

FEMINIST CATCH-AS-CATCH-CAN¹

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Synopsis—Looking back at her own involvement as a 'right on' lesbian feminist activist in the German women's movement Monika Jaeckel now feels that too much valuable energy is spent in struggles between sisters. She proposes to focus on the dialogue among as many different women as possible, validate different personal and professional choices and perspectives and to do this by openly confronting our contradictions. Accepting, if necessary by struggle, differences among women will result in mutual protection—instead of 'trashing'—and in more space for feminists. Such a strategy includes not blaming and guilt tripping each other for our (relative) privileges but rather devising new ways how to share and distribute available resources, and thus turn our diversity into our strength.

Quarrels between women are hard to write about. How do you get down to the nitty gritty, the petty particulars, the mean and juicy details? These quarrels are so personal—and yet we've all experienced them, we all carry keen-edged memories of conflicts, fights, ruptures with 'best girlfriends', room-mates, ex-lovers, sisters in political combat, mothers, mothers-in-law, daughters etc. The closer the relationship, very often the more disastrous and bitter the break-up. What's going on in our sisterly combats? Why do we turn our backs so often on women we once trusted? Why do we so often let years of silence slip between us? First of all, of course, because fights between women hurt so very much. But it's also because we haven't yet cultivated and encouraged enough female bonding based on diversity, built on openly acknowledged and appreciated differences of interest, life decisions, cultural or racial backgrounds and 'positions' in the world.

I want to begin this article with a brief outline of some crucial points in my personal 'herstory', just to give a picture of where I come from; then I want to look at some of the mechanisms I think are at work in our schisms and separations,

I'm not going to give you the 'juicy details'. I'm not able to. Maybe when we've moved further towards building a constructive culture for dealing

with our conflicts in the women's community it will be easier to go public with the wounds and scars of being 'women identified' and relating primarily to women.

In Germany, very many people are moving out of institutions and 'settled' living situations. This is true as much for feminists as for people from the various different alternative movements. This tendency has already been labelled: the people in question are called 'Aussteiger', that is, those who bail out of mainstream society.

I would describe my recent development as the reverse: bailing out of the alternative scene and entering the institutions. After 8 years of 'living in the movement' I made a conscious decision to give the professional world a go: I took on a job as a sociologist in a research institute.

I studied sociology in Frankfurt during the peak time of student revolt. I was among the first women who were involved in the creation of a new women's movement in Germany. I fell in love with a woman during the first international feminist camp in Femø, Denmark, and became a movement lesbian. I participated in many feminist projects and publications, helped build up the first feminist publishing house, the *Frauenoffensive*, I sang in the notorious women's rock band *Flying Lesbians*. In short, I was what you might rightly label an 'old activist', but certain small developments gradually moved me out of the 'scene'. The autonomous women's movement became too narrow for me, too confined, too dogmatic, I didn't like the feeling of being in a ghetto.

I spent my university years in Frankfurt, seven, exciting, moving years full of political action. I changed towns. I had to leave. I needed room for

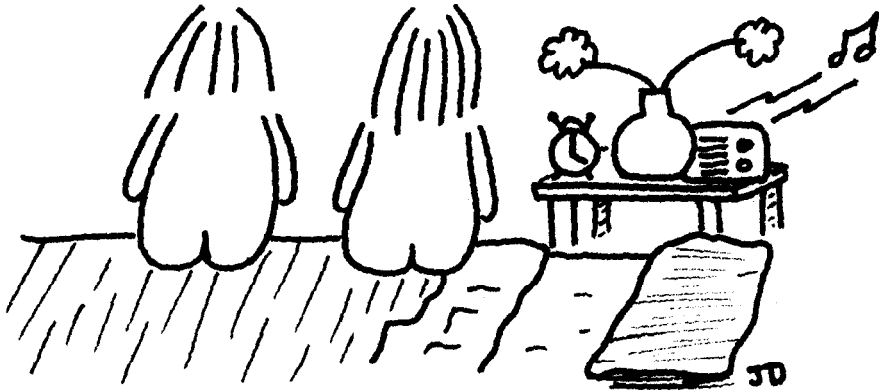
¹ This article is based on a discussion between a group of German women who managed to sustain their friendship despite (or rather because) of their differences, printed in a book called *Schwesternstreit. Über die heimlichen und unheimlichen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Frauen*, 1983: (Struggles between sisters: On secret and sinister conflicts among women.)

personal development and I couldn't find it in a town where I had acquired an 'image'. I had gone through most stages of my political/personal student life publicly, well known in the closely knit scene of the feminist/leftist community. It was like shadow-boxing. Every step I wanted to take I had to first confront the ideas in other people's minds of what I was standing for.

I began to feel very strange as a member of a women's movement that most women felt alienated by. The majority of women certainly didn't feel represented by us. I was curious to find out if a dialogue was possible, if there was some accessible ground of mutual understanding. This positive motivation to move out of the ghetto and into 'mainstream reality' was of course accompanied by a retreat from the women's community for rather more negative reasons: a growing vulnerability towards feminist trashing which I could not deal with.

the wrong side, the fear of diversity, the amount of energy going into pressing life into straight lines; into right-wrong categories. At one time, the fear was of being called a 'revisionist', now it's shameful to be called 'established' or a 'heterosexual collaborator' or whatever the new slogans we come up with to build our fences and clear cut borders are.

