

Anti-rape March Sparks Debate on Feminism

Fifth Estate Collective

On Saturday night, May 3, a gathering of about 250 to 400 women and perhaps 100 men held a rally in Palmer Park on Detroit's *North End* and then marched through the surrounding neighborhood chanting, "Women, Take Back The Night." The assembly was one of a series of actions initiated by women which have been held nationwide to protest the pervasive rape culture of this society.

As dusk fell in the park, a highly enthusiastic crowd cheered a succession of women speakers, musicians, and performers before beginning a spirited three-mile march through the adjoining streets. However, from its inception, the long-scheduled march had been a subject of intense controversy regarding all of its aspects—its attempted exclusion of men, its reliance on the media, its relationship to the police, its perception of the causes of rape, and perhaps most potent, the role of feminism.

Within the community which many of the march organizers function the debate had become so intense that relationships of long-term standing were threatened and the split has not yet been healed. This article is an attempt to view the march from a critical perspective of both the activity itself and the larger political framework within which it fits.

Take Back the Night and The Media

Women, Take Back The Night (WTBTN) has been described since the march by its organizers as being a "complete success." Indeed, if one judges the success of a demonstration by the amount of media coverage received, then WTBTN scored high in the ratings. The television stations were well represented in the park as were reporters from daily newspapers and radio stations. Prior to the march the news media picked up on the event with extraordinary gusto giving it continual play on radio, TV and in the papers, including a long story and photograph on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press*' "The Way We Live Section (formerly the "Women's" page).

However, if you judge a march by the stated expectations of its organizers and by the number of people who actually attend, then you can only conclude that this march was a dismal failure. The WTBTN collective had predicted that up to 3,000 women would participate in its march. Subtracting the people who just happened to be in the park and who did not join in the march, as well as a hundred or so men who attended (even though it had been made quite clear that they would be unwelcome) the organizers failed to draw more than ten per cent of the numbers they had anticipated. To describe it as a success can only mean as a media event, which is equivalent to saying a non-event, a spectacle. The news media loved it; it had all the makings of a good story.

A constant and contradictory note of dependence on the news media was heard throughout the weeks preceding the march right up to the speeches made at the rally. Women who had originally expressed opposition to the news media ended up by submitting to being photographed for a humiliating mug shot in the *Free Press* a scant three pages from the X-rated movie ads as well as taking part in a radio talk show on a station which regularly airs racist and sexist jokes as part of their daily fare.

At the rally, one speaker attacked the media for racism for publicizing crimes against white women while ignoring the much more prevalent crimes against black women, and another attacked this very sensationalism of the media, recognizing that its coverage is “supporting violence against women.” Both observations are obviously true, but somewhat contradictory in their intent. In any case, these contradictions did not keep the march organizers from jumping at every chance they could to get this media coverage.

The daily media played it all to the hilt, of course, since it doesn't have any sense of rape being any different from other crimes which plague the metropolitan area. For the newspapers as well as for the cops, it was a law-and-order issue, as it has been across the country in such places as Boston and Los Angeles, where conservative feminist politicians from the National Organization of Women (NOW) have lined up with city halls and police departments to demand more cops on the streets and stiffer rape penalties, finding themselves in the position of being warmly applauded by right-wing anti-pornography book burners, anti-abortion-rights fundamentalist Christians, and pro-death penalty reactionaries.

Enter the Police

The feminists also found themselves in a love-hate relationship with the cops similar to that which they had with the media. In the early planning stages, concerns raised by many people—including members of the *Fifth Estate* staff—about the pro-police tendencies of previous WTBTN marches made the organizers conscious enough to write and distribute a brochure which stated, “We can't be content with asking established institutions, such as the police who only maintain the status quo, for the solution...”

Though this brochure paid lip service to a non-authoritarian vision of society, it seemed to be only for local community consumption. At the rally itself, one of the two main speakers, Alberta Tinsley: introduced as the former administrator of a local rape crisis center, stated in her speech, “We're fortunate to have the cooperation of the police...we'll be well protected.” She then went on to read a poem about rape in which the cops are portrayed in a more accurate light as uncaring and unsympathetic!

