'The Tyranny of Structurelessness'

by Jo Freeman

The 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' of first published in 1970 to address the need for organisation in the US women's liberation movement as it sought to move from criticising society to changing society. As such the examples used are specific to that movement but anyone who has been involved in a 'Structureless' group will be able to draw parallels with their own experiences. Often the most frustrating thing about progressive struggles is that each generation must repeat the mistakes of the pervious struggles. Learning from the history of these struggles can save us having to make their mistakes ourselves. [AF, 2000]

See end for printing history and original introduction

Formal and Informal Structures

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a 'structureless' group. Any group of people of whatever nature coming together for any length of time, for any purpose, will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible, it may vary over time, it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities and intentions of the people involved. The very fact that we are individuals with different talents, predisposition's and backgrounds makes this inevitable. Only if we refused to relate or interact on any basis whatsoever could we approximate 'structurelessness' and that is not the nature of a human group.

This means that to strive for a 'structureless' group is as useful and as deceptive, as to aim at an 'objective' news story, 'value-free' social science or a 'free' economy. A 'laissez-faire' group is about as realistic as a 'laissez-faire' society; the idea becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones. Similarly, 'laissez-faire' philosophy did not prevent the economically powerful from establishing control over wages, prices and distribution of goods; it only pre-

vented the government from doing so. Thus 'structurelessness' becomes a way of masking power, and within the women's movement it is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not). The rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is curtailed by those who know the rules, as long as the structure of the group is informal. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.

For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can only happen if they are formalised. This is not to say that normalisation of a group structure will destroy the informal structure. It usually doesn't. But it does hinder the informal structure from having predominant control and makes available some means of attacking it. 'Structurelessness' is organisationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group; only whether or not to have a **formally** structured one. Therefore, the word will not be used any longer except to refer to the idea which it represents. **Unstructured** will refer to those groups which

have not been deliberately structured in a particular manner. **Structured** will refer to those which have. A structured group always has a **formal** structure, and may also have an informal one. An unstructured group always has an **informal**, or covert, structure. It is this informal structure, particularly in unstructured groups, which forms the basis for elites.

The Nature of Elitism

'Elitist' is probably the most abused word in the women's liberation movement. It is used as frequently, and for the same reasons, as 'pinko' was in the '50s. It is never used correctly. Within the movement it commonly refers to individuals though the personal characteristics and activities of those to whom it is directed may differ widely. An individual, as an individual, can never be an 'elite' because the only proper application of the term 'elite' is to groups. Any individual, regardless

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of how well-known that person is, can never be an elite.

Correctly, an elite refers to a small group of people who have power over a larger group of which they are part, usually without direct responsibility to that larger group, and often without their knowledge or consent. A person becomes an elitist by being part of, or advocating, the rule by such a small group, whether or not that individual is well-known or not known at all. Notoriety is not a definition of an elitist. The most insidious elites are usually run by people not known to the larger public at all. Intelligent elitists are usually smart enough not to allow themselves to become well- known. When they become known, they are watched, and the mask over their power is no longer firmly lodged.

Because elites are informal does not mean they are invisible. At any small group meeting anyone with a sharp eye and an acute ear can tell who is influencing whom. The member of a friendship group will relate more to each other than to other people. They listen more attentively and interrupt less. They repeat each other's points and give in amiably. The 'outs' they tend to ignore or grapple with. The 'outs' approval is not necessary for making a decision; however it is necessary for the 'outs' to stay on good terms with the 'ins'. Of course, the lines are not as sharp as I have drawn them. They are nuances of interaction, not pre-written scripts. But they are discernible, and they do have their effect. Once one knows with whom it is important to check before a decision is made, and whose approval is the stamp of acceptance, one knows who is running things.

Elites are not conspiracies. Seldom does a small group of people get together and try to take over a larger group for its own ends. Elites are nothing more and nothing less than a group of friends who also happen to participate in the same political activities. They would probably maintain their friendship whether or not they were involved in political activities; they would probably be involved in political activities whether or not they maintained their friendships. It is the coincidence of these two phenomena which creates elites in any groups and makes them so difficult to break.

