

Sex, Homophobia, and Women: The Rise of Lesbian Feminism

Part 2

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There were problems for women not only on the national political scene but also within the Left movement where women found themselves marginalized and ignored, especially by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). This marginalization and oppression on the Left led to the creation of a subset of second wave feminism- radical feminism.

There was an attempt by some within the Left to discuss women's struggles during the early 1960s. In 1962, SDS organized a convention at Port Huron, Michigan to resolve the problems between new members and the old guard. An underlying issue at this meeting was the fact that "many relationships and marriages among SDS couples were reaching a breaking point" and that "this personal turbulence made the issue of sex roles especially compelling,"[1] yet it was Casey Hayden and Mary King's Sex Caste memo that allowed for the organization to hold a workshop on women's roles in the SDS. The memo argued that women were in a caste-based system in regards to the general society and within their relationships with men, stating that women "seem to be caught up in a common-law caste system that operates, sometimes subtly, forcing them to work around or outside hierarchical structures of power which may exclude them" and "seem to be placed in the same position of assumed subordination in personal situations too." [2] The fact that Hayden and King regarded women's position in society as comparable to a caste system shows that they were beginning to see the situation that women were in as one in which they were oppressed. In a way it represents the first awakenings to the plight of women by women.

Part I



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However, when the workshop took place, it was originally composed of both men and women, but "a number of men reacted so defensively that some women resolved to meet by themselves, without the obstructionist men." [3] This utter unconcern with women's issues would continue into the 1960s, with the Left being more worried about racial and economic issues.

From 1964 to 1965, SDS launched the Economic Research and Association Project with the goal of creating an interracial alliance to talk about economic inequality to “bring poor whites into an alliance with the Negro freedom movement on economic issues, thereby averting a backlash against the civil rights movement.” In 1965 the SDS became involved in protesting the Vietnam war in which they were designated as “helpmates” and sex was used as a way to get men to burn their draft cards. “In fact, one of the draft resistance’s most popular slogans was ‘Girls Say Yes To Guys Who Say No!’”[4] By using sex to gain support for the anti-war movement, the SDS reveals its own sexism as such a slogan reduces women to nothing but a sexual object, a reward that men who resist the war will receive.

Women were further sexually objectified in the Left, specifically within the counterculture that was springing up in the ‘60s and ‘70s. Among these countercultures were new ways of thinking about sex and love in which women were expected to adopt countercultural influences that men approved of. : Due to new thoughts about the concept of love and the advent of free love thought, “men expected women to adopt their own more promiscuous sexual standards.”[5] Francine Silbar, a well-known feminist stated that “women were treated by Movement men like ‘sexual garbage cans... and reservoirs of mechanistic lust to be tapped at the whims of our thoughtless, self-centered small master.”[6] Among all of this women found themselves in groups that were “dominated by men who were, at best, uninterested in challenging sexual inequality.”[7] It was in this marginalization of women that radicalized women.

It must be mentioned that these radicalized women would create entirely new strands of feminism as the feminism that was articulated in groups like NOW came from women who “were, for the most part, highly educated women who found their career paths limited by their sex category”[8] and as such, these women were mainly concerned with creating equal opportunities for women in the work place and thus wouldn’t be on the same page as women who were in the Left radical movement. There could rarely be agreement between these two groups as those in NOW and like-minded groups wanted to work within the system while there were women such as the Marxist and socialist feminists [who] wanted radical political and economic change; the small consciousness-raising groups [who] wanted a radical revision of relations between women and men, and the cultural feminists [who] wanted radical change in linguistic, artistic, sexual, and symbolic conceptions of women.[9]

The first step that women took to radicalize themselves was in the spring of 1966 when “Naomi Weisstein taught a course on women at the University of Chicago and Heather Booth organized the women’s workshop at the anti-draft conference. At the SDS’s June 1967 National Convention, the Women’s Liberation Workshop “thrashed out an analysis and series of demands to present to the entire convention” with Jane Addams, Elizabeth Sutherland, Susan Cloke, and Jean Peak writing “As we analyze the position of women in capitalist society and especially in the United States we find that women are in a colonial relationship to men and we recognize ourselves as part of the Third World.”[10] In stating that women were in a “colonial relationship” with men, these four women were furthering feminist theory and creating a fuller realization of the oppression of women. While there were feminists that acknowledged the oppression of women, none had gone so far as to even begin to somewhat articulate the fact that this “colonial relationship,” that was psychological, economic, and social in nature. It recognized the full extent to which women were suppressed and oppressed by the existing patriarchal order.

