

"CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING EXPOSES THE ORWELLIAN LIES OF SEXIST AMERIKA"

B4 Steve GANN

consciousness raising

Throughout the world gay people are gathering in consciousness raising groups. Some groups have been very helpful to the participants while others have ended with little satisfaction. Many CR groups are attended only sporadically and have a high turnover rate. The purpose of this article is to introduce the uninformed to the phenomenon of consciousness raising and also, perhaps, to assist some consciousness raising groups already formed.

Presently in the gay liberation movement CR is the vital process by which gay people develop an awareness of gay oppression. Up to now it has been the only really effective way in which gay people become aware of the self-hatred imposed on them by the sexist straights. Despite claims to the contrary, it is not possible for gay people to fight gay oppression without first establishing a gay consciousness. Gay organizations with a low consciousness wind up supporting causes which are covertly, if not overtly, oppressive to gay people. They end up reinforcing the oppression foisted on them by straight society. Thus a gay supporting security clearances for homosexuals is the same as a black supporting integration to the Ku Klux Klan.

Yet there were many blacks who supported causes equivalent to integrating the Klan. They believed what white society wanted them to believe, that racism was an abnormal aberration, some wart that could be surgically removed with the skillful incision of the white liberal scalpel. But oppression is a good teacher. It didn't take blacks long to realize that racism is not some isolated compartment in American society. Social phenomena of this sort are never isolated. Rather, racism permeates the thoughts and actions of American society; it permeates the very minds of blacks themselves. Blacks began to see that much of their actions were motivated by the self hatred imposed on them by racist America. They went through centuries of indoctrination that white was good and that black was inferior. To achieve black liberation blacks had to first develop a black consciousness; they had to establish their own identity as blacks free from white influence. Only then would they be able to truly recognize their oppression.

Gay people must travel the same route. To fight gay oppression they must cope with that oppression within themselves. Sexism with its perverted concept of maleness is the norm in American society. It is accepted to some degree by everyone even women and gay people, the chief victims of sexism. Those who do not play this perverted game are made to feel inferior, inadequate, mentally ill. This tactic is used by the sexists to perpetrate their super human facade, the facade which masks the impotence and sterility of straight sexuality. The sexists are not satisfied with the mere degradation of gays; they bring gays into mental rehabilitation clinics. There gays are confronted by sexist indoctrination, and they are told that the root of all their difficulties lies within themselves; they are confronted with the ultimate solution - reorienting their life styles to adopt the sexist oppression of the majority.

Consciousness raising exposes the Orwellian lies of sexist America. By sharing together their common experiences, gays begin to see the patterns of oppression foisted on them by the straight world. Recognizing their oppression they can begin to devise methods to deal with it. Dealing with their personal hang-ups they develop a capacity to love which is unattainable in present straight society.

The products of consciousness raising are easy to enumerate but difficult to achieve. The shackles of sexism have been with us thousands of years. To free ourselves requires a thorough and diligent examination of our life styles. But, when we look at the alternatives - blindly striding out at an elusive enemy or going to sexists for assistance - we can recognize the correctness of our course. And, when we consider the benefits, we can eagerly anticipate the real love that arrives with our new gay consciousness.

A consciousness raising group is a group of gay people who have regular sessions together. By consensus a topic is selected for each session. Each member of the group contributes her personal experience relating to the chosen topic. When all of the testimony has been heard, the group looks into the similarity in the experiences related by all of the members. The fact that a similarity exists could, of course, be a coincidence, but the chances of this are very remote. What the similarity demonstrates is the interaction of society on each individual of the group. From this similarity gays can readily recognize how sexism influences the behavior of gay people. A gay person begins to see that his personal hang-ups, those that he was afraid to divulge to others, are indeed the same hang-ups that other gays were also afraid to divulge. It becomes increasingly difficult to explain this commonness without considering each person's interactions with sexist society.

Thus consciousness raising sessions become political sessions. But, they are not ordinary politics which is a sexist power trip. Rather they are the beginnings of a new gay politics, a politics based on love and not domination.

An ideal size for a CR group is six to eight gays although variations can be tried. Too many people means considerable testimony which is time consuming. By the time all of the testimony is heard, members are more interested in getting home than in looking into the similarities in the testimony. Too few members supply insufficient material on which to base political conclusions.

The group should be limited at least initially to individuals interested in developing a gay consciousness. Needless to say, straights and "bisexuals" should never be admitted into a gay consciousness raising group; otherwise, the whole procedure is a sham. Ask women why the mere presence of men is a hindrance to the development of a woman's consciousness. Or, as I have previously stated, look into the black liberation movement. Gays demonstrating "objectivity" toward straights are only showing how deep in the closet they really are.