These friendship groups function as networks of communication outside any regular channels for such communication that may have been set up by a group. If no channels are set up, they function as the only networks of com-

munication. Because people are friends, usually sharing the same values and orientations, because they talk to each other socially and consult with each other when common decisions have to be made, the people involved in these networks have more power in the group than those who don't. And it is a rare group that does not establish some informal networks of communication through the friends that are made in it.

Some groups, depending on their size, may have more than one such informal communication network. Networks may even overlap. When only one such network exists, it is the elite of an otherwise unstructured group, whether the participants in it want to be elitists or not. If it is the only such network in a structured group it may or may not be an elite depending on its composition and the nature of the

formal structure. If there are two or more such networks of friends, they may compete for power within the group thus forming factions, or one may deliberately opt out of the competition leaving the other as the elite. In a structured group, two or more such friendship networks usually compete with each other for formal power. This is often the healthiest situation. The other members are in a position to arbitrate between the two competitors for power and thus are able to make demands of the group to whom they give their temporary allegiance.

Since movement groups have made no concrete decisions about who shall exercise power within them, many different criteria are used around the country. As the movement has changed through time, marriage has

become a less universal criterion for effective participation, although all informal elites still establish standards by which only women who possess certain material or personal characteristics may join. The standards frequently include: middle-class background (despite all the rhetoric about relating to the working-class), being married, not being married but living with someone, being or pretending to be a lesbian, being between the age of 20 and 30, being college-educated or at least having some college background, being 'hip', not being too 'hip', holding a certain political line or identification as a 'radical', having certain 'feminine' personality characteristics such as being 'nice', dressing right (whether in the traditional style or the anti-traditional style), etc. There are also some characteristics which will almost always tag one as a 'deviant' who should not be related to. They include: being too old, working full-time (particularly if one is actively committed to a 'career'), not being 'nice', and being avowedly single (i.e. neither heterosexual nor homosexual).

Other criteria could be included, but they all have common themes. The characteristic prerequisite for participating in all the informal elites of the movement, and thus for exercising power, concern one's background, personality or allocation of time. They do not include one's competence, dedication to feminism, talents or potential contribution to the movement. The former are the criteria one usually uses in determining one's friends. The latter are what any movement or organisation has to use if it is going to be politically effective.

Although this dissection of the process of elite formation within small groups has been critical in its perspectives, it is not made in the belief that these informal structures are inevitably bad - merely that they are inevitable. All groups create informal structures as a result of the interaction patterns among the members. Such informal structures can do very useful things. But only unstructured groups are totally governed by them. When informal elites are combined with a myth of 'structurelessness', there can be no attempt to put limits on the use of power. It becomes capricious.

This has two potentially negative consequences of which we should be aware. The first is that the informal structure of decision-making will be like a sorority: one in which people listen to others because they like them, not because they say significant things. As long as the movement does

not do significant things this does not much matter. But if its development is not to be arrested at this preliminary stage, it will have to alter this trend. The second is that informal structures have no obligation to be responsible to the group at large. Their power was not given to them; it cannot be taken away. Their influence is not based on what they do for the group; therefore they cannot be directly influenced by the group. This does not necessarily make informal structures irresponsible. Those who are concerned with maintaining their influence will usually try to be responsible. The group simply cannot compel such responsibility; it is dependent on the interests of the elite.

The 'Star' System

The 'idea' of 'structurelessness' has created the 'star' system. We live in a society which expects political groups to make decisions and to select people to articulate those decisions to the public at large. The press and the public do not know how to listen seriously to individual women as women; they want to know how the group feels. Only three techniques have ever been developed for establishing mass group opinion: the vote or referendum, the public opinion survey questionnaire and the selection of group spokespeople at an appropriate meeting. The women's liberation movement has used none of these to communicate with the public. Neither the movement as a whole nor most of the multitudinous groups within it have established a means of explaining their position on various issues. But the public is conditioned to look for spokespeople.

While it has consciously not chosen spokespeople, the movement has thrown up many women who have caught the public eye for varying reasons. These women represent no particular group or established opinion; they know this and usually say so. But because there are no official spokespeople nor any decision-making body the press can interview when it wants to know the movement's position on a subject, these women are perceived as the spokespeople. Thus, whether they want to or not, whether the movement likes it or not, women of public note are put in the role of spokespeople by default.