Once the analysis and demands were presented to the entire convention, the place went

wild because after the statement had been read, “a man leapt from his seat to suggest that they separate the analysis from the resolutions for the purposes of debate and voting. When the chair announced that the workshop’s analysis was open neither to debate nor a vote[,] the meeting hall erupted. Men were yelling, arguing, cursing, and objecting all over the floor.”[11] The men had moved swiftly to ensure that their dominance of the movement would remain.

Unfortunately, women would again attempt to put their oppression on center stage to no avail at the 1967 National Conference for New Politics in Chicago. There about 50-70 women following the role of blacks, attended a women’s workshop and drafted a resolution in which they

demanded that women receive fifty one percent of the convention votes and committee representation because, they argued, women comprise fifty-one percent of the population. They demanded that the convention condemn the mass media ‘for perpetuating the stereotype of women as always in an auxiliary position to men [and as] sex objects.’ They also called upon the convention to endorse ‘the revamping of marriage, divorce, and property laws.’ Finally they demanded ‘complete control by women of their own bodies, the dissemination of birth control information to all women regardless of their age and marital status, and the removal of all prohibitions against abortion.’[12]

They were able to get their resolution on the agenda, however, when the time came for the women’s resolution to be discussed, the chair introduced the resolution of Native Americans rather than women. Next week the women had a meeting and in the fall the Chicago group issued a manifesto entitled To the Women of the Left in which they stated that women should avoid having men define their issues, methods, and goals.

Lesbian Feminism

While many women had become radicalized in the search for a place in which they would not be oppressed, a deeply ironic situation came about where radical feminism, for all its purported support of women, usually ignored the issues of lesbians altogether.

There are several examples that can be seen in groups that sprang out of the radical feminist movement. One example is The Redstockings who saw lesbians as “irrelevant to [their] vision of class struggle between men and women.” (pg 147) The Redstockings viewed the struggle between men and women as a class issue and rejected not only “Marxist theorizing on the ‘woman question’”[13] but rejected theorizing altogether. In their manifesto it “contended that all men have oppressed women” and that they every man, “not just the ruling class men whom politicians typically targeted,”[14] received benefits from the male supremacist system that existed in the United States. It is interesting to note that while the Redstockings did not favor theorizing, they actively engaged in the appropriation of Marxist methodology to the female struggle in so far that they wanted to use access and use the analytical thought process in relation to their situation.

A Boston-based group, Cell 16, was considered by “many women as the most militant of all women’s liberation groups.”[15] However, they too ignored the problems that lesbians faced. The group’s leader, Roxanne Dunbar, was a homophobe; with her strongly implying that lesbianism was “unnatural.” Cell 16 rejected lesbianism, stating that “the fundamental problem with homosexuality was that like heterosexuality it suffers from being a sexuality.”[16] This was a rather strange take on lesbianism as it seems to view sexuality as

a problem rather than something that is natural and normal.

The biggest blow, however, to lesbianism in the radical feminist movement came with The Feminists. Ti-Grace Atkinson, founding member of the New York chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) “contended that lesbianism is based ideologically on the very premise of male oppression: the dynamic of sexual intercourse. Lesbians, by definition, accept that human beings are primarily sexual beings. If this is the case, one would have to grant that women are, in some sense, inferior.”[17] However, such an analysis is incorrect as lesbianism is nothing more than a label to describe one’s sexuality, rather than steeped in any ideological underpinnings. By arguing that lesbians accept “that human beings are primarily sexual beings,” it is examining lesbianism solely through a sexualized lens and ignores the fact that being a lesbian is much more than having sex with other women; it is having a normal relationship with ups and downs, just as heterosexual couples have.

Betty Friedan herself was against lesbians in the feminist movement, going so far as to use the term “lavender menace” to describe lesbians during the November 1969 Conference to Unite Women which the New York NOW chapter organized. She argued that lesbians would delegitimize the greater feminist movement and “was adamant that the women’s movement present itself as reasonable, moderate, heterosexual, family-loving not family-destroying, man- loving not man-hating in its approach.”[18] Such homophobia is extremely ironic to the feminist movement as by stating that lesbians should remain separate from the greater movement, one was essentially arguing that lesbians were not in fact women.

By denying lesbians the right to join the feminist movement, the movement defined woman as one that was heterosexual. It also shows a refusal to delve into sexual politics and by doing such empowers the patriarchy. It is actually quite surprising that heterosexual women did not adopt the “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” manner of thinking which would have allowed them to ally themselves with lesbians even if it were only for a short while. In this alliance, there could have been a chance to come to a sort of understanding about lesbians and the realization that lesbians were not a threat to liberal feminism, but rather could be major allies of it.