Another march organizer, Miriam Frank, who had previously stated that she was not opposed to a “sexually segregated society” went out of her way to joyously announce, “The police are with us tonight!” And despite the criticism in the “rape poetry” and the rhetoric of the brochure, it was the police who made sure everything went off without a hitch. The irony of feminists with signs proclaiming such smile-face banalities as “Sisters I Love You” and hugging one another behind a cordon of male cops and reporters seemed to be lost on most of the rally participants.

The Image of Power and the Power of Images

Not to be outdone by the show of force from the boys in blue, several women and children staged a karate demonstration to emphasize their “power.” The audience cheered enthusiastically when the growling women dressed in karate uniforms performed kicks and punches choreographed to a popular disco hit. (We assume that the men in the audience just gulped nervously at this display of female ferocity.)

Their power thus proven, the participants and some of the observers then marched through the streets, presumably taking back the night—lined up in orderly fashion behind the police cars, and under the watchful eye of the internal “non-authoritarian” security patrol appointed by the march organizers. *

The “power” exhibited by the feminist jocks for the crowd of spectators turned out to be part and parcel of the media happening: the image of power in the absence of the possibility of its realization through feminist ideology. Karate skills performed by a few militants do nothing to offset the terrifying rape fear which pervades this society. No one can honestly claim that a few karate lessons for the minority of women who can afford to pay the karate entrepreneurs for them really represent power capable of acting as an effective defense for women or for confronting a society which causes rape and violence against women.

The solutions do not lie in creating an image of “beautiful sisters” capable of beating off male assailants perhaps twice their weight and even armed, but in mobilizing large numbers of people against not only the war-zone at-

mosphere on the street but against the powerlessness and rage which creates the conditions for violence against women and children.

But this would ultimately mean to question the sexist, separatist assumptions of the middle-class, reformist feminists. So they were content with this image of power—this caricature—rather than confronting the causes of rape as human beings part of a human society made up of women and men, parents and children, families and communities.

Biology is Not Destiny

In fact, it was this issue, the question of feminist separatism, which caused the most debate, disillusionment and hard feelings in our immediate community after it became clear that men were unwanted as full-participants in the march. Many women, who were against excluding their husbands, brothers and friends from helping to organize or to attend the action began to feel ostracized and pressured into giving in to the demands of the militant separatists, or dropping out of the planning altogether. It seems that for many of the organizers, the slogan of sisterhood applied only to those women who bought their ideology that men, by way of a definition of their biology akin to the concept of original sin, are the cause of rape, and hence the enemy.

On the other hand, the organizers refused to exclude “sisters” who happened to be bosses and bureaucrats, or even cops, inviting all women regardless of class or social position.

The male exclusion issue was a particularly thorny one. From the constant insistence that the march was to be a “women only” event (men were told they could show their support by driving women to the park, baby-sitting, or standing on the sidelines quietly) to the absolute denial of their existence at the rally, support from men was ignored and they were discouraged from playing any role other than that of a passive clique of cheerleaders. In fact, the only acknowledgement of the men’s presence was when they were told not to stand any closer than thirty feet in front of the stage and that they weren’t allowed to walk in front of the march.

Granted, there were some genuine, good feelings shared that evening. A lot of enthusiasm and emotion was displayed. Women were angry and horrified as the speakers talked of rape statistics and incest and wife-beating; they hugged one another joyously in celebration of “their evening in the park” where for once they could gather without fear. Some women even cried thankful tears for the organizers of this event who “made this evening possible” for them. There was a lot of talk about the “sisters getting it together” and the “power of women uniting” and a lot of cheering and hugging and self-congratulating.

During the rally an expanded edition of the original brochure was distributed which allegedly contained the philosophy behind the movement for women to “take back the night.” In it were statements such as how the women who organized this rally “want to change attitudes and conditions of life and work that keep all people feeling powerless, causing women to feel inferior and men to lash out in anger and violence...we want a non-authoritarian society based on respect for each person regardless of age, race, sex or sexual preference.” However, directly across from this statement was an announcement for a celebration dance following the march for “women only” (the party, another dismal failure only drew about 35 women).

Recognition of rape as a manifestation of this oppressive society which warps all human potential, and the need for total change and the development of new social relationships were a constant theme in the pamphlet but none of this was ever expressed from the podium by the speakers. The issue of rape fear which affects both men and women, in a society populated by both men and women, is apparently not to be tackled as a human problem born out of oppression, rage and frustration.

