

## NOTES

1. Marge Piercy's *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit), 1982, describes such a milieu very well.
2. Marcia Womongold, letter, *Gay Community News*, April 10, 1982, p. 5.
3. Laurie Dale, "The Snatch," Pandora, February 1979.
4. Laura Lederer, *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow and Company), 1980.
5. Deirdre English, "The Politics of Porn: Can Feminists Walk The Line?" *Mother Jones*, April 1980.
6. Lederer's *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*; Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee), 1981; Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row), 1981; Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Ellen Donovan, "What Women Should Know About Pornography," *Family Circle*, February 1981, and Alice Walker, "When Women Fight Pornography at Home" (the title seems to be that of Ms. in which the essay first appeared in February, 1980; in *TBTN* the same piece is entitled "Coming Apart"). In *TBTN*, out of 35 pieces, 22 use "pornography" as part of their titles. Of the remainder, 6 make it clear in the first few sentences that pornography is their subject.
7. *TBTN*, Diana E.H. Russell and Laura Lederer, "Questions We Get Asked Most Often," p. 29. Also *Op. Cit.*, p. 29, and Helen E. Longino, "What Is Pornography?" pp. 51-53.
8. For example, Susan Brownmiller, *TBTN*, "Let's Put Pornography Back In The Closet," p. 252.
9. *TBTN*, p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-79.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
13. John D'Emilio, "Women Against Pornography," *Christopher Street*, May 1980.
14. See footnote 5.
15. Pat Califia, "Among Us, Against Us—The New Puritans," *The Advocate*, April 17, 1981.
16. Califia, "Feminism and Sadoomasochism," *Co-evolution Quarterly*, No. 33, Spring 1981.
17. Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Ellen Donovan, "What Women Should Know About Pornography," February 1981.
18. *TBTN*, p. 21.
19. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: Avon), 1979.
20. Daniel Eisenberg, "Toward a Bibliography of Erotic Pulp," *Journal of Popular Culture*, XV:4, Spring 1982, p. 175.

## News From The Front

LAST TUESDAY I WAS IN MY LOCAL HARDWARE STORE, PRICING chickenwire to cover my petunias. The typewriter at our local women's center had acquired the habit of being stolen—I was trying to do something about this too—and I must have seemed too enthusiastic about the nuts, bolts, and chains, for a young woman in blue jeans and T-shirt gave me the most disapproving look I've ever received in my life, and I could not imagine why until I came home to find the June issue of *off our backs* on my doorstep and a pile of other publications, all about what I will call (to be equally unfair to both sides) the Great PP Controversy or the "Puritans" vs. the "Perverts."

I must admit that my first reaction was to be sympathetic to the Perverts. Particularly irritating was the Puritans' apparent lack of theory—but as I read on it occurred to me that the Puritan side was indeed operating on a theory,

whether explicit (as quoted below) or implicit. Here is Dorchen Leidholt on one part of it: "the belief that the root of women's oppression is located in personal, sexual relationships, which become the model for oppression in every area of society . . . 'The personal is political.'"

And here is another, in the same essay: ". . . pornography is its [the patriarchy's] primary agent of socialization."<sup>1</sup> I think most feminists occupying the Puritan position would find the above formulation too narrow, so let's restate it to read that culture—in neither the broad, anthropological sense of everything that goes on in a society or the narrow use to identify "high" culture (as opposed to popular culture and the mass media)—is the primary cause of sexism along with personal, sexual relationships. To these I think we must add a third idea, that sexual behavior and sexual preferences are the core of the human personality—or, at the very least, a faithful barometer of it, so that sexuality is a fundamental shaper and predictor of personality.

I don't think it's unfair to see these ideas as central to the PP controversy, again: that women's subjection is caused by personal relations and culture (in the sense of the mass media, advertising, fiction, art, etc.) and that sexuality is crucial to the core of human personality.

If the above is so, then corruptions of sexuality are, quite simply, horrendous, and the fact that your supposedly feminist neighbor is pouring hot wax on her lover in the service of sexual arousal is something so dreadful, so betraying, so incomprehensible, that there is almost no limit to the horror with which you ought to react.

