for the August 26 national strike last year.

It is a common mistake to try to place the various feminist organizations on the traditional left/right spectrum. The terms "reformist" and "radical" are convenient and fit into our preconceived notions about the nature of political organization, but they tell us nothing of relevance. As with most everything else, feminism cuts through the normal categories and demands new perspectives in order to be understood. Some groups often called "reformist" have a platform which would so completely change our
society it would be unrecognizable. Other groups called "radical" concentrate on the traditional female concerns of love, sex, children and interpersonal relationships (although with untraditional views). The activities of the organizations are similarly incongruous. The most typical division of labor, ironically, is that those groups labeled "radical" engage primarily in educational work while the so-called "reformist" ones are the activists. It is structure and style rather than ideology which more accurately differentiates the various groups and even here there has been much borrowing on both sides. The older branch has used the traditional forms of political action often with great skill, while the younger branch has been experimental.

The most prevalent innovation developed by the younger branch has been the "rap group." Essentially an educational technique, it has spread far beyond its origins and become a major organizational unit of the whole movement, most frequently used by suburban housewives. From a sociological perspective the rap group is probably the most valuable contribution so far by the women's liberation movement to the tools for social change.

The rap group serves two main purposes. One is traditional; the other is unique. The traditional role is the simple process of bringing women together in a situation of structured interaction. It has long been known that people can be kept down as long as they are kept divided from each other, relating more to those in a superior social position than to those in a position similar to their own. It is when social development creates natural structures in which people can interact with each other and compare their common concerns that social movements take place. This is the function that the factory served for the workers, the church for the Southern Civil Rights movement, the campus for students and the ghetto for urban blacks.

Women have been largely deprived of a means of structured interaction and been kept isolated in their individual homes relating more to men than to each other. Natural structures are still largely lacking, though they have begun to develop, but the rap group has created an artificial structure which does much the same thing. This phenomenon is similar to the nineteenth century development of a multitude of women's clubs and organizations around every conceivable social and political purpose. These organizations taught women political skills and eventually served as the primary communications network for the spread of the suffrage movement. Yet after the great crusade ended most of them vanished or became moribund. The rap groups are taking their place and will serve much the same function for the future development of this movement.

They do more than just bring women together as radical an activity as that may be. The rap groups have become mechanisms for social change in and of themselves. They are structures created specifically for the purpose of altering the participants perceptions and conceptions of themselves and society at large. The means by which this is done is
called "consciousness raising." The process is very simple. Women come together in groups of five to fifteen and talk to each other about their personal problems, personal experiences, personal feelings and personal concerns. From this public sharing of experiences comes the realization that what was thought to be individual is in fact common; that what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and probably a political solution. Women learn to see how social structures and attitudes have molded them from birth and limited their opportunities. They ascertain the extent to which women have been denigrated in this society and how they have developed prejudices against themselves and other women.

It is this process of deeply personal attitude change that makes the rap group such a powerful tool. The need of a movement to develop "correct consciousness" has long been known. But usually this consciousness is not developed by means intrinsic to the structure of the movement and does not require such a profound resocialization of one's concept of self. This experience is both irreversible and contagious. Once one has gone through such a "resocialization", one's view of oneself and the world is never the same again, whether or not there is further active participation in the movement. Even those who do "drop out" rarely do so without first spreading feminist ideas among their own friends and colleagues. All who undergo "consciousness raising" virtually compel themselves to seek out other women with whom to share the experience, and thus begin new rap groups.

There are several personal results from this process. The initial one is a decrease of self and group depreciation. Women come to see themselves as essentially pretty groovy people. Along with this comes the explosion of the myth of individual solution. If women are the way they are, because society has made them that way, they can only change their lives significantly by changing society. These feelings in turn create the consciousness of oneself as a member of a group and the feeling of solidarity so necessary to any social movement. From this comes the concept of sisterhood.

This need for group solidarity partially explains why men have been largely excluded from the rap groups. It was not the initial reason, but it has been one of the more beneficial by-products. Originally, the idea was borrowed from the Black Power movement, much in the public consciousness when the women's liberation movement began. It was reinforced by the unremitting hostility of most of the New Left men at the prospect of an independent women's movement not tied to radical organizations. Even when this hostility was not present, women in virtually every group in the U.S., Canada and Europe soon discovered that the traditional sex roles reasserted themselves in the groups regardless of the good intentions of the participants. Men inevitably dominated the discussions, and usually would talk only about how women's liberation related to men, or how men were oppressed by the sex roles. In segregated groups women found the discussions to be more open, honest and extensive. They could learn how to relate to other women and not just to men.
Unlike the male exclusion policy, the rap groups did not develop spontaneously or without a struggle. The political background of many of the early feminists of the younger branch predisposed them against the rap group as "unpolitical" and they would condemn discussion meetings which "degenerated" into "bitch sessions." This trend was particularly strong in Chicago and Washington, D.C., which had been centers of New Left activity. Meanwhile, other feminists, usually with a civil rights or a-political background, saw that the "bitch session" obviously met a basic need. They seized upon it and created the consciousness raising rap group. Developed initially in New York and Gainesville, Fl.a., the idea soon spread throughout the country becoming the paradigm for most movement organization.