This is one source of the tie that is often felt towards the women who are labelled 'stars'. Because they were not selected by the women in the movement to represent the movement's views, they are resented when the

press presumes they speak for the movement. Thus the backlash of the 'star' system, in effect, encourages the very kind of individual non responsibility that the movement condemns. By purging a sister as a 'star', the movement loses whatever control it may have had over the person, who becomes free to commit all of the individualistic sins of which she had been accused.

Political Impotence

Unstructured groups may be very effective in getting women to talk about their lives; they aren't very good for getting things done. Unless their mode of operation changes, groups flounder at the point where people tire of 'just talking' and want to do something more. Because the larger movement in most cities is as unstructured as individual rap groups, it is not much more effective than the separate groups at specific tasks. The informal structure is rarely together enough or in touch enough with the people to be able to operate effectively. So the movement generates much emotion and few results. Unfortunately, the consequences of all this motion are not as innocuous as the results, and their victim is the movement itself.

Some groups have turned themselves into local action projects, if they do not involve too many people, and work on a small scale. But this form restricts movement activity to the local level. Also, to function well the groups must usually pare themselves down to that informal group of friends who were running things in the first place. This excludes many women from participating. As long as the only way women can participate in the movement is through membership of a small group, the non-gregarious are at a distinct disadvantage. As long as friendship groups are the main means of organisational activity, elitism becomes institutionalised.

For those groups which cannot find a local project to devote themselves to, the mere act of staying together becomes the reason for their staying together. When a group has no specific task (and consciousness-raising is a task), the people in it turn their energies to controlling others in the group. This is not done so much out of a malicious desire to manipulate others (though sometimes it is) as out of lack of anything better to do with their talents. Able people with time on their hands and a need to justify their coming together put their efforts into personal control, and spend their time criticising the personalities of the

other members in the group. Infighting and personal power games rule the day. When a group is involved in a task, people learn to get along with others as they are and to subsume dislikes for the sake of the larger goals. There are limits placed on the compulsion to remould every person into our image of what they should be.

The end of consciousness-raising leaves people with no place to go and the lack of structure leaves them with no way of getting there. The women in the movement either turn in on themselves and their sisters or seek other alternatives of action. There are few alternatives available. Some women just 'do their own thing'. This can lead to a great deal of individual creativity, much of which is useful for the movement, but it is not a viable alternative for most women and certainly does not foster a spirit of co-operative group effort. Other women drift out of the movement entirely because they don't want to develop an individual project and have found no way of discovering, joining or starting group projects that interest them.

Many turn to other political organisations to give them the kind of structured, effective activity that they have not been able to find in the women's movement. Thus, those political organisations which view women's liberation as only one issue among many find the women's liberation movement a vast recruiting ground for new members. There is no need for such organisations to 'infiltrate' (though this is not precluded). The desire for meaningful political activity generated by women by becoming part of the women's liberation movement is sufficient to make them eager to join other organisations. The movement itself provides no outlets for their new ideas and energies.

Those women who join other political organisations while remaining within the women's liberation movement, or who join women's liberation while remaining in other political organisations, in turn become the framework for new informal structures. These friendship networks are based upon their common non-feminist politics rather than the characteristics discussed earlier; however, the network operates in much the same way. Because these women share common values, ideas and political orientations, they too become informal, unplanned, unselected, unresponsible elites - whether they intend to be so or not.

These new informal elites are often perceived as threats by the old informal elites previously developed within

different movement groups. This is a correct perception. Such politically orientated networks are rarely willing to be merely 'sororities' as many of the old ones were, and want to proselytise their political as well as their feminist ideas. This is only natural, but its implications for women's liberation have never been adequately discussed. The old elites are rarely willing to bring such differences of opinion out into the open because it would involve exposing the nature of the informal structure of the group. Many of these informal elites have been hiding under the banner of 'anti-elitism' and 'structurelessness'. To counter effectively the competition from another informal structure, they would have to become 'public' and this possibility is fraught with many dangerous implications. Thus, to maintain its own power, it is easier to rationalise the exclusion of the members of the other informal structure by such means as 'red-baiting', 'lesbian-baiting' or 'straight-baiting'. The only other alternative is formally to structure the group in such a way that the original power is institutionalised. This is not always possible. If the informal elites have been well structured and have exercised a fair amount of power in the past, such a task is feasible. These groups have a history of being somewhat politically effective in the past, as the tightness of the informal structure has proven an adequate substitute for a formal structure. Becoming structured does not alter their operation much, though the institutionalisation of the power structure does not open it to formal challenge. It is those groups which are in greatest need of structure that are often least capable of creating it. Their informal structures have not been too well formed and adherence to the ideology of 'structurelessness' makes them reluctant to change tactics. The more unstructured a group it is, the more lacking it is in informal structures; the more it adheres to an ideology of 'structurelessness', the more vulnerable it is to being taken over by a group of political comrades.