However, once again in a strange irony that reveals itself time and time again in this story between lesbian and liberal feminists; lesbian feminism came in part from the radical feminist movement itself. While there was much animosity among many radical feminists against lesbians, there was a small undercurrent in the feminist community where lesbianism began to sprout. Ros Baxandall of Redstockings stated

that among New York radical feminists “Lesbianism wasn’t a big thing because virtually everyone was experimenting with it. We’d go away to write something and almost everyone would sleep together. We even drew lots [to determine who would sleep with whom] and then cheated.”[19]

This reveals the fact that while lesbians were hated and despised among mainstream liberal feminists, there was still sexual experimentation among radical feminists.

Despite this oppression, lesbians were able to create new theories that spoke to their oppression. Early radical lesbians “argued either that the lesbian is the paradigm case of patriarchal resister because she refuses to be heterosexual or that she fits on a continuum of types of patriarchal resisters”[20] In doing this, they “made a space for lesbianism by focusing on what they took to be the inherently feminist and anti-patriarchal nature of

lesbian existence.”[21] By viewing their sexuality as anti-patriarchal by its very nature, lesbians could reaffirm their identities and show that their very existence was an act of rebellion against the status quo.

Lesbian Feminist Theory

On a theoretical level, liberal feminism was only able to reject lesbians as their allies against patriarchy by “treat[ing] lesbian oppression as a special case of patriarchal oppression and remain blind to the irreducibly lesbian nature of lesbian lives”[22] and ignoring the fact that liberal feminism doesn’t have a space for non-heterosexuals. The main problem with liberal feminism in regards to lesbians was the fact that they did not have a structure to address the issues of people who were gay and viewed homosexuality through a very narrow lens that didn’t allow them to see lesbians as anything other than enemies.

Anti-lesbian feminists were unable to realize that they were much more the supporters of patriarchy than lesbians.

Women’s heterosexual orientation perpetuates their social, economic, emotional, and sexual dependence on and accessibility by men. Heterosexuality is thus a system of male ownership of women, participation in which is compulsory for men and especially for women. The lesbian’s and heterosexual woman’s relation to heterosexuality on this account is fundamentally the same. Both experience it as the demand that women be dependent on and accessible by men. Both are vulnerable to penalties if they resist that demand. Thus heterosexuality is equally compulsory for heterosexual women and lesbians; and compulsory heterosexuality means the same thing for both. There is no specifically lesbian relation to heterosexuality.[23] (emphasis added)

Charlotte Bunch of the lesbian feminist group, The Furies, articulates this by stating that

Heterosexuality separates women from each other; it makes women define themselves through men; it forces women to compete against each other for men and the privilege which comes through men and their social standing. Heterosexual society offers women a few privileges as compensation if they give up their freedom: for example, mothers are respected and ‘honored,’ wives or lovers are socially accepted and given some economic and emotional security, a woman gets physical protection on the street when she stays with her man, etc. The privileges give heterosexual women a personal and political stake in maintaining the status quo.[24] (emphasis added)

From the point of lesbian feminist theory, women, by being in heterosexual relationships, are allowing themselves to, at some level, be subjugated by men as they must adhere to the norms and values that the general society promotes (such as dressing in a non-provocative manner) and that have been created within the context of a male-dominated society.

Yet, this theory also acknowledges the sexual politics that occur between lesbians and men as in the eyes of the patriarchy, for a woman to be independent, she must be a lesbian, however “in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation – which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a ‘woman’ is to get fucked by men.” [25] It acknowledges the inherent objectification and sexualization of women in society.

The first lesbian feminist theory that was espoused was *The Woman Identified Woman* in 1970 by the group Radicalesbians. In the paper, the Radicalesbians state that lesbian “is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs.”[26] It acknowledges that for a woman to actually stand up and assert herself immediately strips her of womanhood in the eyes of the patriarchy and reduces her to that of a “thing,” rather than a human being.

The Woman Identified Woman discusses how the homophobia in the larger feminist movement actually empowers the patriarchy as it keeps women in the mindset of the heterosexual patriarchy and forces women to take a less militant stance for fear of being called a “dyke.”

Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. As long as male acceptability is primary-both to individual women and to the movement as a whole-the term lesbian will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women’s liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism – i. e., to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female.[27] (emphasis added)

By denying lesbianism, women were actually internalizing the oppression, disregard, and hatred that men have in regards to them as on a psychological level, they are engaging in male-defined responses that result in a hatred and dehumanization of lesbians based on their homosexuality.

