VIEWPOINT

Forum: The Feminist Sexuality Debates

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Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists

Ann Ferguson

In the last four years, there has been an increasing polarization of American feminists into two camps on issues of feminist sexual morality. The first camp, the radical feminists, holds that sexuality in a male-dominant society involves danger—that is, that sexual practices perpetuate violence against women. The opposing camp, self-styled "anti-prudes," I term "libertarian feminists," for whom the key feature of sexuality is the potentially liberating aspects of the exchange of pleasure between consenting partners. As thus constituted these are not exclusive positions: obviously it is quite consistent to hold that contemporary sexual practices involve both danger and pleasure.[1]

1. It is important to note that feminists in the first phase of the women's movement during the late 1960s did not make this distinction in thinking about sexuality; they emphasized both a defense of women's right to pleasure (female orgasms) and legal protection from one of the dangers of heterosexual intercourse: unwanted pregnancies (i.e., the right to abortion). During the second phase in the early 1970s, feminists emphasized women's right to sexual pleasure with women (lesbian feminism). It is only in the third phase of the movement, when the goals of sexual pleasure have become culturally legitimated to a greater extent, that many feminists have begun to emphasize the violence and danger of heterosexual institutions like pornography.

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What accounts, then, for the current dichotomy, indeed the bitter opposition, between radical- and libertarian-feminist positions on sexual morality? I would argue that there are both historical and philosophical differences between the two camps. Historically, radical feminists have been those who are members of or who identify with a lesbian-feminist community that rejects male-dominated heterosexual sex. Radical feminists tend to condemn sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, cruising (promiscuous sex with strangers), adult/child sexual relations, and sexual role playing (e.g., butch/femme relationships). They reject such practices because of implicit and explicit analyses that tie dominant /subordinate power relations to the perpetuance of male dominance.[2] Libertarian feminists, on the other hand, tend to be heterosexual feminists or lesbian feminists who support any sort of consensual sexuality that brings the participants pleasure, including sadomasochism, pornography, role-oriented sex, cruising, and adult/child sexual relations. These issues have come to a head recently in disagreements regarding radical feminists' condemnation of pornography and sadomasochistic sexuality, particularly by such groups as Women against Pornography and Women against Violence against Women. Some of the spokeswomen for libertarian feminism are self-identified "S/M" lesbian feminists who argue that the moral-ism of the radical feminists stigmatizes sexual minorities such as butch/ femme couples, sadomasochists, and man/boy lovers, thereby legitimizing "vanilla sex" lesbians and at the same time encouraging a return to a narrow, conservative, "feminine" vision of ideal sexuality.[3]

A problem with the current debate between radical and libertarian feminists is that their opposing positions do not exhaust the possible feminist perspectives on sexual pleasure, sexual freedom, and danger. Both sides are working with a number of philosophical assumptions about the nature of sexuality, power, and freedom that *have never been properly* developed and defended. Consequently, each side claims the other

2. See Robin Linden, Darlene Pagano, Diana Russell, and Susan Leigh Star, eds., *Against SadoMasochism* (East Palo Alto, Calif.: Frog in the Well Press, 1982); Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon &Schuster, 1976); Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979); Andrea *Dworkin, Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981); Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revolt against Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982); Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1981); and Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, eds.. *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975).

3. See Pat Califia, "Feminism and *Sadomasochism," Heresies 12* 3, no. 4 (1981): 30-34; Gayle Rubin, "The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M," in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian SIM,* ed. SAMOIS (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1982); Gayle Rubin, Deirdre English, and Amber Hollibaugh, "Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism," *Socialist Review 58* 11, no. 4 (July/August 1981): 43-62; and Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Politics, the New Right and the Sexual Fringe," in *The Age Taboo: Gay Male Sexuality, Power and Consent,* ed. Daniel Tsang (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981).

ignores an important aspect of sexuality and sexual freedom. But both can be seen to be vulnerable from a third perspective that I shall call a (not the) socialist-feminist perspective. Although I do not have space here to develop that perspective adequately, I hope to advance the debate between the two theoretical positions in the women's movement on sexual morality by presenting and critiquing their underlying paradigms of sexuality, social power, and sexual freedom.

Two Paradigms Contrasted

Radical feminists' views on sexuality include the following:

1. Heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification (men as subjects/masters; women as objects/slaves) that supports male sexual violence against women.

2. Feminists should repudiate any sexual practice that supports or "normalizes" male sexual violence.

3. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by developing a concern with our own sexual priorities, which differ from men's—that is, more concern with intimacy and less with performance.

4. The ideal sexual relationship is between fully consenting, equal partners who are emotionally involved and do not participate in polarized roles.

From these four aspects of the radical-feminist sexual ideology, one can abstract the following theoretical assumptions about sexuality, social power, and sexual freedom:

5. Human sexuality is a form of expression between people that creates bonds and communicates emotion (the primacy of intimacy theory).

6. Theory of Social Power: In patriarchal societies sexuality becomes a tool of male domination through sexual objectification. This is a social mechanism that operates through the institution of masculine and feminine roles in the patriarchal nuclear family. The attendant ideology of sexual objectification is sadomasochism, that is, masculinity as sadistic control over women and femininity as submission to the male will.