First, the theory that sexuality is a profound determiner of the dynamics of the human personality is, of course, Freud's. He did not supply the idea in its modern form, however; for one thing, he believed that perversion and neurosis were mutually exclusive (a theory which would

lead to very odd conclusions if it were applied to the current controversy). What Freud actually proposed was not the idea that sexuality determines personality or even that sexual behavior is continuous with other behavior—he emphatically did not (for example) posit that sexual sadists are cruel or sexual masochists self-hating, or that fetishists dehumanize their relations with others. What he did maintain was that the etiology ("causal history" might be the best paraphrase) of neurosis lay in the repression (not suppression) of infant and childhood sexuality while perverts, spared neurosis, remained sexually fixed at one of the early way-stations of sexual development. It's all quite complicated. The much simpler idea, that one's style of sexual behavior indicated the state of one's personality and that a good, healthy sexual style indicates a good, healthy personality while other sexual styles are unhealthy and bad, is a very different creation.

Europe and England, in the 1880s and 1890s were experiencing intense agitation about the "woman question." There were attempts to get the vote, ladies were demanding entry to the professions, and so on. Literature was full of the "New Woman." It was in this atmosphere that the idea of sexuality being an indicator of healthy and unhealthy personalities began. And it began with the creation of . . . The Homosexual.

Before this time homosexual acts were certainly condemned as horrible (and men were occasionally hanged or burnt for them) but the idea of "the homosexual" as a certain sort of person did not exist. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries women (not only ladies, to judge from some of the literary evidence) showed moral nobility and purity by falling in love with one another, exchanging love letters, rings, and presents, and (when they were economically free to do so) expressing their "romantic friendships" and

“schoolgirl smashes,” by living together in “Boston marriages.” What the German doctors did in the 80s (and the English in the 90s) was to invent a new “disease,” a constitutional “abnormality” which could then be used to condemn all strong feeling between women (a thing that was, at the time, quite common). They did not, by the way, make same-sex genital activity the test of Lesbianism; what they indicted was a whole personality, which was (in addition to loving women, whether carnally or not) feminist, refused to marry, wished to go to college, lived independently, smoked, preferred female company, disliked female dress, and so on.

There is evidence, by the way, that some of the doctors, like Krafft-Ebing, meant to gain tolerance for “homosexuals” by insisting that they couldn’t help themselves—when will people learn that this ploy *never* works!—but the wildfire success of his (almost) original creation is due to its usefulness in maintaining the sexual (and other) *status quo*.<sup>2</sup>

News of this new and convenient disease hit England in the 90s and was public knowledge in the United States by the 1920s (though American intellectuals and literati were probably aware of it much earlier). Somewhere in here, in the twenties, I think, Freudian psychoanalysis became an American fad, and what happened then was perhaps inevitable.

Over here are the doctors, maintaining that homosexual behavior is one result of a diseased personality which also produces a whole lot of other behavioral symptoms (mostly unconventional gender behavior).

Over here is Freudian theory, maintaining that sexuality is central to the human personality.

Do you see what I see?

Put together the idea that refusal to abide by conventional gender rules is the sign of an abnormal personality and the idea that sexual behavior is at the root of personali-

ty, and . . . abracadabra! Psychiatric and popular bigotry as we all know and loathe it, in which unconventional sexual behavior is the sign of a “sick,” “immature” personality while conventional sexual behavior indicates the opposite.

Do you see what I see *now*?

I sometimes wonder whether the Puritans in the PP controversy ever lived through the American fifties. Take a theory the only function of which was to condemn homosexuals, especially women, add to it political reaction and a last-ditch effort to enforce gender roles which were no longer economically viable (the movement of white women leaving home for wage-work *began* in the 50s) and you get the ideological viciousness that made that disgusting decade (and my adolescence) unbearable.

It was not that homosexuality was sick; *everything* was sick. If the way someone does sex, and with whom, and in what position, and how often, indicates the health or sickness of the whole personality, then every sort of sexual “misbehavior” becomes redolent of disease. Women who liked to be on top of their men in sex were sick; women who failed to achieve orgasms in coitus (sometimes or always), or had them in the wrong place, were sick; not marrying disclosed a fear of men, which was sick; adultery was sick; a difference in age between sexual partners (even a few years) was sick; women who were attracted to other women were sick; anybody who wanted more or less frequency of sex than “normal” was sick. And anything non-coital was, of course, sick (including masturbation). Interpreting sexual behavior, like interpreting the Bible, can go on forever. And it did. Everything was sick except monogamous, married, heterosexual coitus in the missionary position between spouses of the same color with simultaneous orgasms which left behind them (especially for the woman) no residual sexual excitement. And even all this was doubtful evidence of health if the woman was older than the man

by even a few years.