To date, the major, though hardly exclusive, activity of the younger branch has been organizing rap groups, putting on conferences, and putting out educational literature, while that of the older branch has been using the "channels" and other forms of political pressure to change specific situations in inequity. In general, the younger branch has been organized to attack attitudes and the older branch to attack structures.

While the rap groups have been excellent techniques for changing individual attitudes they have not been very successful in dealing with social institutions. Their loose informal structure encourages participation in discussion and their supportive atmosphere elicits personal insight; but neither is very efficient in handling specific tasks. Thus, while they have been of fundamental value to the development of the movement it is the more structured groups which are the more visibly effective.

Individual rap groups tend to flounder when their members have exhausted the virtues of consciousness raising and decide they want to do something more concrete. The problem is that most groups are unwilling to change their structure when they change their tasks. They have accepted the ideology of "structurelessness" without realizing the limitations of its uses. This is currently causing an organizational crisis within the movement because the formation of rap groups as a major movement function is becoming obsolete. Due to the intense press publicity that began in the fall of 1969, as well as the numerous "overground" books and articles now being circulated, women's liberation has become practically a household word. Its issues are discussed and informal rap groups formed by people who have no explicit connection with any movement group. Ironically, this subtle, silent and subversive spread of feminist consciousness is causing a situation of political unemployment. With educational work no longer such an overwhelming need women's liberation groups have to develop new forms of organizations to deal with new tasks in a new stage of development. This is necessitating a good deal of retrenchment and rethinking. Cities undergoing this process often give the impression of inactivity and only time will tell what will be the result.
Initially there was little ideology in the movement beyond a gut feeling that something was wrong. NOW was formed under the slogan "full equality for women in a truly equal partnership with men" and specified eight demands in a "Bill of Rights." It and the other organizations of the older branch have continued to focus around concrete issues feeling that attempts at a comprehensive ideology have little to offer beyond internal conflict.

In the younger branch a basic difference of opinion developed quite early. It was disguised as a philosophical difference, was articulated and acted on as a strategical one, but actually was more of a political disagreement than anything else. The two sides involved were essentially the same people who differed over the rap groups, but the split endured long after the groups became ubiquitous. The original issue was whether the fledging women's liberation movement should remain a branch of the radical left movement, or be an independent women's movement. Proponents became known as "politicos" or "feminists" respectively and traded arguments about whether "capitalism was the enemy", or the male-dominated social institutions and values. They also traded a few epithets with politicos calling feminists politically unsophisticated and elitist, while in turn being accused of subservience to the interests of left wing men.

With the influx of large numbers of previously apolitical women an independent, autonomous women's liberation movement became a reality instead of an argument. The spectrum shifted to the feminist direction, but the basic difference in orientation still remained. Politicos now also call themselves feminists, and many have left the left, but most see women's issues within a broader political context while the original feminists continue to focus almost exclusively on women's concerns. Although much of the bitterness of the original dispute has subsided, politicos generated such distrust about their motives that they prejudiced many women against all concerns of Left ideology. This has led some feminists to the very narrow outlook that politicos most feared they would adopt.

Meanwhile, faced with a female exodus, the radical left movement has forsaken the rhetoric of its original opposition without relinquishing most of its sexist practices. Embracing the position that women are a constituency to be organized, most New Left (and some Old Left) organizations have created women's caucuses to recruit women to "more important activities." These are very different from the women's caucuses of the professional associations that have also mushroomed into existence. The latter are concerned with raising feminist issues within their organizations. The New Left women's groups serve much the same function as traditional ladies auxiliaries.

The widely differing backgrounds and perspectives of the women in the movement have resulted in as many different interpretations of women's status. Some are more developed than others, and some are more
publicized, yet as of 1971 there is no comprehensive set of beliefs which can accurately be labeled women's liberationist, feminist, neofeminist or radical feminist ideology. At best one can say there is general agreement on two theoretical concerns. The first is the feminist critique of society, and the second is the idea of oppression.