The slogans are changeable, the function remains—nobody wants to be associated with the 'wrong' side. The feeling of belonging, of being strong in a group that fits within the narrow borders of a common ideology can be comfortable and we all need that feeling, sometime or other. I've certainly needed close(d in) groups and dogmatic principles in my development and have been involved in building them, because it is exhausting to deviate all the time from the rest of society and you want to have a place in which to feel really right. But alas—the ghetto doesn't carry you very far—it soon begins to become suffocating.



♫ "If I were a housewife,
And you were a right-on lesbian,
Would you love me anyway,
Would you share my ba-a-by..." ♪

I have always been a controversial person. I enjoy aiming right into the middle of touchy topics, but in the women's movement the rejection and discrimination I received as a result began to catch up with me. It started to hurt, when we (that is, myself and others like me) were denounced in the feminist press as 'new femininity ideologists' or even as fascists because of the mothers' centres we were involved in.

I was struck by two major aspects of these feminist trashing campaigns. First of all by the enormous tabooing of thoughts and ideas: thinking past feminist standards and boundaries was forbidden! And second by the culture of fear connected with taboos. The tremendous fear of belonging to

That was the painful experience and realisation: the insider scene, the community, often doesn't really offer support. Nobody stands up and says: 'Hey, stop, we're not going to label each other fascist'—or other such similar terms. Real support can only begin when minority opinions are supported; and the protection of minorities is not a very developed mode in leftist and feminist communities in Germany. I recall many painful events. For example, I made an LP called 'Witch is Witch',² containing very personal, somewhat sad

² *Witch is Witch*, Frauenbuchvertrieb, Mehringdamm 32-34; 7000 Berlin 67, Federal Republic of Germany.

songs. Too sentimental to be considered trendy and 'Right On' the LP was strongly attacked on the women's scene. I had previously participated in the radical lesbian power trip: 'If you see us coming, better step aside, unless you're lesbian, what about you? . . .' but the songs of *Witch is Witch* talked about the non-glamorous sides of lesbian relationships, questioning some feminist 'truths' etc. In general it was felt the LP lacked 'power'. Positive feedback came from women outside or on the fringes of the movement and it was as a result of this feedback that I got to know a group of very fascinating strong women, living their individual compromises and contradictions with refreshing honesty and humour. I enjoyed the fresh wind, outside of the scene.

For me the dialogue with mothers, who are not very integrated into the women's movement, was important. To draw on a rather classical emancipation concept: for me, finding a female identity, had a lot to do with relating to the 'mother question'. When I was a young girl I didn't want to be the 'dumb housewife' I considered my mother to be. I wanted to have public recognition and influence like my father. He was a pastor. I thought it thrilling when he preached on Sundays and the whole room listened to what he had to say. I wanted that kind of power. So I went into an intellectual career and learned to speak as fast and as loud as men. I secularized the topics a bit, but actually, making speeches or interventions at teach-ins wasn't so very different from my father's sermons. I made a career on the left, putting in a lot of energy until I had 'made it'—that is, was recognised as just-as-good-as-a-man in their world. Only then did I ask: is that all there is? Actually, I found the male world quite pitiable and started my search for my female soul, a female identity beyond equality and male identification.

My search began in love relationships with women, in a dialogue with my own mother, whom I soon started seeing in a very different light, and in deep friendships with other women. I became aware that most of my close friends are mothers. Apparently there is something there. We started a mothers' project in our institute; together with other women I developed and helped build up three mothers' centres.

In my relationship with my female colleagues I experienced the deep conflicts and divisions that the job world creates between women. The job world abstracts totally from reproductive life, so that the differences that we have on that level become divisive elements in the working relationships between women. Whether you have children or not, whether you bring up your children alone or not, whether you have a partnership relationship or not, whether you live alone or together with others, whether you have dependents to care for or not—

all these differences in life styles become built in cornerstones of the competition involved in the work world, which is based on the assumption that work performance be continual and independent of emotional and existential states of being.

That is the crucial suicidal competition career women face with men—who invariably have a wife at home to take care of the 'other' side of their lives. But it is also the point of divisions between women in the job world, and the deep scars these divisions produce, of painful experiences of competition, envy, distrust and disloyalty. But we cannot avoid this competition just as we cannot avoid other differences between us—whether they come from ethnic or class identity/background, or simply from differences in self confidence and sense of worth—so we might as well deal with them in the open. Give each other room to live with differences without turning bitter, vicious or self destructive.

I'd like to sum up some of the ideas involved in such a process.

(1) It makes us all stronger, if we confront our contradictions—because they are part of the patriarchal scheme we've been born into. And we're not going to get rid of them simply by goodwill or raised consciousness. Solidarity and conspiracy between women are just as much an ever present reality as treason and betrayal, and we have to learn to deal with both without disappointment or cynicism, that is, without losing faith in female bonding and losing the energy and our potential.