A CR group is not a so called "encounter group". This latter group is sexist as is implied by the word "encounter". Attacking and exposing people is a frequent mechanism used by sexists to conceal their own inadequacies. It is of dubious help to the person being attacked. Worst yet, it reinforces the sexism of the attacker. If the group is male, the sexism of the person attacked is rekindled so that he in turn counter attacks; this result of male conditioning is unavoidable. It has its most virulent form in the supposed docile males of the group. Situations of this sort should not be allowed to develop.

This is not to say that constructive statements should not be made when appropriate. Many members of CR groups tend to intellectualize the topic being discussed. They go into abstractions in an attempt to divert attention from themselves. Intellectualization should be corrected when it occurs. The group should insist that each person's testimony be limited to her own personal experience. If necessary, the group can set a rule that each member speak completely in the first person avoiding second and third personal pronouns unless they directly relate to the first person.

In this same vein there are people who ramble on and on relating what is commonly termed "bull shit". The other members of the group should correct the bull shitter and at the same time prevent the session from becoming a total bore. On the other hand, a person's individual experience is never questioned. Each person is the expert of her own experience and should be given ample time to state it in the way he deems appropriate.

One good way to gauge the effectiveness of a CR group is by observing the subjective consciousness level of each of its members. Gays of the highest consciousness are those who recognize how low their consciousness really is. And, at the stage we are in the movement, our consciousness is necessarily low. In

fact one of the main objectives of CR is to permit us to realize how low it really is. Members with the liberated aplomb are generally the members with the lowest consciousness. Some demonstrate this aplomb in ways that can be very destructive to the group. They try to induce others to relate experiences to which they show strong resistance. They propose bold experiments in a group which is relatively new. They privately deride other members of the group.

If the atmosphere of the group is truly liberated, individual reticence will be overcome. Forcing people to relate can be a good way of precluding their reappearance.

There are always members of a group who have reservations about bold experimentation. Many times the sexist atmosphere of the group prevents them from exposing what they regard as their own inadequacies. Anyone proposing such experiments should check his own motives. Is he doing it because he believes the group will benefit, or is it just one of his power trips?

Criticism should always be open - never in private. If the criticisms are valid they can face the confrontation of the entire group. The motives of the critic can be examined as well as the validity of his criticism.

Members of a group should not try to impose a specific life style on anyone including themselves. The old saying "practice what you preach" has no place in a CR group. We are not at this point in a position to follow this maxim. Our present actions develop from our past consciousness. Our consciousness is necessarily ahead of our actions. An interesting story can clarify this concept. Two members of a gay liberation group, unmentionable of course, presented themselves as shing examples of liberated men. They strongly criticized the objectifying of people. Future events disclosed an amusing encounter between them. It seems they recognized each other in the dark back room of a well known bar. Signs of recognition began to develop when they were mutually engaged in the same activity.

With few exceptions, every member of the group should be present at each session. The membership should be adjusted to include only those members who attend regularly. It is easy to find excuses not to attend. There are plenty of events in our environment to attract us elsewhere - tickets to a sports event, a political meeting, an alternative rendezvous. Persons who stray from the session are demonstrating the relative importance they have to consciousness raising. Other members of the group should criticize this lacy and expose any hidden reasons for poor attendance. Some members, for example, express a dislike for another member of the group and use this dislike as an excuse for poor attendance. This particular excuse is not a reason for low consciousness; it is an example of low consciousness.

Consciousness raising groups unlike visits to a psychiatrist are very unprofessional; this is one reason they have been so successful. Therapists create a wall between themselves and their patient. This makes them appear super human. Actually, this screen of formality serves only to hide the therapists' hang-ups from the patient. Many therapists are persons whose feelings of inadequacy is so great that it requires the constant reminder of the hang-ups of their patients. We, gay people, are too sensual to be super human. We learn through CR to relate to people as humans not as characters in straight fairy tales. CR groups can do many things together. They can go on trips, eat together, work together, sleep together. In the absence of sexism these things tend to bring the group together. For men it is a new experience; they learn to be close together without becoming aggressive; they develop a sensuality among themselves without staging a performance. For a male this is indeed an accomplishment. For a woman, the satisfaction of doing things with other women independent of sexist males is a new experience - an experience which most males fail to comprehend.

