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 previous 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 'structureless' 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 prevented 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
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, they do 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 friendships 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 communication. 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 possesses 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
views, they are resented when the
ment to represent the movement's
selected by the women in the move-
labelled 'stars'. Because they were not
ten felt towards the women who are
This is one source of the tie that is of-
spokespeople by default.
of public note are put in the role of
the movement likes it or not, women
whether they want to or not, whether
perceived as the spokespeople. Thus,
spokespeople nor any decision-making
because there are no official
sons. These women represent no par-

While it has consciously not chosen
spokespeople, the movement has
thrown up many women who have
called the public eye for varying rea-
s. These women represent no par-
ticular group or established opinion;
they know this and usually say so. But
because there are no official
spokespeople nor any decision-making
bodies the press can interview when it
wants to know the movement's posi-
ton 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 of-	en felt towards the women who are
labelled 'stars'. Because they were not
selected by the women in the move-
ment 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 respon-
sibility that the movement condemns.
By purging a sister as a 'star', the
movement loses whatever control it
may have had over the person, who be-
comes free to commit all of the indi-
vidualistic sins of which she had been
accused.

Political impotence

Unstructured groups may be very ef-
fective 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 indi-
vidual 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 re-
results. Unfortunately, the conse-
quences 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 participat-
ing. 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 organi-
sational activity, elitism becomes in-
stitutionalised.

For those groups which cannot find a
local project to devote themselves to,
the mere act of staying together be-
comes the reason for their staying to-
gether. When a group has no specific
task (and consciousness-raising is a
task), the people in it turn their ener-
gies to controlling others in the group.
This is not done so much out of a malici-
sious desire to manipulate others
(though sometimes it is) as out of lack
of anything better to do with their tal-
ents. Able people with time on their
hands and a need to justify their com-
ing together put their efforts into per-
sonal control, and spend their time
criticising the personalities of the
other members in the group. Infight-
ing 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 dis-
likes for the sake of the larger goals.
There are limits placed on the compul-
sion 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 cer-
tainly does not foster a spirit of co-
operative group effort. Other women
drift out of the movement entirely be-
cause they don't want to develop an
individual project and have found no
way of discovering, joining or starting
projects that interest them.

Many turn to other political organisa-
tions to give them the kind of struc-
tured, effective activity that they have
nen not been able to find in the women's
movement. Thus, those political or-
organisations which view women's lib-
eration as only one issue among many
find the women's liberation movement
a vast recruiting ground for new mem-
ers. There is no need for such organi-
sations to 'infiltrate' (though this is not
precluded). The desire for meaningful
political activity generated by women
by becoming part of the women's lib-
eration movement is sufficient to make
them eager to join other organisations.
The movement itself provides no out-
lets 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 re-
maining in other political organisa-
tions, in turn become the framework
for new informal structures. These
friendship networks are based upon
their common non-feminist politics
rather than the characteristics dis-
cussed earlier; however, the network
operates in much the same way. Be-
cause these women share common val-
ues, ideas and political orientations,
they too become informal, unplanned,
unassembled, irresponsible elites -
whether they intend to be so or not.

These new informal elites are often
perceived as threats by the old infor-
mal 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 priorities 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 coordinated 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 underground books and articles now being circulated, women’s liberation has become a household word. Its issues are discussed and informal 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. The movement must go on 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 dependable 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.

Jo Freeman.

Printing history for this text

‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’, by Jo Freeman, was first printed by the women’s liberation movement, USA, in 1970. It was reprinted in Berkeley Journal of Sociology in 1970 and later issued as a pamphlet by Agitprop in 1972. It was again issued as a pamphlet by the Leeds women’s group of the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists (ORA) and then reprinted by the Kingston group of the Anarchist Workers’ Association (AWA). It was later published jointly by Dark Star Press and Rebel Press in 1984 in a pamphlet called ‘Unyting the Knot - Feminism, Anarchism & Organisation’, with the printing done by Algaye Press [84th Whitechapel High St, London E1]. Around 1996 this text was placed on the web at http://www.tigerden.com/~berios/tos.txt. This edition is based on a that text with US spellings switched to British ones.

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 something 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.