7. Sexual freedom requires the sexual equality of partners and their equal respect for one another both as subject and as body. It also requires the elimination of all patriarchal institutions (e.g., the pornography industry, the patriarchal family, prostitution, and compul-

sory heterosexuality) and sexual practices (sadomasochism, cruising, and adult/child and butch/femme relationships) in which sexual objectification occurs.

The libertarian-feminist paradigm can be summarized in a manner that brings out in sharp contrast its emphasis and that of the radical-feminist paradigm:

1. Heterosexual as well as other sexual practices are characterized by repression. The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority "pure" and under control.

2. Feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions, or moral judgments that stigmatize sexual minorities and thus restrict the freedom of all.

3. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives us pleasure and satisfaction.

4. The ideal sexual relationship is between fully consenting, equal partners who negotiate to maximize one another's sexual pleasure and satisfaction by any means they choose.

The general paradigms of sexuality, social power, and sexual freedom one can draw from this sexual ideology are:

5. Human sexuality is the exchange of physical erotic and genital sexual pleasures (the primacy of pleasure theory).

6. Theory of Social Power: Social institutions, interactions, and discourses distinguish the normal/legitimate/healthy from the abnormal/illegitimate/unhealthy and privilege certain sexual expressions over others, thereby institutionalizing sexual repression and creating a hierarchy of social power and sexual identities.

7. Sexual freedom requires oppositional practices, that is, transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality.

Critique of Radical and Libertarian Feminisms

Radical feminists assert the value of emotional intimacy in sexual interactions while libertarian feminists emphasize pleasure. But neither emotions nor physical pleasures can be isolated and discussed in a vacuum. These values can be judged only in a specific historical context since there is no one universal function that can be posited for sexuality.

Physical pleasures, emotional intimacy, reproduction—each of these takes priority for different cultures, classes, races at different times in their histories.

Thus we must reject both the radical-feminist view that patriarchy has stolen our essentially emotional female sexuality and the libertarian-feminist view that sexual repression has denied women erotic pleasure. Both of these positions are essentialist. It has been true in recent Western patriarchal cultures that the goal of female sexuality, emotional intimacy, has for "respectable" women been differentiated from the goal of male sexuality, physical pleasure. But not all societies, and not even all classes and races within these Western cultures, have organized sexuality into such a dichotomized system. So when the two camps accuse each other of being "female" or "male" identified, respectively, they are treating historically developed gender identities as if they were human universals.

The problem with both radical and libertarian theories is that they describe social power in too simple a fashion. There may be, in fact, no universal strategy for taking back sexual power. Although the radical feminists are right that sexual objectification characterizes patriarchally constructed heterosexuality, their account is overdrawn. We need a more careful study of sexual fantasies and their effects. Even when fantasies involve images of dominance and submission, they may empower some women to enjoy sex more fully, a phenomenon that, by enhancing connections to one's body, develops self-affirmation. Nonetheless, in order to test the possibility of a different type of sexual practice that would provide mental affirmation as well, we do need to develop an alternative feminist sexual fantasy therapy for women, and for men, that does not involve such images.

Libertarian feminists are ingenuous in their insistence that any consensual sexual activity should be acceptable to feminists. This begs the question, for any feminist position has to examine the concept *of consent* itself in order to explore hidden power structures that place women in unequal (hence coercive) positions. That some avowed feminists think they consent to sadomasochism and to the consumption of pornography does not indicate that the true conditions for consent are present. Libertarians must show why these cases differ from the battered wife and "happy housewife" syndromes—something they have not yet convincingly done.

Pornography is an especially difficult topic, in part because the distinction between erotica and pornography is dependent on the context, that is, on the gender, class, and culture of the audience. Pornographic practices, discourses, and images primarily directed at men reduce women to sex objects. But there are other contradictory popular discourses directed primarily at women or mixed audiences—for example, the literature of romance, "PG" movies, and television soap operas.

If we look at the whole entire system of such ideological sexual communications, we find a set of conflicting assumptions. These assumptions constitute a distinctive blend of liberal individualist and patriarchal ideals peculiar to advanced capitalist patriarchal societies. On the one hand, the ideology of romantic love permeates much erotica, assuming that sexual liaisons should be between peers who each have a right to equal sexual pleasure. On the other hand, it is also true that in much sexually explicit material the message is what Andrea Dworkin and Kathleen Barry call "cultural sadism"—that is, that men should initiate and control sex and women should submit to it (men are consumers, women providers, of sex).

Libertarian and radical feminists each choose to emphasize opposing sides of these contradictions. I argue, instead, that we should develop feminist erotica and sex education that aims to make people conscious of these contradictions in order to encourage new forms of feminist fantasy production. This erotica and education must emerge in a variety of contexts (high school courses, soap operas, and Harlequin novels as well as avant-garde art) and be geared to all types of audiences. This means avoiding the sexual vanguardism of either radicals or libertarians, who interact primarily within closed countercultural communities (lesbian feminists, middle-class radicals, and other sexual minorities).[4]

To further resolve this dilemma I think we must adopt a transitional feminist sexual morality that distinguishes between basic, risky, and forbidden sexual practices.[5] Forbidden sexual practices are those in which relations of dominance and submission are so explicit that feminists hold they should be illegal. Such practices include incest, rape, domestic violence, and sexual relations between very young children and adults. The difference between a forbidden and a risky practice is an epistemological one: that is, a practice is termed "risky" if it is suspected of leading to dominant/subordinate relationships, although there is no conclusive proof of this, while forbidden practices are those for which there is such evidence. Sadomasochism, capitalist-produced pornography, prostitution, and nuclear family relations between male breadwinners and female housewives are all risky practices from a feminist point of view. This does not mean that feminists do not have a right to engage in these practices.