Since the movement at large is just as unstructured as most of its constituent groups, it is similarly susceptible to indirect influence. But the phenomenon manifests itself differently. On a local level most groups can operate autonomously, but only the groups that can organise a national activity are nationally organised groups. Thus, it is often the structured feminist organisations that provide national directions for feminist activities, and this direction is determined by the priori-

ties of these organisations. Such groups as National Organisation of Women and Women's Equality Action League and some Left women's caucuses are simply the only organisations capable of mounting a national campaign. The multitude of unstructured women's liberation groups can choose to support or not support the national campaigns, but are incapable of mounting their own. Thus their members become the troops under the leadership of the structured organisations. They don't even have a way of deciding what the priorities are.

The more unstructured a movement is, the less control it has over the directions in which it develops and the political actions in which it engages. This does not mean that its ideas do not spread. Given a certain amount of interest by the media and the appropriateness of social conditions, the ideas will still be diffused widely. But diffusion of ideas does not mean they are implemented; it only means they are talked about. Insofar as they can be applied individually they may be acted upon; insofar as they require co-ordinated political power to be implemented, they will not be.

As long as the women's liberation movement stays dedicated to a form of organisation which stresses small, inactive discussion groups among friends, the worst problems of unstructuredness will not be felt. But this style of organisation has its limits; it is politically inefficacious, exclusive and discriminatory against those women who are not or cannot be tied into the friendship networks. Those who do not fit into what already exists because of class, race, occupation, parental or marital status, or personality will inevitably be discouraged from trying to participate. Those who do not fit in will develop vested interests in maintaining things as they are.

The informal groups' vested interests will be sustained by the informal structures that exist, and the movement will have no way of determining who shall exercise power within it. If the movement continues deliberately not to select who shall exercise power, it does not thereby abolish power. All it does is abdicate the right to demand that those who do exercise power and influence be responsible for it. If the movement continues to keep power as diffuse as possible because it knows it cannot demand responsibility from those who have it, it does prevent any group or person from totally dominating. But it simultaneously ensures that the movement is as ineffective as possible. Some middle ground between

domination and ineffectiveness can and must be found.

These problems are coming to a head at this time because the nature of the movement is necessarily changing. Consciousness-raising, as the main function of the women's liberation movement, is becoming obsolete. Due to the intense press publicity of the last two years and the numerous overground books and articles now being circulated, women's liberation has become a household word. Its issues are discussed and informal rap groups are formed by people who have no explicit connection with any movement group. Purely educational work is no longer such an overwhelming need. The movement must go on to other tasks. It now needs to establish its priorities, articulate its goals and pursue its objectives in a co-ordinated way. To do this it must be organised locally, regionally and nationally.

Principles of Democratic Structuring

Once the movement no longer clings tenaciously to the ideology of 'structurelessness', it will be free to develop those forms of organisation best suited to its healthy functioning. This does not mean that we should go to the other extreme and blindly imitate the traditional forms of organisation. But neither should we blindly reject them all . Some traditional techniques will prove useful, albeit not perfect; some will give us insights into what we should not do to obtain certain ends with minimal costs to the individuals in the movement. Mostly, we will have to experiment with different kinds of structuring and develop a variety of techniques to use for different situations. The 'lot system' is one such idea which has emerged from the movement. It is not applicable to all situations, but it is useful, in some. Other ideas for structuring are needed. But before we can proceed to experiment intelligently, we must accept the idea that there is nothing inherently bad about structure itself - only its excessive use.