This theory (of the continuity of sexual behavior with other behavior) was never tested, let alone proved; the very few studies of the outcome of psychotherapeutic treatment that were done were so embarrassing that they have not been publicized in the literature of the field.

I suspect that the Puritans in the PP controversy are not aware of where their theory comes from (it's been part of our cultural surround for at least twenty-five years), that its success is purely mythological, and that its only function has been to oppress. For women—mostly Lesbians—to turn this garbage against other women is some sort of horrid cosmic joke which would be funny if it weren't so painful. Feminists of the late 60s-early 70s loathed these ideas; if you doubt it, read Natalie Shainess in *Sisterhood is Powerful*.<sup>3</sup>

But what about the idea that cultural institutions (like sexism) are determined by personal relations and the mass media? This idea is respectably feminist; it has been part of the mental furniture of the women's movement right from the beginning. If sexual style doesn't matter, still, cultural forces like popular art and literature, and the quality of personal relationships may be the primary determiners of social institutions; isn't it proper that we concentrate our efforts on them?

I'm sorry, no, they aren't and we shouldn't. Consider: For at least two centuries, American (and other) women have been confined to personal relations—especially sexual relations—as their special “sphere.” For a somewhat shorter period American (and other) ladies were able, if they wished, to add to their “real” job the consumption of art in the form of novels, pictures, magazines, etc. and a few brave souls even won partial permission to dabble in producing the stuff. To believe that these activities are the primary

cause of society's institutions (of which sexism is one) is simply to assert that what we *can't* do (which includes almost all the money and power, and all the places in which big decisions are actually made) *doesn't matter*. I have felt the helplessness that prompts such thinking, the utter rage at so-called “radical” movements which act as if we didn't exist, and the fear that we can't really enter the (still alien) public world. But to assert that the Women's and Ladies' Ghetto is—somehow—The Cause Of It All—will not stand up. The ideas that American soldiers collapsed under Chinese “brainwashing” because their moms brought them up badly or that women control the country's wealth or that Black women are responsible for racist oppression are ideas of exactly the same order and their absurdity doesn't disappear if you give them a positive, instead of a negative, content. I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I hear—now—that women will make a feminist revolution by practicing good personal relations and the arts. There's good sense in doing both of these things for your love of and need for them. To do these things *because* they will bring about the revolution does nothing but put an unbearable burden of perfection on personal relations, sexual relations and (to a lesser degree) the arts. It is also, to put it mildly, rather dumb. It's true that sexism is often experienced most painfully and intimately in personal relations. It's also true that most of the movement's professional activity has been in the women's professions: nursing, library work, teaching, and the arts. But why on earth should these evidences of ghetto-ization lead to valuing the ghetto-ized activities as the determiners of Western culture? Is it likely that the things we are allowed to do are primary determinants of our society? We're not supposed to have power, remember.

Questions about what does determine society's institutions and where the important decisions get made and by whom will drive the questioners either to incorporate an

analysis of class into their theory, or (since most men do not, by any stretch of the imagination, make the decisions that shape the world) lead them to distort their ideas of causality more and more to make feminist theory explain phenomena to which that theory becomes more and more inadequate. I say *inadequate* and not *untrue*; I believe that the same thing happens if you try to make class analysis do the job of feminism, without noticing that sexism (and racism) predate Capitalism and seem (so far) to have outlived it. The point is not to argue about which oppression is more important or which came first (arguments about which are "primary" mean this about 99% of the time) but to find how they interact right now. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, socialism, feminism, ecology and ethology may be about to converge on the quintessentially Marxist question: What makes history happen? or: Why do people do what they do?

To understand an animal species' behavior the first question an ethologist asks is: What does the animal eat? Everything else, from its habits to its sexual signals, its teeth (if any), its chemistry, and the shape of its body flows from this one constraint. When you ask that question of human beings the answer is complicated by the fact that people make tools and do work; that is, human adaptation to a particular environment is cultural, not biological; technology, social institutions, and the minutiae of behavior are all cultural adaptations to one fundamental fact, where and how the society gets its calories.\* So far we are only restating Marx's "relations of production," *i.e.* technology and natural resources. What's new is adding the effects of population pressure—for despite our romancing about tribal societies, it's only in the last century or so that any human societies have had anything like a genuinely safe and genuinely dependable way of controlling fertility. (The condom

\* This word means energy sources of all kinds, not just energy used to grow food.