4. The criticism of vanguard politics is not meant to imply that oppositional subcultures are irrelevant in a feminist strategy for social change. To the contrary, lesbian-feminist and alternative feminist networks are a necessity, both for survival and as a challenge to dominant sexual and social ideologies. The point is that social change within the dominant culture's practices is not successfully accomplished by vanguard sexual politics among isolated subcultural groups.

5. I develop these distinctions somewhat further in Ann Ferguson, "The Sex Debate within the Women's Movement: A Socialist-Feminist *View," Against the Current* (September/ October 1983), pp. 10-16.

But since there is conflicting evidence concerning their role in structures of male dominance, they cannot be listed as basic feminist practices, that is, those we would advise our children to engage in. Basic feminist practices can include both casual and more committed sexual love, co-parenting, and communal relationships. They are distinguished by self-conscious negotiation and equalization of the partners in terms of the different relations of power (economic, social [e.g., age, gender], etc.) that hold between them. A feminist morality should be pluralist with respect to basic and risky practices. That is, feminists should be free to choose between basic and risky practices without fear of moral condemnation from other feminists.

Conclusions

Our contemporary sexual practices are characterized both by dominant/submissive power relations and by potential for liberation. In order to avoid the oversimplifications of the radical and libertarian positions on sexuality, we need a paradigm that can be historicized. Elsewhere I suggest the use of "modes of sex/affective production."[6] Conceiving of contemporary public patriarchy as a developing system allows us to explore the contradictions in our contemporary sexual identities, sexual, ideologies, and sex/affective institutions.[7] Our vision of a sexually liberated society should situate genital sexual practices in a wider complex of sex/affective relationships. Parent-child and kinship-friendship networks are all implicated in sexual equalization, as are class and race power dynamics.[8] A completely elaborated feminist sexual morality must explore these relations in much greater detail than we have to date.

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6. This concept is related to what Gayle Rubin calls "sex/gender systems" ("The Traffic in Women: Notes toward a 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna Rapp Reiter [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975]). I develop the concept further to include the production and exchange of sexuality, nurturance, and affection in "Women as a New Revolutionary Class in the U.S.A.," in *Between Labor and Capital,* ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

7. See Ann Ferguson and Nancy Folbre, "The Unhappy Marriage of Capitalism and Patriarchy," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,* ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981); and Ann Ferguson, "Patriarchy. Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," in Ann Ferguson, Jacquclyn N. Zita, and Kathryn Pyne Addelson, "Viewpoint: On 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence': Defining the Issues," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 158-72.

8. Ann Ferguson, "On Conceiving Motherhood and Sexuality: A Feminist Materialist. Perspective," in Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, NJ.: Rowman & Allenheld, 1984).

The Repression of History and Gender:

A Critical Perspective on the Feminist Sexuality Debate[9]

Ilene Philipson

As the debate over what constitutes politically acceptable sexuality proceeds, participants on both sides seem to be drawing the boundaries of their respective positions more rigidly and vehemently. One must carefully monitor her words and actions these days in order to avoid being seen as an enemy of the women's movement or, conversely, a moralistic defender of vanilla sex.

Feminists who oppose the antipornography movement have articulately and justifiably exposed its theoretical deficiencies and impolitic tactics, asserting that their aim is solely to open the discussion of sexuality among feminists and to free feminist discourse from moralistic standards and taboos. They consider themselves liberated thinkers who are unabashedly "pro-sex," and they pit themselves against what they believe are self-righteous and antisex champions of a revived social purity movement.[10] But I question the ways in which many pro-sex feminists are replacing the simplistic theorizing and divisive name-calling of the anti-pornography movement with their own, thereby closing off the very discussion they wish to throw open.

Pro-sex feminists criticize antipornography feminists for their lack of historical analysis: according to the antipornography viewpoint, patriarchy is an unchanging force throughout history that is expressed through unrelenting, systematic violence against women. Thus footbinding in China and rape in New York City are two instances of the same phenomenon that can be analyzed in similar, if not identical, fashion. Pro-sex feminists see the inherent problems in this view and hold that male domination of women changes over time and across cultures and classes. When they move from critique to theory building, however, many proponents of the pro-sex position become as neglectful of history in their analyses as those they criticize are; in place of an ahistorical understanding of violence against women, they posit an unchanging social repression of sexual drives. They view repression as the most salient social and

9. I would like to thank Artemis March and Rachael Peltz for the insights each provided in the development of the ideas presented here. I would also like to thank Jeff Escoffier, who disagrees with my position but who has contributed enormously to my understanding of this debate.

10. See Linda Gordon and Ellen DuBois, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 7-25.

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political problem in regard to sexuality today, and see it as having changed insignificantly since the nineteenth century or before.