While engaging in this trial-and-error process, there are some principles we can keep in mind that are essential to democratic structuring and are politically effective also:

1 **Delegation** of specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks by democratic procedures. Letting people assume jobs or tasks by default only means they are not dependably done. If people are selected to do a task, preferably after expressing an interest or willingness to do it, they have

made a commitment which cannot easily be ignored.

2 Requiring all those to whom authority has been delegated to be **responsible** to all those who selected them. This is how the group has control over people in positions of authority. Individuals may exercise power, but it is the group that has the ultimate say over how the power is exercised.

3 **Distribution** of authority among as many people as is reasonably possible. This prevents monopoly of power and requires those in positions of authority to consult with many others in the process of exercising it. It also gives many people an opportunity to have responsibility for specific tasks and thereby to learn specific skills.

4 **Rotation** of tasks among individuals. Responsibilities which are held too long by one person, formally or informally, come to be seen as that person's 'property' and are not easily relinquished or controlled by the group. Conversely, if tasks are rotated too frequently the individual does not have time to learn her job well and acquire a sense of satisfaction of doing a good job.

5 **Allocation** of tasks along rational criteria. Selecting someone for a position because they are liked by the group, or giving them hard work because they are disliked, serves neither the group nor the person in the long run. Ability, interest and responsibility have got to be the major concerns in such selection. People should be given an opportunity to learn skills they do not have, but this is best done through some sort of 'apprenticeship' programme rather than the 'sink or swim' method. Having a responsibility one can't handle well is demoralising. Conversely, being blackballed from what one can do well does not encourage one to develop one's skills. Women have been punished for being competent throughout most of human history - the movement does not need to repeat this process.

6 **Diffusion of information** to everyone as frequently as possible. Information is power. Access to information enhances one's power. When an informal network spreads new ideas and information among themselves outside the group, they are already engaged in the process of forming an opinion - without the group participating. The more one knows about how things work, the more politically effective one can be.

7 **Equal access to resources** needed by the group. This is not always perfectly possible, but should be striven for. A member who maintains a monopoly over a needed resource (like a printing press or a darkroom owned by a husband) can unduly influence the use of that resource. Skills and information are also resources. Members' skills and information can be equally available only when members are willing to teach what they know to others.

When these principles are applied, they ensure that whatever structures are developed by different movement groups will be controlled by and be responsible to the group. The group of people in positions of authority will be diffuse, flexible, open and temporary. They will not be in such an easy position to institutionalise their power because ultimate decisions will be made by the group at large. The group will have the power to determine who shall exercise authority within it.

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ORIGINAL INTRODUCTION

During the years in which the women's liberation movement has been taking shape, a great emphasis has been placed on what are called leaderless, structureless groups as the main form of the movement. The source of this idea was a natural reaction against the overstructured society in which most of us found ourselves, the inevitable control this gave others over our lives, and the continual elitism of the Left and similar groups among those who were supposedly fighting this over-structuredness.

The idea of 'structurelessness', however, has moved from a healthy counter to these tendencies to becoming a goddess in its own right. The idea is as little examined as the term is much used, but it has become an intrinsic and unquestioned part of women's liberation ideology. For the early development of the movement this did not much matter. It early defined its main method as consciousness-raising, and the 'structureless rap group' was an excellent means to this end. Its looseness and informality encouraged participation in discussion and the often supportive atmosphere elicited personal insight. If nothing more concrete than personal insight ever resulted from these groups, that did not much matter, because their purpose did not really extend beyond this.

The basic problems didn't appear until individual rap groups exhausted the virtues of consciousness-raising and decided they wanted to do some- thing more specific. At this point they usually floundered because most groups were unwilling to change their structure when they changed their task. Women had thoroughly accepted the idea of 'structurelessness' without realising the limitations of its uses. People would try to use the 'structureless' group and the informal conference for purposes for which they were unsuitable out of a blind belief that no other means could possibly be anything but oppressive.

If the movement is to move beyond these elementary stages of development, it will have to disabuse itself of some of its prejudices about organisation and structure. There is nothing inherently bad about either of these. They can be and often are misused, but to reject them out of hand because they are misused is to deny ourselves the necessary tools to further development. We need to understand why 'structurelessness' does not work

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