Gay people searching for a nice place to meet often search in vain. Too often, we end up in bars, cruising spots, or being disgusted with these places, not going out at all. Gay liberation groups from their inception have recognized the need to provide an alternative to the places gay people have been frequenting for god knows how long. The individuals who have worked to fulfill this need, have found it an exercise in futility.

We have built centers, rented churches, and started groups in an effort to get rid of the ugly, oppressive ways we meet one another. Our genuine ambition, somehow led us astray and we have failed. The trouble with the centers is that they are centers, huge places swarming with strangers similar to shopping centers where you get lost in the aisles. A lot of people just do not feel at ease within ten blocks of any kind of church. Groups are good and necessary in any organization. Some of us are not talented, others have to work for a living and do not have the leisure required for group participation. Our mistake in a hasty getaway to find any place at all to meet, has been to ignore making our centers where people can come and go and not feel guilty about either; a sort of ready made oasis where people feel at ease with themselves and one another; a relaxed atmosphere where people can get away from political arguments, groups dynamics and mutual analysis.

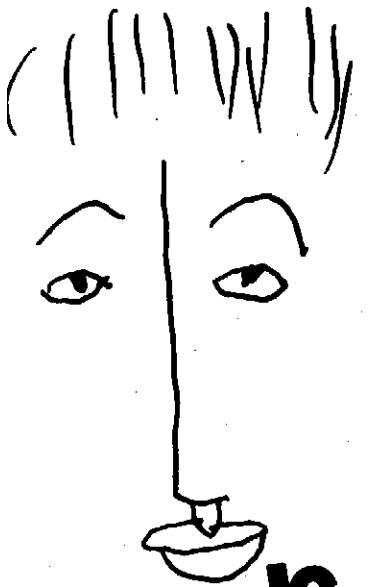
One Sunday not long ago, I ventured into the wilds of Manhattan's upper west side and discovered the People's Coffee Grounds. Located at 82nd Street just off Broadway. Occupying what was once a basement apartment, you would very likely pass it by walking down the street. Down the rickety steps behind the creaking door, I was in. "Welcome to the Grounds." I poured some coffee and sat down at a big table in the center of the room. Off to the right are smaller tables; two fellows were playing chess while three others talked along side them. A record player, decks of cards, scrabble and monopoly were on shelves to the left. A hallway leads to the other room furnished with a couch, telephone, a rack of books and newspapers.

Talking with a member of the collective responsible for opening and closing, I learned the grounds had opened last August.

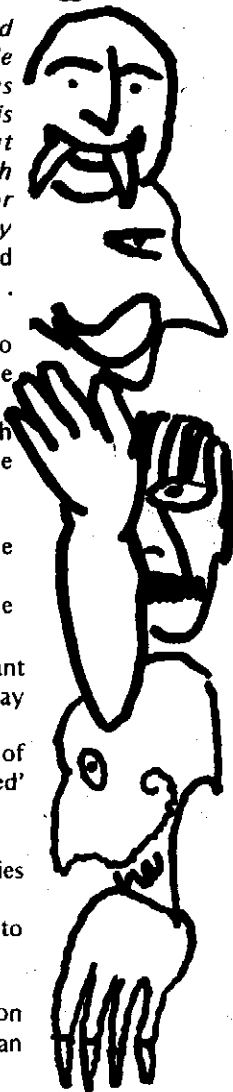
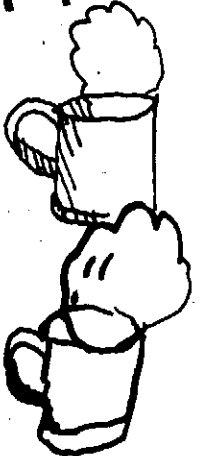
The Coffee Grounds is at 210 West 82nd. It is open specially for Gay people on Sunday nights from 6-1:00 AM.



"Right now we pay half the eighty dollars rent. We are non-profit and use the donations we receive to pay our half. We are open Saturday from six until twelve and Sunday from four until one." Somebody got up and asked if I wanted more coffee. Yes, I said and thanked him. Impressed with the grounds I inquired of my friend why more such places did not exist. "I don't really know; I guess others just haven't thought of it. We work awfully hard to keep this place open. One of us always has to be here. We alternate; and if I want to set out for a bite to eat, someone takes over- so it's not as bad as I seem to make it." I told him I thought it was important to keep the place open, and he agreed. People were coming and going. I found the experience unique. Never had I been at a place where gays were talking so easily about books, television, or anything they wanted- no pressures or hassles or arguments, just nice people having a nice time in a nice place.