The feminist critique starts from entirely different premises than the traditional view and therefore neither can really refute the other. The latter assumes that men and women are essentially different and should serve different social functions. Their diverse roles and statuses simply reflect these essential differences. The feminist perspective starts from the premise that women and men are constitutionally equal and share the same human capabilities. Observed differences therefore demand a critical analysis of the social institutions which cause them.

The concept of oppression brings into use a term which has long been avoided out of a feeling that it was too rhetorical. But there was no convenient euphemism and discrimination was inadequate to describe what happens to women and what they have in common with other groups. As long as the word remained illegitimate, so did the idea and it was too valuable not to use. It is still largely an undeveloped concept in which the details have not been sketched, but there appear to be two aspects to oppression which relate much the same as two sides of a coin—distinct, yet inseparable. The social structural manifestations are easily visible as they are reflected in the legal, economic, social and political institutions. The social psychological ones are often intangible; hard to grasp and hard to alter. Group self-hate and distortion of perceptions to justify a preconceived interpretation of reality are just some of the factors being teased out.

For women, sexism describes the specificity of female oppression. Starting from the traditional belief of the difference between the sexes, sexism embodies two core concepts.

The first is that men are more important than women. Not necessarily superior—we are far too sophisticated these days than to use those tainted terms—but more important, more significant, more valuable, more worthwhile. This value justifies the idea that it is more important for a man, the "breadwinner", to have a job or a promotion, than a woman, more important for a man to be paid well, more important for a man to have an education and in general to have preference over a woman. It is the basis of the feeling by men that if women enter a particular occupation they will degrade it and that men must leave or be themselves degraded; and the feeling by women that they can raise the prestige of their professions by recruiting men, which they can only do by giving them the better jobs. From this value comes the attitude that a husband must earn more than his wife or suffer a loss of personal status and a wife must subsume her interests to his or be socially castigated. From this value comes the practice of rewarding men for serving in the armed forces and punishing women for having children. The first core concept of sexist thought is
that men do the important work in the world and the work done by men is what is important.

The second core concept is that women are here for the pleasure and assistance of men. This is what is meant when women are told that their role is complementary to that of men; that they should fulfill their natural "feminine" functions; that they are "different" from men and should not compete with them. From this concept comes the attitude that women are and should be dependent on men; for everything but especially their identities, the social definition of who they are. It defines the few roles for which women are socially rewarded--wife, mother and mistress--all of which are pleasing or beneficial to men, and leads directly to the "pedestal" theory which extols women who stay in their place as good helpmates to men.

It is this attitude which stigmatizes those women who do not marry or who do not devote their primary energies to the care of men and their children. Association with a man is the basic criterion for participation by women in this society and one who does not seek her identity through a man is a threat to the social values. It is similarly this attitude which causes women's liberation activists to be labeled as man haters for exposing the nature of sexism. People feel that a woman not devoted to looking after men must act this way because of hatred or inability to "catch" one. The second core concept of sexist thought is that women's identities are defined by their relationship to men and their social value by that of the men they are related to.

The sexism of our society is so pervasive that we are not even aware of all its inequities. Unless one has developed a sensitivity to its workings, by adopting a self-consciously contrary view, its activities are accepted as "normal" and justified with little question. People are said to "choose" what in fact they never thought about. A good example is what happened during and after World War II. The sudden onslaught of the war radically changed the whole structure of social relationships as well as the economy. Men were drafted into the army and women into the labor force. Now desperately needed, women's wants were provided for as were those of the boys on the front. Federal financing of day care centers in the form of the Landham Act passed Congress in a record two weeks. Special crash training programs were provided for the new women workers to give them skills they were not previously thought capable of exercising. Women instantly assumed positions of authority and responsibility unavailable only the year before.

But what happened when the war ended? Both men and women had heeded their country's call to duty to bring it to a successful conclusion. Yet men were rewarded for their efforts and women punished for theirs. The returning soldiers were given the G.I. Bill and other veterans benefits, as well as their jobs back and a disproportionate share of the new ones created by the war economy. Women, on the other hand, saw their child care centers dismantled and their training programs cease. They were
fired or demoted in droves and often found it difficult to enter colleges flooded with ex-GIs matriculating on government money. Is it any wonder that they heard the message that their place was in the home? Where else could they go?

The eradication of sexism and the practices it supports, like those above, is obviously one of the major goals of the women's liberation movement. But it is not enough to destroy a set of values and leave a normative vacuum. They have to be replaced with something. A movement can only begin by declaring its opposition to the status quo. Eventually if it is to succeed, it has to propose an alternative.