may turn out to be more productive of social change than the atomic bomb.) In this view, institutions that enforce male superiority *are an adaptation to population pressure*. If increases in population, which mean less to go around in *any* society with limited energy sources, cannot be otherwise avoided, then female infanticide, the differential neglect of little girls, and rather horrendous kinds of abortion will become social necessities. To make such necessities bearable—even acceptable—it's necessary to make both men and women believe that women's lives are less worthwhile than men's lives. Warfare is thus a very dramatic and useful way of creating and enforcing male "superiority." Tribal and village-band warfare (which seldom results in permanent redistribution of land, resources, or people) can result in a very striking differential valuation of the sexes, and a ratio of boys to girls of about 160 to 100. (Prolonged nursing, which will work as an anti-contraceptive only in conjunction with a high-protein diet, may work with gathering-hunting societies, but in agrarian ones, with carbohydrates as the major food source, it is just not effective.) Modern warfare doesn't seem, at first glance, to be the same phenomenon, but it may be no coincidence that serious efforts at women's liberation and numbers of people in the peace movement have appeared at approximately the same time.<sup>4</sup>

If the above is inaccurate or incomplete, it's still at least a possible working model of the way things happen, and it's several orders of magnitude more complex than a theory which takes into account only personal relations and the mass media. It's also a theory that describes human behavior as fairly rational, self-interested, and intelligible—which is not true of a theory which holds that the way people do sex is the core of their personalities.

Two theories, both the products (one directly, the other indirectly) of sexism, both inadequate.

Why does anyone believe them?

I don't think we need go far afield to find the answers, nor are they particularly surprising. To insist on the central importance of the very activities you just happen to be restricted to is very ordinary human behavior and it's also human not to be aware of the theoretical assumptions one has picked up from the cultural (broad sense) surround. What bothers me a good deal more is a theory that I suspect is often implicated here, and that is the idea that there are great differences between men and women, that these are innate, that they follow the lines assigned to them by the sexist status quo, and that progress therefore consists of replacing men by women and masculine qualities by feminine ones.

Such a belief certainly simplifies life, but it won't stand up to the crucial historical question: Why has feminism occurred *when* it has and not centuries earlier—or never? When you use the biologicistic theory to explain sexuality the results become really mischievous; female sexuality is declared to be all that sexism says it is—S & M *et. al.* become not only horrifying but totally baffling (how can *women* be doing such things?); intimacy is the only permissible cue to passion; everything else is declared corrupt, and the true feminist goal becomes a Great Love—all this conforming almost exactly to the stuff we all loathed fifteen years ago—“Passive as underwater plants”<sup>5</sup> (I am attacking the use of Rich's poem by Dorchen Leidholt in a recent issue of the *New Women's Times*, not the poem itself, of course.) and “as deep and mysterious as the sea, as strong and still as the mountain, as insistent as the wind”<sup>6</sup>—all of which sends a twinge of frightful, blasphemous irony up my spine and leads me to ask (with intentional rudeness) when Rod McKuen started writing for the women's movement. Is it too late in the day to point out that sex is an impersonal appetite, that it's not identical with love (or politics), that

there's no reason to think it should be, and that the social mystification which confuses the issue (and insists that sex be either polluted or angelic) has been one of the most important repressive agents of the good old feminine mystique? The idea that the practitioners of “feminist” sex have feelings and sensations higher and more holy than those enjoyed by the rest of us is sheer snobbery, like the anti-semitism that assigns “intelligence” to Christians while Jews have only “low cunning” or the moralism that assigns “love” to the monogamous and “lust” to everyone else. I'm sorry to appear to be attacking Dorchen Leidholt in particular—she's far from alone in her ideas—but the political movement I joined thirteen years ago was against injustice, not “hard penile thrusts,”<sup>7</sup> which absurdity is, I take it, the direct result of unthinking, feminine-ist biologism.

Women have very often dealt with the bitterness of our sexual situation by idealizing our presumed difference from men, our supposed gentleness, our “incapacity” for sex without love, our (justified) fears, our massive ignorance, and our enraged bitterness at hearing men preach a “freedom” which we know isn't meant for us. We've never advanced an inch, doing this, but have only created further rage and further restriction. Paralysis is a high price to pay for avoiding the knowledge that we are not so very different from men, that feminism doesn't explain everything, and that, in our capacity as middle-class women, and as white women, we are oppressors as well as oppressed. I know that many feminists—for good reason—fear the sexism and sheer stupidity of the American Left, and many more feel already so embattled and deprived that asking them to recognize the privileges of their class position only leads to their absolute refusal to do so, since (most unfortunately) they conceive of this as moving back to an anti-feminist position which also obliges them to feel intensely guilty.