Therefore, a central flaw in the pro-sex argument is the assumption that society today is just as sexually repressive as it has been in the past. Pro-sex thinkers thus repeatedly invoke the specter of nineteenth-century social purity movements as warning: the radical and transcendent nineteenth-century feminists were defeated by the moralistic and puritanical social purity feminists, who primarily sought to protect women from the dangers of sex rather than to explore the possibilities of sexual liberation and fulfillment. Pro-sex thinkers assert that in similar fashion antipornography feminists today could transform feminism into little more than moralistic prudery in which the fear of sexual violence dominates and subsumes the quest for sexual pleasure. But this parallel fails to consider the social landscapes that have served as background for each of these historically distinct feminist movements.

Some authors make this nineteenth-century characterization of society quite explicit. Gayle Rubin declares that today "sex itself is not a legitimate activity or goal."[11] But this claim simply does not ring true. Sex as a legitimate activity in its own right is extolled by countless nonfiction books, television talk shows, newspaper articles, and advice columns and is portrayed sympathetically in popular fiction, motion pictures, and music. One need only read the personal ads in metropolitan newspapers or visit local singles' bars to realize that sex for its own sake is widely accepted among people who see themselves as neither deviant nor in any way outside the norms of cosmopolitan, middle-class behavior. Barbara Ehrenreich has demonstrated that sex without the ties of emotional commitment became the goal of millions of men in the 1950s, as the Playboy ideology became as American as apple pie. And certainly advocating sex itself as a legitimate goal has earned Hugh Hefner not the scorn of most Americans but respect, envy, and millions of dollars.[12]

Nowhere does this image of a thoroughly repressive society appear more clearly than in arguments that portray pornography as one of the few outlets for sexual liberation and rebellion. Ellen Willis, for example, suggests that porn is "a protest against the repression of non-marital, non-procreative sex." To enjoy pornography is "a form of resistance to a culture that would allow no sexual pleasure at all."[13] Deirdre English defines a pornography district as "a small zone of some sexual freedom," while Gayle Rubin asserts that "there's a geography of access to certain kinds of sexual and erotic experience. . . . There really are zones of more

11. Rubin, "The Leather Menace," p. 193.

12. Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Co., 1983).

13. Ellen Willis, "Who Is a Feminist?" *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (New York) (December 1982), pp. 16-17.

and less freedom. For instance, there is the gay community. There are the porn districts, which provide people with a range of experiences they can't get in a suburban family."[14]

Such views do not take into account the real ways sexual behavior, ideology, and values have changed in the past century and particularly in the last forty years. They do not acknowledge how modern capitalism has harnessed sexuality and sexual "liberation" for dehumanizing purposes, an insight initially articulated by Herbert Marcuse and Philip Slater in the 1950s and 1960s and widely accepted in left and feminist circles. Nor do these views include an analysis of or set of standards regarding different forms of sexual behavior, for they imply that the world of sexuality is completely dichotomized: there is sexual repression, and there is sexual freedom.

I believe we have to ask precisely what these authors envision as sexual freedom. In reacting to the moralism and absolutism of many antipornography thinkers, a number of feminists seem to embrace an uncritical acceptance of pornography. Certainly it should be possible to launch a critique of the antipornography position without suggesting that pornographic sex embodies ultimate sexual freedom. Moreover, authors who defend pornography should be able to justify their defense with arguments fully applicable to the twentieth century. Viewing the enjoyment of porn as "a form of resistance to a culture that would allow no sexual pleasure at all" seems anachronistic at best in the 1980s. With pornography a billion-dollar industry in the United States, with pornographic images used throughout advertising, and with the consumption of explicitly pornographic materials encouraged through their movement out of "dirty" bookstores into supermarket newsstands, cable television, and the home video market, it hardly seems accurate or believable to assert that the enjoyment of pornography is a form of cultural resistance. Such enjoyment might more accurately be seen as a form of cultural conformism.

Furthermore, in suggesting that the world can be divided into the repressive suburban family on the one hand, and liberatory porn districts on the other, pro-sex feminists fail to recognize how much society has changed since the nineteenth century. Pornography districts may indeed offer a range of experiences not available in the Victorian family. But to dichotomize contemporary society in such fashion is to ignore the ways in which pornographic images have penetrated virtually all corners of our social world. While certain practices, not the least of which is homosexual activity, may not find acceptance in suburbia, it must be remembered that *Hustler* now coexists on suburban newsstands with *Family Circle*, that "pleasure parties" have replaced Tupperware parties, and that radio

14. Rubin, English, and Hollibaugh, pp. 51, 53.

shows such as "Sex Talk," in which both female and male listeners call in their responses to explicit sexual questions, now fill suburban air waves. The geography of sexual access has been fundamentally transformed in the last century, and failing to acknowledge this negates history.

None of this, however, speaks to the question of who actually enjoys pornography and can by doing so resist repressive culture. The message implicit in the pro-sex position is that porn provides both men and women with a source of sexual freedom and expression that is otherwise unavailable. But a single trip to any porn district is sufficient to demonstrate that women are not serviced or even considered in the entertainment and materials presented. It should be superfluous to point out that pornography is directed almost exclusively to men and that women's sexual enjoyment, if considered at all, is seen as derivative of men's. And yet these basic points appear to be lost on authors whose critique of the feminist antipornography position seems to be gradually evolving into an uncritical acceptance of pornography as a liberatory form for all people.

