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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 moralism 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, N.J.: 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 S/M*, 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 (somasochism, 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, Jacquelyn 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 Trebilcock (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allenheld, 1984).