In the late sixties and early seventies feminists didn't



believe that the personal was political but that the personal led to the political—odd how the phrase has changed, no? Descriptive theories derived from personal experience have been replaced by prescriptive theories to which personal experience must conform. We have, in fact, developed a flourishing right wing in which feminist theory is rushing pell-mell ahead right into the nineteen-fifties.

No thanks. I've been there.

When and if the Great PP (It's tempting to add Pornography and Prostitution and make it the quadruple-P) Controversy goes the way of the Lavender Menace, the issues behind it will remain: Those who want to avoid class analysis must continue to look for ever new "fundamental" causes of sexism, although this route leads right to the idea of biological causation, and that is to my mind, the counsel of despair. If men are plain evil and always have been, and women have always been good, why on earth should anything change now? The only way to avoid the pessimistic dead-end of the biological view is by positing direct supernatural intervention or the radiation-avoiding properties of our auras. I've heard both. (One woman explained to me once that "The Goddess is making more and more lesbians be born in order to overthrow the patriarchy.") If the theoretical dead-end which feminism is in lets us turn either left (socialism) or right (biologism) then the third direction is straight up—but such stuff is a magical grasping-at-straws, an escape into the empty, empty heavens.

Years ago someone asked me if I was dedicated to the women's movement and I said: No, the women's movement is dedicated to me and the moment it stops having a living connection with the issues I perceive to be meaningful, I will spend my energies in some other place. From what I hear now about "feminist sensuality," I have to conclude that I'm not only not a feminist; I'm not even a woman. Which was exactly what I kept hearing during the fifties,

strange to say. When I hear women denounced for deviant sexual behavior, when male lust is seriously advanced as a primary cause of women's oppression and the cultivation of certain kinds of sexuality, I begin to wonder where I am. Is this feminism or feminine-ism?

The feminism I know began as politics, not rules for living. To call X a feminist issue did not then mean that there was a good way to do X and a bad way, and that we were trying to replace the bad way with the good way. X was a feminist issue because it was the locus of various social pressures (which it made visible) and those social pressures were what feminism was all about. Makeup, for example, is a feminist issue *not because using makeup is anti-feminist and scrubbing your face is feminist but because makeup is compulsory*. Those who don't see the distinction are building a religion, not a politics. "Whatever isn't prohibited is compulsory" is not the banner under which I want to march.

I hope the great PP controversy will pass and become a quaint memory. I hope feminists will learn that a theory which describes only sexism is as incomplete as one that describes only class struggle. I hope that the biological theories will disappear and that feminists will learn that sex is an impersonal appetite and quite O.K. that way, but I wonder. There's a well-known quotation which seems to me a lot more likely, downright sinister, in fact, and here it is:

*Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it.*

## NOTES

1. Leidholt, Dorchen. "Lesbian S/M: Sexual Radicalism or Reaction," *New Women's Times*, July/August, 1982.
2. See Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York (Wm. Morrow & Co.: 1981).
3. Shainess, Natalie. "Psychology Constructs the Female," In *Sisterhood is Powerful: an Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. Ed. Robin Morgan. New York (Vintage: 1970).
4. Harris, Marvin. *Cultural Materialism*.
5. Adrienne Rich, quoted by Dorchen Leidholt. See footnote 1.
6. Andrea Dworkin, also quoted by Dorchen Leidholt, *Ibid*.
7. *Op. Cit.*

## Pornography By Women For Women, With Love

YES, THERE IS PORNOGRAPHY WRITTEN 100% BY WOMEN FOR A 100% female readership.

Surely I mean erotic?

Well, let's just say that to call something by one name when you like it and another when you don't is like those married ladies we all know who call what they do "making love" while what is done at singles bars is "shallow and trivial sex," and what homosexuals do is "perversion." (There are also those folks who call a work of art that supports the status quo "art" and works that question it "political.")

I tend to get restive at such honorifics, yet in the anti-pornography/anti-anti-pornography fight, "pornography" has become a loaded word, so for the purpose of this discussion we need a neutral one. Now that the title has caught your eye, and made some of you bristle, I'm going to talk about neither erotica nor pornography, but "sexual fantasy."

But first I must tell you about *Star Trek*.



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**Joanna Russ**

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***Magic  
Mommias,  
Trembling  
Sisters,  
Puritans &  
Perverts***

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**Feminist Essays**

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