Just as pro-sex feminists identify dichotomous zones of sexual repression and liberation, they also posit two kinds of sexuality—repressed and unrepressed among individuals. In this case, women represent the more sexually repressed and men the less repressed. And because pro-sex feminists believe that repression is the fundamental cause of our sexual unhappiness, they regard women's sexuality as deeply problematic. Ellen Willis articulates this position clearly: "Women who do not suppress their lustful feelings altogether—or sublimate them into disembodied romanticism or mother love—usually feel free to express them only in the relatively safe and socially validated context of marriage or a quasi-marital commitment. Thus what looks like women's superior ability to integrate sex and love is only a more hidden form of alienation."[15] According to this view women who need or desire human connectedness and commitment to truly enjoy **sex,** to be lustful, are alienated—and perhaps more alienated than men since men presumably can experience lust without the encumbrances of committed relationships and love.

This derogation of women's sexual/emotional needs is even clearer in the *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality:* "Why are there no institutions to support female sexuality? ... Why are there no baths for straight women? We've discussed external reasons ... but internal reasons are important too: women's fear of rejection, fear of being the object, concern with subject/object relations. One can read this as a lack of strength, a fear of crumbling which makes the less-than-totally-personalized sexual interaction frightening for women."[16] Such a statement implies that concern

15. Ellen Willis, "Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution," *Social Text* 6 (Fall 1982); 3-21, esp. l3.

16. Hannah Alderfer et al., eds., *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality* (New York: Faculty Press, 1982), p. 31. This diary from the Barnard College conference "The Scholar and the

with object relations is a deficiency, a problem in need of explanation, and that depersonalized sex is normative. Thus women's sexual desire— which is often distinguished by an aversion to depersonalized sex and a need for intimacy and closeness—is seen as an inadequacy.

I believe this perspective suggests an emergent norm of what constitutes politically correct sex. The feminists formulating this view have been quite critical of what they see as the moralistic, restrictive, and conservatizing sexual norms of the women's movement and specifically of the feminist antipornography movement. Yet implicitly they are constructing their own ideology, which distinguishes between good/liberatory and bad/repressed sexual needs and behavior. When they raise the question, "Why are there no baths for straight women?" and respond that it is due to women's inadequacy, they endorse bathhouse sexual practices and condemn women's sexuality as abnormal and lamentable. When they claim that women's aversion to depersonalized sex is caused by alienation, weakness, and fear, they do so from a normative position that extolls such sexual activity and renders women's needs for intimacy aberrant.

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, this understanding of sexuality embodies the most simplistic, crude "drive theory" that sees human beings as merely vessels containing powerful drives that are either discharged or repressed. Thus the more capable one is in discharging these biologically based drives without the need for emotional attachment (which may interfere with unencumbered release), the more one is truly liberated. Because men traditionally have been more able to have sex without emotional involvement, they occupy a more enviable position in the hierarchy of sexual pleasure and sexual politics. This, of course, is nothing different from what men have been telling women for years—but it is remarkable that a number of feminists are now concurring in the assertion of male sexual superiority.

The pro-sex position has the effect of labeling every woman who has serious questions about depersonalized sex and pornography a "good girl," a prude, an unrebellious and repressed woman. It describes the world and its female inhabitants in only dichotomous terms: there are repression and liberation, bad girls and good girls, pro-sex feminists and antipornography feminists, women who hold that "mother knew best" and women who believe that "mother didn't know shit."[17] There is no room for subtlety, ambivalence, contradiction. There is, in fact, no room for most women.

From an opposite pole, pro-sex feminists have begun to replicate the very moralism, exclusiveness, and disregard of women's complex sexual

Feminist IX: Toward a Politics of Sexuality" is available for $7.00 from c/o Jaker, 299 Riverside Dr., New York, New York 10025.

17. See, e.g., Lisa Orlando, "Bad Girls and 'Good' Politics," *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (New York) (December 1982), pp. 1, 16-18.

experience that they criticize in the antipornography movement. But the corrective to the inadequacy of prevailing feminist ideas about sexuality is not the glorification of what hitherto have been feminist taboos. Most women will not find depersonalized sex as a norm any more inspiring or attractive than the lesbian norm that characterized the early 1970s. My hunch is that most women will find it far less relevant to their own sexual and emotional needs and desires. Furthermore, just as a strident antipornography position lends itself to ahistorical theories of patriarchal domination, so an uncritical acceptance of pornography prevents development of sophisticated psychosocial analyses.

In an attempt to combat what they see as the theoretical and tactical problems of the antipornography position, many feminists are responding in a way that will only serve to make a middle ground in the sexuality debate harder to identify. Few women will want to speak out openly for fear of being labeled prudish or repressed, in the same way that now many fear being branded an enemy of feminism by the antipornography movement. By dichotomizing society into the repressed and the liberated, pro-sex feminists obviate meaningful discussion of the complex issues at hand. When Kate Ellis claims that "the division between the planners of the Barnard conference ["The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," Barnard College, 1982] and their opponents is simply the current expression of a division in the women's movement, going back to the nineteenth century, between sex radicals, who want more freedom for women, and what we now call cultural feminists, who want more protection for women," she is simplifying both history and the present.[18] In a society characterized by male domination it is impossible to want just freedom, on the one hand, or just protection, on the other. As long as women are routinely raped and battered, and such rape and battering are glorified in both pornography and mainstream media, as long as women are systematically denied equal access to jobs and earn half what men do, and as long as women have primary responsibility for child rearing, which often causes them to live in poverty, protection is a necessary feminist demand. This does not mean we should not simultaneously work for independence and liberation from the forces that cause us to seek protection. It also does not mean that the questions of sexual fulfillment, pleasure, and excitement should be absent from feminist discourse. It does mean, however, that we should abandon simple-minded, exclusionary categories in the discussion of sexuality and begin the difficult task of understanding the connections between behavior and fantasy, sexual expression and object relations, and sexual activity and ideology.