It is a shaky point of departure to assume that feminist struggle requires a total break from patriarchal adaptation, and that only those women who have resolved the disentanglement on all levels have the right to be 'feminist'. (And then to go about testing each other to find out if we've been radical enough in our detachments.) We're not going to become very numerous unless we develop feminist strategies and tactics that acknowledge, and are based on, the fragile and ruptured balance of women's ambiguous identities in the patriarchal world in which we live. The concept of radical purity in our feminist struggles forces us to put too much energy into hiding and suppressing all the crazy and fascinating parts of us that don't fit.

(2) The second-class status of women in society infuses women with insecurity and a lack of self-esteem—both of which are often responsible for triggering off destructive and self-destructive mechanisms—the notorious self-hatred of women. The 'choice' we have can only be between inadequate alternatives as long as reproductive tasks remain unpaid and devalued. In our society life styles and options which belong together are split up and offered as alternatives so that each side is wanting: security and a sense of responsibility is divided from sensuality and passion; the body is parted from the mind, work is disconnected from

living, eros is dissociated from your own sex, survival from dignity and so on, so that every life style you decide on stays deficient. This results in the lovely 'choice' between being: housewife or social worker; wife and mother or mistress—or professional mistress: prostitute—; beautiful or intellectual; sexually exploited or devoid of a sexual identity; a career woman or economically dependent or poor; an emancipated 'superwoman', magically connecting career, children and an equal relationship or an ordinary over-burdened woman failing to perform successfully on at least one of the three levels. . . . Each one of us has a keen awareness of the trap into which we might fall and that's what accounts for the defensiveness we often show toward other women.

(3) When we learn to protect each other in our contradictions and compromises instead of attacking and tracking each other down on them, we'll begin to have more space. That's what I think it is all about: giving each other space for development that often takes rather crooked paths. I'm not talking about the sweet soft sisterliness of 'anything goes' that avoids confrontation and struggle. We have to come close enough to each other to feel the edges and schisms. But I don't believe in the politics of purism, of radicalism any more. I'm more interested in a politics of curiosity, that not only tolerates but encourages contradictions and diversity.

Different issues and different demands have differing importance for different women, according to their existential situations. We all have different priorities concerning where we want to put our political energy and creativity. Instead of fighting each other over whatever we consider the most important issue, it could be more rewarding to develop a general framework to include all the different aspects of feminist struggle, as opposed to a hierarchy of important and more important issues, or radical and more radical strategies. Concentration on any *one* of the feminist issues is not going to result in the overthrow of patriarchy by itself. The contradictory patriarchal ambiguity of our lives is reflected just as much in feminist politics. The choice between wrong alternatives is carved too deeply into the structure of society to be overcome in one single—really radical—issue. I believe in feminist variety. For instance, personally, I'm not convinced of the efficacy of the efforts now taking place in Germany to build up a feminist parliamentary party, but I give these efforts any support I can in order to ensure they really have a chance of being tried out—to see how far they get. We can continue discussion from there. And I might even enjoy hearing feminist speeches in parliament. So much energy is wasted on internal disputes, on attempts to prevent some initiative, because it's not radical enough, instead of letting each other try out different strategies. The situation of women is

complex, there is no one true path. I think, to give another instance, that we should demand both wages for housework and qualified job opportunities for women. If we started getting used to demanding more in one breath we might advance further than is possible when we are divided from one another—our demands competing against each other for the prize of being the most legitimate alternative.

(4) Another trap we often fall into is blaming each other for our privileges. Instead of guilt-tripping each other for whatever piece of the cake we've managed to cut off, we should pitch together and make use of the freedom of space we derive from our different resources. Instead of always being so envious and purist about women who have access to patriarchal money, or status or protection of some sort, we could spread these privileges around and enjoy them together. Everybody pays a price so we don't have to make a priority list of whose suffering is more radical, trashing each other for the little compensations we take in return.

We could be a lot more shrewd at finding ways to share the fruits of our compromises, and ensuring that we profit from them inside a women's community. And many more women would be willing to share if they weren't so put down for their privileges, whatever they are.

We all strive for some kind of balance where we can keep our energy level generous and our souls growing. It's not necessarily the superwoman concept, taking all of society's contradictions on your own shoulders—and hating all women who don't—that makes for the most constructive and powerful contributions to a feminist evolution. And anyway, who throws the first stone . . . ? I've seen lots of lesbians, for instance, who refuse any personal compromise with a male on an intimate basis, but adjust themselves to the male job world, in order to sustain a living. I've seen 'kept women', financially dependent, use their resources for other women. I've seen women who flip out as a result of trying to break out of too many conventional patterns at once, being taken care of by women who had stayed more integrated in conventional society.

We bring different contributions to the women's community, depending on the risks we're willing, and also able, to take. And each woman needs her own space and her own rhythm in this process—and the respect and love of other women for her specific balance, for both the gifts and the limits she brings. Diversity is our strength.

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