

WOMEN IN THE SDS: ACTING ON THEIR OWN BEHALF (1968)'

Ever since the visit of the Shah, tomatoes and eggs have become useful in drawing public attention to something that would otherwise not be addressed. They have several times proven useful to strengthen arguments. But the students who besmirched the Shah were not acting on their own behalf; they were representing defenseless Persian peasants. The tomatoes were just symbols of more efficient missiles. Whether you supported this activity was a question of your own hard-won knowledge, your own decisions, your self-identification. The world of the CIA and the Shah cannot be changed by using tomatoes; these people have already thought of everything.

The tomatoes that were lobbed at the SDS delegates' conference in Frankfurt were not symbols. Their purpose was to force the men whose suits they stained (and which women will doubtless have to clean) to consider things they have never considered. It was not meant as a spectacle for the press that deliberately silences everything, but was directed at precisely those men who got hit in the head. The woman who threw tomatoes, and the woman who supplied the reasons for doing so, did not act on the basis of their own hard-won experience; in doing what they did, they acted for countless women, and on their own behalf. And they couldn't have cared less if what they had to say measured up to the usual theoretical level of discourse expected in the SDS, or

if their reasoning was absolutely foolproof, or if *Spiegel* would agree with them. They would have died of suffocation if they hadn't burst into action. In fact, millions of women suffocate daily on what they have to swallow, and what they take medication for—thalidomide, if they're unlucky—what they beat their kids for, throw wooden spoons at their husbands for, or whine about. If they're well-behaved they make sure the windows are closed so that nobody hears what everybody knows: things are not working the way they are supposed to.

The conflict that became public again in Frankfurt, after I don't know how many decades—if it ever was so decidedly public before—is not a fabrication. It is not a conflict to dither over, nor is it a theoretical conflict you simply ponder. Anyone who has a family knows it by heart, but this was the first time the private matter was clearly made public.

The *Stern* journalist who quickly shrugged it off—a debate on the oppression of the female members of SDS had long been simmering within the organization—did not notice that this is not just about the oppression of the women in the SDS, but about the oppression of his own wife as well, within his own family. The *konkret* journalist, who saw the tomato incident as one among many at the conference, and who used the label “women's liberationists” for those women who expressly rejected an authoritarian appeal to the law—this man did not feel targeted either, although he was. Maybe he didn't get hit this time. And Reimut Reich's² suggestion that women should refuse to have sex further confirms Helke Sander's position that men are completely unwilling to face up to the conflict. He, too, wants to push it back into the private sphere that it just burst out of with a lecture on tomatoes.

The Berlin women who intervened in Frankfurt no longer want to cooperate. They bear the entire burden of raising children but have no influence on the history, purpose, or direction of this work. They no longer want to suffer insulting comments for not having a good education, or only a partial education, or not being able to work in their professions because they are raising children—all of which leaves its mark, for which they are usually held responsible. They made it clear that it is not a personal failure for a woman not to be able to combine raising children with work outside the home; it is a societal failure, since society makes these two domains irreconcilable. They made a few things very clear. And when men didn't want to engage with this, they threw tomatoes at them. They didn't whine, or play the victim begging for sympathy and equal rights and all that jazz. They analyzed the private sphere in which most of them live and whose burdens are their burdens; they noted that in this private sphere men are, in fact, the functionaries of capitalist society who impose oppression on women, even if they don't want to. When the men couldn't respond, they threw tomatoes at them.

The purpose is not to set off permanent marital fights; the purpose is to make the conflict public, to bring it into a space where communication and understanding can be made possible among those who reach for such missiles in their passionate attempts to make their arguments heard over those that proclaim men are superior because they hold socially superior positions.

Frankfurt was a success for these women because a number of names were put to a number of things, because this occurred without resentment or lamentations, because the women who did what they did in Frankfurt have some organizational experience

and have done a few months (not years, as Bissinger claimed) of work with women, acquiring knowledge about possibilities and difficulties.

It is not in the interests of women for the SDS to make women's issues its own. If the organization wants to support women, so much the better; but there should be no patronizing instructions about what to do. The reactions of the men at the conference and of the still friendly reporters showed that entire trainloads of tomatoes will have to be thrown at appropriate targets for the message to really sink in. The only real results the Frankfurt event can hope to achieve is that more women think about their problems, organize, learn to understand the issues and formulate their thoughts. Meanwhile, all a woman wants from her man is to be left in peace with the matter, have him wash his own shirts for a change, so she can head off to a committee meeting on the liberation of women. And he can just cut out his stupid comments on the name of the association, because its usefulness will become apparent once it gets down to work. Ever since the Frankfurt events, there is no doubt that this association is faced with mountains, not molehills, of necessary and difficult work.

NOTES

1. At the twenty-third delegates conference of the SDS in September 1968 in Frankfurt, the Berlin "Action Committee for the Liberation of Women" gave a talk. The spokeswoman, Helke Sanders (1937-), a filmmaker and author associated with the feminist movement, accused the anti-authoritarian leadership of the SDS of practicing the same strategies to oppress women within the organization as were prevalent in society. When the next speaker Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1943-1970), who was a key member of the SDS, did not

respond to this accusation, the women threw tomatoes at him. Manfred Bissinger (1940–) was the editor of *Stern* at that time.

2. Reimut Reiche (1941–) is a German sociologist, psychoanalyst, and sexuality researcher.