Lesbian feminism is needed as not only must lesbians deal with the oppression that comes from patriarchy, but they also have to create a space for themselves within the larger LGBT community. The gay rights movement equates lesbians and gays on the same level and in doing so is “unable to address the connection between lesbian oppression and women’s oppression” and “tend[s] to equate gay with gay male and failed to address the patriarchal attitudes embedded in the gay movement itself.”[28] During the 1970s and ‘80s, lesbians found it difficult to get gay men interested in equal rights for lesbians as “gay men [did] not find feminist or lesbian concerns to be close enough to their own to compel either supportive political action or serious and attentive thought.”[29] The larger gay rights movement ignores the specific oppression that lesbians found themselves under and rather than creating an open space for lesbians to be safe, it suppresses and ignores them.

On a cultural level, one realizes that gay men, specifically white gay men, are actually beneficiaries of the misogynistic culture that existed (and still exists) in America as while they are oppressed due to their homosexuality, they still benefit from being white men in a society that favors whiteness and masculinity. “[T]he gay rights movement generally has taken the course of claiming the manhood of its constituents, supposing that the presumption of gay men’s rights will follow upon acknowledgement of this. In so doing, they acquiesce in and support the reservation of full citizenship to males and thus align themselves with the political adversaries of feminism.”[30]

On a deeper analysis of gay men, they have much more in common with heterosexual men as the patriarchal system itself is homoerotic.

All or almost all of that which pertains to love, most straight men reserve exclusively for other men. The people whom they admire, respect, adore, revere, honor, whom they imitate, idolize, and form profound attachments to, whom they are willing to teach and from whom they are willing to learn, and whose respect, admiration, recognition, honor, reverence and love they desire... those are, overwhelmingly, other men. [...] Heterosexual male culture is homoerotic; it is man-loving. This is perfectly consistent with its being heterosexual, since in this scheme sex and love have nothing essential, and very little that is accidental, to do with each other.[31] (emphasis added)

This homoeroticism in heterosexuals creates a situation where gay men find themselves as fitting in with patriarchy on a cultural basis and thus they may be more likely to support it at the expense of women.

Gender norms and patriarchy within the LGBT community can be seen in modern times as white gay men are at the top and the most representative of the LGBT in the United States for no other reason than being white men. It is interesting to note that many parts of the oppressive framework that existed in the overall society were replicated within the gay community.

The fact that gay men find themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, with the patriarchy and thus with the oppression of women creates a need for lesbian feminism to exist as a way to address the oppression of lesbians.

Lesbian feminist theory allows for a safe space to be made for lesbians while at the same time presenting a challenge to the system that is predicated on heterosexuality and patriarchy as well as challenging liberal feminists to seriously think about just how much the patriarchy has influenced their thinking about women and if they have internalized any of those thoughts that come out in the form of homophobia and denying the very truth that lesbians, in fact, constitute being women just as much as they themselves do.

Notes

[1] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pg 34

[2] Casey Hayden, Mary King, *Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo from Casey Hayden and Mary King to a number of other women in the peace and freedom movements*, University of Illinois at Chicago <http://uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUArchive/memo.html>

[3] Echols, pg 34

[4] Echols, pg 38

[5] Echols, pg 42

[6] Echols, pg 43

[7] Echols, pg 25

[8] Barbara Ryan, "Ideological Purity and Feminism: The US Women's Movement from 1966 to 1975," *Gender and Society*, 3 (June 1989), pg 5

- [9] Ryan, pg 6
- [10] Echols, pg 44
- [11] Echols, pgs 44-45
- [12] Echols, pg 48
- [13] Echols, pg 143
- [14] Echols, pg 147
- [15] Echols, pg 159
- [16] Echols, pg 164
- [17] Echols, pg 173
- [18] <http://nova.wpunj.edu/newpolitics/issue35/boucher35.htm>
- [19] Echols, pg 212
- [20] Cheshire Calhoun, "Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory," *Ethics* 104:3 (April 1994), pg 558
- [21] Calhoun, pg 558
- [22] Calhoun, pg 559
- [23] Calhoun, pg 560
- [24] Charlotte Bunch, *Lesbians In Revolt*, Feminist Reprise,
<http://www.feminist-reprise.org/docs/lwmbunch.htm>
- [25] Radical Lesbians, *Woman Identified Woman*, Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement An On-line Archival Collection,
<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womid/>
- [26] <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womid/>
- [27] <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womid/>
- [28] Calhoun, pg 560
- [29] Marilyn Frye, *Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism*, *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*,
<http://www.feminist-reprise.org/docs/fryegayrights.htm>
- [30] <http://www.feminist-reprise.org/docs/fryegayrights.htm>
- [31] <http://www.feminist-reprise.org/docs/fryegayrights.htm>

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