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18. Kate Ellis, "I'm Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I'm Not Sure How I Feel about It," *Socialist Review* 14, no. 3-4 (May-August 1984): 112

American Feminism in the Age of the Body

Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby

The call for "control over one's body" has come to be seen as the most radical demand feminists can make. It is claimed that realizing such control would create the most profound revolution possible for women. Integral to this call for seizing control over our bodies is the belief that we must seize control over our sexuality—that our sexuality has been torn from us and that we must recover or discover either an autonomous female or a feminist sexuality.

Where did this language come from? Feminists have striven to be self-reflective and to question the nature and origins of our beliefs. Yet, curiously, there has been little questioning of how and why the language of control and sexuality has come to dominate contemporary feminist discourse. Our goal here is first to raise some questions about the genealogy of such language and about how it has framed the development of feminist issues. We will then broach an alternative formulation, which we call "contextual feminism."

In considering how the language of control became so fundamental to feminist discourse, it is relevant to take note both of the emergence of feminism out of liberalism and of its shared borders with Marxism as a theory of society and revolution. Despite important philosophical differences between Marxism and liberalism, both ideologies partake of Western society's uncritical acceptance of science as the sole means for discovering truth. It is ironic that Marxism, which purports to challenge the value system of the dominant class, has nonetheless readily adopted that class's notion of scientific certainty and control. And it is 'particularly ironic that radical feminism, which so self-consciously rejects Marxism, has nevertheless emulated Marxism's principle of seizing control over production with the analogue of seizing control over reproduction.[19]

There are several problems with the language of control. First, it slips too readily into a language of domination. Second, it presumes a centering of power that simply may not exist in contemporary society: we are asked to seize power, yet power is no longer held by a clearly identifiable and coherent group. Third, as many artists, philosophers, and scientists have recognized, our physical cultural world is largely an indeterminate one; thus the epistemological certainty requisite for control is unavailable.

19. We do not condemn science altogether, however, for we are fully aware of how science facilitated the feminist challenge to biological determinism in this century and, in fact, encouraged this wave of feminists to conceive of nurturance as separable from female bodies, a potentially profound shift.

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Problems surrounding the language of the body and sexuality are perhaps more difficult to describe because of the pervasive current belief that the truth of oneself is to be found in one's sexuality. Feminism, which broke from the New Left in declaring that "the sexual revolution is not our revolution," has on the whole not developed a vision to supplant the idea that sexuality is itself the means to liberation. To appreciate better the problems surrounding sexuality as the means to liberation, we need to consider the confluence of science, sex, and power that marks our society.

We find the work of Michel Foucault insightful in this regard, particularly his analysis of how power infuses and induces a "deployment of sexuality" in a scientized society. He argues that power, no longer merely vested in a sovereign's "right of seizure," is now predominantly a "disciplinary power" that is "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them." Historically, this disciplinary power did not simply replace sovereignty but rather intersected with it. The continuation of the juridical discourse of sovereignty permitted concealment of new micro-centers of power, which operate through the production, regulation, surveillance, and labeling of human activities. These processes, he argues, lead to a "society of normalization," that is, a society governed less by legal rights and more by the authority of science.[20]

In the nineteenth century, as this normalizing process gained ascendancy, the developing disciplines of medicine, education, and psychology focused their investigatory concerns on the body and on the secret it was said to harbor: sex. Sexuality as it is understood today is, according to Foucault, a historical phenomenon that emerged in the seventeenth century as a mechanism of the new ways of organizing knowledge. This confluence of science, sex, and power produced and continues to produce an intensified focus on the body as the instrument of truth, creating what we call the "sexuated body"—a body situated in, satiated with, and standardized by sex. Paradoxically, in a society that sees privacy as the realm for the deepest expression of individuality, even so-called diverse innovative sexual practices have been processed for us.

Although Foucault provides an astute revision of how power operates in contemporary societies, he does not particularly illuminate the effects of the deployment of sexuality on the lives of women. We speak here of the routinization of battery, sexual exploitation, harassment, and sexual abuse.[21] These are perhaps the darkest by-products of what'

20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 67-68, 136, and *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 107.

21. Monique Plaza astutely points to Foucault's stopping short of his own investigation of the deployment of sexuality in regard to rape in "Our Damages and Their Compensation, Rape: The Will Not to Know of Michel Foucault," *Feminist Issues* 1 (Summer 1981): 25-35. While sexual abuse of women has existed in societies without these technologies, our hypothesis is that the technologies exacerbate abuse.