It is instead to be the rallying cry for a feminist movement which hopes to increase its ranks by giving women the illusion of potential power through such spectacles as a “Take Back the Night” march. Somehow the ideas in the pamphlet expressing the need for a non-authoritarian society based on respect for all persons got lost in the feminist locker room while changing into karate uniforms.

Perhaps the real crux of it all lies in the observation of one woman who declined to attend either the rally or march due to its exclusionary nature who said, “This isn’t a march about rape, but about feminism.” Feminism is simply a variant of leftism, which acts as a mediation between the real issues and those who are affected. Just as

leftists organize marches about jobs, or police brutality but whose real intent is to recruit people to their party, the Take Back the Night march was a feminist event whose content happened to be the crucial issue of rape. One of the march organizers even suggested as the next event, a woman's fair be held—the content becomes insignificant with militancy the only criterion.

Had there been a real desire to organize a genuine protest against rape terror it would have been one which would have invited and in fact demanded that all members of the community attend and show their opposition to violence against women. Instead, all men were excluded and any women who objected to its exclusionary nature were shunned, until a small group of the faithful assembled to speak for all men and women about an issue that is of grave importance to all of us.

Feminism says “women’s” issues take precedence over all else in your life; it separates humanity into further fragments, driven by the illusion that power and control stems from sexual unity. Though claiming to be the salvation of women, feminism’s most visible accomplishment in the past 20 years has been to provide more female lawyers, therapists, bank presidents, judges, advertising executives and other personnel, all taken from a movement which, at its inception challenged some of the fundamental beliefs of this society. Now, feminist writers such as Robin Morgan extol the virtues of having women as governors and as priests and police so that this society continue with business as usual—and nothing changes.

Separatism is only the most exotic, incoherent variant of feminism. A concept of “sisterhood” which does not provide an analysis of the movement of capital to maintain its domination over every layer of society and its penetration into every sphere of life, is first of all dangerous because it creates the false illusion that female managers and police can change the conditions of this society rather than simply camouflaging its fundamental destruction of humanity by use of a few changes in personnel. Secondly, it is dangerous, because as the events of May 3 proved, it undermines the potential for a large, community-based activity against the atmosphere of rape and violence against women. It should be clear by now that the separatism played a significant role in severely limiting the attendance of not only men, but of women as well, at the march.

By singling out men as the enemies of women, and implying that all men are potential rapists, and that all men must “share in the guilt” of those who do rape, feminists mystify not only the causes of rape, but make the realization of a solution that much more difficult. Oddly enough, they invert the slogan of the early feminist movement, turning biology into destiny, robbing women and men of that humanity which we all share.

Rather than staging a feminist media spectacle where a handful of militants bring together scattered fragments around an issue, assemble for a rally filled with blustery speeches and a quick march before being sent home again to resume one’s isolation, a different approach should have been taken. What we saw in Palmer Park was solely of benefit to those in an isolated and declining movement, with not one concrete activity to prevent rape or protect women coming out of it. A community must protect its members against predators and that can only be done by the community as a whole, creating real alternatives to the rule of violence and real forms of self-activity which lay the basis for women, men and their children to live without fear for their safety or that of their loved ones.

“Now woman is confronted with the necessity of emancipating herself from emancipation, if she really desires to be free.”

—Emma Goldman, *The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation*.

FOOTNOTE:

* Using New Age lingo, the organizers of Women Take Back the Night called these uniformed guards (they all wore bright orange vests to distinguish themselves from the regular participants) “monitors” in an attempt to soften their role to both themselves and the marchers. The “monitors” weren’t there to protect the marchers from outside provocateurs (that was the function of the police—“we’ll be well protected”), but to protect the spectacle from the marchers themselves! Their role was to make sure no one marred the event by doing something that wasn’t already determined by the organizers. Their role was to stop anyone—men, for example—from breaking ranks and (dare we think of it) mingling

with the women in the front of the line. Early in the march one male participant happened to wander towards the front ranks and was quickly told to step to the back of the line (read: bus), although some of this segregation fell apart towards the finale.

The irony of all this is that many of the same women who helped organize the demo and recruit other women into the internal security forces were the same people who only one year ago were telling the passive/aggressive “monitors” at an anti-nuke rally to “fuck-off” and chided the participants in the anti-nuke march for succumbing to the authority of the anti-nuke organizers!



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