People's Coffee Grounds



Teal also quotes Martha Shelley for effect, here and there. He fails to mention, however, one of her most radical articles SUBVERSION IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, which is about how different groups are trying to infiltrate the women's movements. Perhaps, because it was a radical article by a woman, Teal felt intimidated or inferior and left it out. Much to Come Out's dismay.

I'm sure that the men in GAA will adore THE GAY MILITANTS. The last couple of boring chapters are almost exclusively about GAA, of which Teal is a member. Also, people who are chronological trivia lovers will love this book. The chronological order of events and actions named are indelibly precise-not to mention irrelevant. When actions take place is important to remember, but what is irrelevant is who came into what GLF meeting first and with whom. And so on and so on.

And here is the last great unsales pitch. If you insist on reading THE GAY MILITANTS and your name is mentioned in the book or you are quoted anywhere, write to Stein and Day and demand your free copy. If you don't want the book simply for ego's sake and want to read it, please don't support someone who's just ripped off the Gay Movement. Don't buy it. Steal it.

By Debra Moldovan



MALE HOMOSEXUALS AS BOGEYMEN

"The most bigoted outsider has always found lesbianism vaguely glamorous if a bit naughty, while much of our stolidest intelligentsia still derides faggotry. Lesbianism is perverse, while faggotry is perverted; lesbianism serves as an appetizer at suburban orgies, while faggotry would be beneath contempt at those same orgies; lesbianism is exotic or at worst, good for a laugh, while faggotry is viciously punishable, or, at best, good for a laugh." - Ned Rorem in a letter to the Village Voice, May 20, 1971.

Therefore.....
Gay male composers who go off to France to compose and write terribly narcissistic journals are perverse (exotic, even!)

but Gay male teachers who stay home to teach about Gay male composers who go off to France are perverted!

Gay male ballet dancers who come from Russia are perverse (and exotic!) but.....

Gay male gym teachers at the YMCA are perverted!

Gay male poets who have been to India and chant mantras all of the time and never speak up about Gay Liberation are perverse (and so exotic!) but.....

Gay male poets who write poems that are proud of being Gay and who don't want to be just 'accepted' by straight people are (you guessed it) perverted.

Handsome Gay actors who star in Warhol movies and come Newark are (exotic?) perverse.....

but everybody who stayed behind in Newark to fight for their own liberation is PER-VER-TED!

And finally all homosexual males who rely upon straight society for their own identification as human beings are not GAY and are most perverted!

The most note worthy thing about.....

All they did was to aid Teal with his token Lesbian representations. They should have demanded total say over anything that was to go in about Lesbians and better still they should have demanded half the space in the book.

There are a few spaces outside of the women's chapter where lesbians are fleetingly mentioned. One of them is about the part that New York Radical Lesbians had at the Panther Convention in Philadelphia last fall. They (I should say we) were quoted loosely from an important paper we wrote concerning our feelings and experiences at the convention. Teal has extremely under rated our importance there. He seems to understand that we were angry at something, but he wasn't sure what at.

Another big deficiency in the book which makes it invalid as a true representation of the gay movement, is the bare mention of the Third World Gay Revolution. Teal gives less space to TWGR than he does to the Lesbians. TWGR got about 2 1/2 pgs. altogether. Because of the tragic lack of information on the Lesbian and Third World movements in THE GAY MILITANTS this book in no way is a valid representation of the Gay Movement. It's tragic because closet cases and straights who read this book are going to accept it, verbatim. The biography on the jacket of the book calls Teal "gay and proud". It's more like male chauvenist and racist!

Teal's book, THE GAY MILITANTS, is what he doesn't write about. Mainly, women. At first I thought that I should be glad that a nice, liberal book (meaning one that would impress the straights) had come out about the Gay Movement. But after reading the first few chapters I realized that the Gay Movement that Teal was writing about had little to do with Lesbians, except in a few token cases.

Women in the straight world exist between the sheets and among the posts and pans. Women (lesbians) in Teal's world exist in chapter nine. That's what we got, one lousy chapter. In the words of the author when confronted with this, BEFORE the book was published, "but I gave them a whole chapter to themselves, what more do they want?"

Donn Teal tosses around and about names of women who are (or were) active in the Lesbian Movement (i.e. Martha Shelley, Lois Hart, etc.) This is one of his acts of pure tokenism and in most cases a total misrepresentation. As far as I have been able to find out, few, if any, of the lesbians mentioned in the book were ever interviewed by Teal.

The women's chapter was supposed to have been written by some women who are unnamed. Although I'm sure that the women who wrote did it with good intentions, I'm not so sure that they did the best possible thing, because