Foucault has called the “technologies or sex,” which include everything from the "pornographization" of films, magazines, and even video games, to the manufactured need for sex manuals that cater to perfecting a myriad of sexual practices, to the dispersal of contraceptive devices for instant sex. Investigating the operations of these technologies leads us to a better understanding of the emergence of contemporary feminism. We would argue that feminism not only was born in reaction to these technologies but also is implicated in them.

The struggle for reproductive rights, which has become the central issue for many feminists today, and in particular the call for abortion on demand provide cases in point. Linda Gordon and Alien Hunter have claimed, for example, that abortion is the "leading point of political contest in the area of both women's liberation and sexual freedom."[22] This claim, which not only narrows feminist concerns but also reinforces heterosexism insofar as it implies that women have sex only with men, can be best understood as an integral part of the accelerated deployment of sexuality in this century. Although we strongly uphold the importance of legal access to abortion, we want to point out that many feminists argue for reproductive rights in the language of control and sexuality characteristic of a technology of sex.

Such a technology poses problems for feminism because it first obscures the connective tissues that sustain us and then excises complex decisions from an ethical context. The net effect of this technological approach is, quite literally, a desensitization to human experience. Indeed, one of the consequences of the contemporary struggle for reproductive rights is a desensitization to abortion itself. As Wendy Brown astutely observes, "Most proabortion groups defensively argue that abortion is a private, technical act so banal that were it not for the hysteria of the Moral Majority no one besides a pregnant woman and her doctor would think twice about it."[23] Carol Joffe perceptively describes how abortion counselors themselves respond to this tendency to treat abortion reductively. According to Joffe, the counselors "did not want their clients to perform only abortions … Abortion seemed most manageable to these workers when they could experience it as part of a larger mosaic of human activity."[24] This move on the part of the counselors to contextualize their work suggests that the very word "reproduction" denies the sensuous, emotional, and evocative features of the activities it purports to name. In short, recognizing the pervasiveness of this scientific term, so

22. Linda Gordon and Alien Hunter, "Sex, Family and the New Right: Antifeminism as a Political Force," *Radical America* (November 1977-February 1978), p. 20.

23. Wendy Brown, "Reproductive Freedom and the Right to Privacy: A Paradox for Feminists," in *Families, Politics and Public Policy: A Feminist Dialogue on Women and the State,* ed. Irene Diamond (New York: Longman Inc., 1983), p. 332.

24. Carol Joffe, "The Abortion Struggle in American Politics," *Dissent* (Summer 1981), p. 270.

devoid of the ambiguities and richness of human experience, forces us to confront feminism's involvement in the deployment of sexuality.

Perhaps the most obvious example of such feminist involvement is the assumption that sexuality exists outside of and untainted by power. To claim, as Gordon and Hunter have, for instance, that "we can be in principle unequivocally pro-sex because sex itself is a human activity that has its own worth and which can be separated from those oppressive power relations that invade it" is to ignore both the historicity of sexuality and the interplay between power and sexuality.[25] We feel that heeding Foucault's analysis of how power operates in a society of normalization will better equip feminists to deal with such complex issues as teenage sexuality, sex education, and media enticement.

Another form of feminist involvement in the deployment of sexuality is the tacit acceptance of sexuality as identity and as the means to truth and liberation, a stance that sometimes occurs in lesbian-feminist discourse. While we strongly affirm the legal and social sanction of sexual practices between partners of the same gender, we are coming to realize the importance of maintaining a distinction between sexual practice and human identity. Several studies indicate that viewing sexual practice as synonymous with core identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. This research suggests that the late nineteenth century was a crucial turning point in the process that converted practice into identity. The emergence of homosexual identity is one of the better known examples of this process. Foucault notes that, prior to the nineteenth century, "sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them," but that, during the nineteenth century, the "homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscrete anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology."[26] Thus we see that the specification of sexual diversity is part of the deployment of sexuality. To claim, therefore, that lesbianism—or any sexual identity—is in itself a challenge to prevailing power relations is to accept the terms of the enterprise one seeks to defeat.

Feminist debates about lesbianism pivot on variations of this identity/ practice matter. On the one hand is the argument that in order to identify as a true feminist one must practice same-gender sex. On the other hand is the argument that feminist identity is not contingent on same-gender sex but does hinge on legal and social support of lesbian practices. At times these debates have been so intense that they have threatened feminist political action. Attempting to reconcile these sometimes polarized points of view, Adrienne Rich offers the concept of a "lesbian con-

25. Gordon and Hunter, p. 19.
26. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 42-43.

tinuum." She attempts to desexualize lesbianism by including along the continuum nurturant relations among females of all ages and races while also endorsing those women who bond with other women through their sexual practices. Despite her profound insights into the ways in which the institution of heterosexuality operates and her eloquence in affirming that nurturance has been a vital force in the lives of women, she nonetheless reinforces the deployment of sexuality in a telling way. At the most basic level, although she recognizes the clinical nature of the term lesbian, she still retains this sexuated and scientized word. Thus her term "lesbian continuum" remains at cross purposes. In addition, her argument that "lesbian experience comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life"[27] obscures the extent to which the breaking of taboos is itself an integral part of the incitement to sexuality.[28]