I cannot pretend to be even partially definitive about the possible alternatives contemplated by the numerous participants in the women's liberation movement. Yet from the plethora of ideas and visions feminists have thought, discussed and written about, I think there are two basic ideas emerging which express the bulk of their concerns. I call these the Egalitarian Ethic and the Liberation Ethic, but they are not independent of each other and together they mesh into what can only be described as a feminist humanism.

The Egalitarian Ethic means exactly what it says. The sexes are equal; therefore sex roles must go. Our history has proven that institutionalized difference inevitably means inequity and sex role stereotypes have long since become anachronistic. Strongly differentiated sex roles were rooted in the ancient division of labor; their basis has been torn apart by modern technology. Their justification was rooted in the subjection of women to the reproductive cycle. That has already been destroyed by modern pharmacology. The cramped little boxes of personality and social function to which we assign people from birth must be broken open so that all people can develop independently, as individuals. This means that there will be an integration of social functions and life styles of men and women as group until, ideally, one cannot tell anything of relevance about a person's social role by knowing their sex. But this increased similarity of the two groups also means increased options for individuals and increased diversity in the human race. No longer will there be men's work and women's work. No longer will humanity suffer a schizophrenic personality desperately trying to reconcile its "masculine" and "feminine" parts. No longer will marriage be the institution where two half-people come together in hopes of making a whole.

The Liberation Ethic says this is not enough. Not only must the limits of the roles be changed, but their content as well. The Liberation Ethic looks at the kinds of lives currently being led by men as well as women and concludes that both are deplorable and neither are necessary. The social institutions which oppress women as women, also oppress people as people and can be altered to make a more humane existence for all. So much of our society is hung upon the framework of sex role stereotypes and their reciprocal functions that the dismantling of this structure will provide the opportunity for making a more viable life for everyone.
It is important to stress that these two Ethics must work together in tandem. If the first is emphasized over the second, then we have a women's right movement, not one of women's liberation. To seek for only equality, given the current male bias of the social values, is to assume that women want to be like men or that men are worth emulating. It is to demand that women be allowed to participate in society as we know it, to get their piece of the pie, without questioning the extent to which that society is worth participating in. This view is held by some, but most feminists today find it inadequate. Those women who are more personally compatible in what is considered the male role must realize that that role is made possible only by the existence of the female sex role; in other words, only the subjection of women. Therefore women cannot become equal to men without the destruction of those two interdependent mutually parasitic roles. The failure to realize that the integration of the sex roles and the equality of the sexes will inevitably lead to basic structural change is to fail to seize the opportunity to decide the direction of those changes.

It is just as dangerous to fall into the trap of seeking liberation without due concern for equality. This is the mistake made by many of the left radicals. They find the general human condition to be wretched that they feel everyone should devote their energies to the Millennial Revolution in belief that the liberation of women will follow naturally the liberation of people.

However women have yet to be defined as people, even among the radicals, and it is erroneous to assume their interests are identical to those of men. For women to subsume their concerns once again is to insure that the promise of liberation will be a spurious one. There has yet to be created or conceived by any political or social theorist a revolutionary society in which women were equal to men and their needs duly considered. The sex role structure has never been comprehensively challenged by any male philosopher and the systems they have proposed have all presumed the existence of a sex-role structure to some degree.

Such undue emphasis on the Liberation Ethic has also often led to a sort of Radical Paradox. This is a situation the politicos frequently found themselves in during the early days of the movement. They found repugnant the possibility of pursuing "reformist" issues which might be achieved without altering the basic nature of the system, and thus, they felt, only strengthen the system. However, their search for a sufficiently radical action and/or issue came to naught and they found themselves unable to do anything out of fear that it might be counterrevolutionary. Inactive revolutionaries are a good deal more innocuous than active "reformists."

But even among those who are not rendered impotent, the unilateral pursuit of Liberation can take its toll. Some radical women have been so appalled at the condition of most men, and the possibility of becoming even partially what they are, that they have clung to the security of the role that they know, to wait complacently for the Revolution to liberate
everyone. Some men, fearing that role reversal was a goal of the women's liberation movement, have taken a similar position. Both have failed to realize that the abolition of sex roles must be continually incorporated into any radical restructuring of society and thus have failed to explore the possible consequences of such role integration. The goal they advocate may be one of liberation, but it does not involve women's liberation.

Separated from each other, the Egalitarian Ethic and the Liberation Ethic can be crippling, but together they can be a very powerful force. Separately they speak to limited interests; together they speak to all humanity. Separately, they are but superficial solutions; together they recognize that while sexism oppresses women, it also limits the potentiality of men. Separately, neither will be achieved because their scope does not range far enough; together they provide a vision worthy of our devotion. Separately, these two Ethics do not lead to the liberation of women; together, they also lead to the liberation of men.