Of late, a small but vociferous group of feminists has made the breaking of taboos the foundation on which feminism should be built.[29] Insisting on the inherently radical nature of being pro-sex, groups such as SAMOIS assert that sadomasochism can be one of the most liberating forms of sexual practice. Their writings are imbued with an extreme form of the sexual-scientific imperative toward mastery. While they are perceptive in discerning essentialist attitudes within lesbian feminism, their own works display two forms of essentialist thinking. For example, Gayle Rubin writes that "sex is fundamentally okay until proven bad," thereby ignoring the historical and cultural construction that she otherwise espouses.[30] Pat Califia speaks of having constructed "a private world of dominance, submission, punishment and pain" since "the age of two," thus implying that people are born into sadomasochism." In short, these writers have unreflectively accepted the idea of practice as identity. Typically, proponents of sadomasochism invoke the rhetoric of free, autonomous individualism, characterizing sadomasochism as a consensual activity. Although a number of other feminists have commented on the illusory nature of sexual consent within the context of a male-dominant society," our analysis here suggests that the debate over consent raises a false issue. Given the current mechanisms of normalization in our society, sexual consent is a function of disciplinary power, and the highly ritual-

27. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631-60, esp. 649.

28. Foucault observes that "the task of discovering this difficult truth of sex was finally turned into an invitation to eliminate taboos and break free of what binds us" *(The History of Sexuality,* p. 80).

29. See, e.g., Califia (n. 3 above).

30. Rubin, English, and Hollibaugh (n. 3 above), p. 43.

31. Califia, p. 33.

32. See, e.g., *Off Our Backs* (June 1982); and Lal Coveny, “Sado-Masochism,” *Scarlet Women* 13 (July 1981): 29-33.

ized directives for engaging in sadomasochistic practices testify to just how prescriptive these activities are.

In our discussion of reproductive rights, lesbian feminism, and sadomasochism, we have attempted to show the problematic aspects of anchoring feminist discourse in the language of control and sexuality. Our analysis thus makes us wary of the direction Catharine MacKinnon takes in attempting to unify feminism via sexuality and its control. MacKinnon perceptively notes that much feminist writing and practice has in fact been centered on sexuality.[33] Yet potential dangers emerge precisely where she promotes formalization. More specifically, her notion of producing a feminist political theory exclusively from an analysis of sexuality may render women even more vulnerable to the deployment of sexuality. She argues, for example, that sexuality is "that which is most one's own, yet most taken away." To accept this is to promulgate the belief that sex is the measure of identity and the instrument of truth. Not surprisingly, this view of sexuality leads her directly into the language of control, an emphasis bolstered by her reliance on Marxist categories. But, ironically, unlike the Marxist impulse to seize control for the purpose of achieving nonalienated labor, MacKinnon appears to be calling for control for its own sake—there is barely a hint of nonalienated sexuality in her agenda for theory.

We suspect that any theory bent solely on exposing the brutalities of social relations will be blinded to life's rich and varied textures and will necessarily produce a weak vision. Our approach to theory and to the relationship between theory and political practice emphasizes the importance of context. We seek, in effect, a contextual feminism that is grounded in the conflicts *and* joys of women's lives, and we seek political strategies that are responsive to visions, without forgetting that such visions are enacted in the lives of actual women rather than Utopian heroines. As this paper indicates, our contextual approach underscores the importance of the way language is used in the creation of visions. Once we become attuned to how discourse within the technology of sexuality manufactures and conceals disciplinary power, we can begin to inquire about the possibility of discourses infused with alternative visions, for we are not totally circumscribed by our society's dominant discourse.

33. MacKinnon claims that "sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality" ("Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7, no. 3 [Spring 1982]: 514—44,533). We are wary of single origin, single explanation theory and concur with Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo's cautions in "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," Signs 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 389—417. In addition, MacKinnon's use of the term "sexuality" strikes us as vague and even contradictory. At times, it seems to designate the act of heterosexual physical intercourse. At other times, it seems to be a methodological construct.

Whereas today bodies, skills, and pleasures are on the whole linguistically sexuated and scientized, alternative discourses have the potential to resist and even supplant disciplinary power's major mode of transmission. Our analysis thus suggests the importance of continuing to expose and reveal those discourses that center on mastery and monolithic identity. It also stresses the necessity of seeking discourses that evoke a fuller range of our senses, emotions, intellect, and imagination in the cultivation of human dignity and security.

In fact, alternatives already exist within feminist discourse, particularly in the cultivation of nurturance and aesthetics. Early in the American feminist tradition, for example, Margaret Fuller warned of the dangers of untrammeled intellect and called on American women to infuse public institutions with sentiment and beauty. We anticipate some disagreement with our support for a language of nurturance, for over the last few centuries nurturance has been seen as innately female and has functioned to exclude women from public activities and to restrict them to a privatized home. But nurturance need not be conceptualized in this way. Moreover, developing nurturant and aesthetic conceptions of bodies, skills, and pleasures may, in this age threatened by nuclear annihilation, be no less than vital. We feel that, while scientific mastery has led us toward ecological destruction, cultivation of nurturance and aesthetics would attend to ecological needs; instead of the demand for control of one's body, it would call for and support a stronger voice for women in all of the decisions that create our lives; instead of sexuated pleasures it would foster the pleasures of intimacy, citizenry, cooperation, community, and communion. Through its respect for the full context of women's lives and its appreciation of the multiplicity of human pleasures, a feminist cultivation of nurturance and aesthetics could encourage political renewal and transformation.

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