

*Reading
between the lines*

A Lesbian Feminist
Critique
of Feminist Accounts
of Sexuality

*Denise
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Reading between the lines

Other works by the same author:

Discrimination and Homosexuality (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 1982—principal author)

Flaws in the Social Fabric (Allen and Unwin, 1984)

Freedom For What? (self-published pamphlet, 1984)

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1

introduction

MY DISAPPOINTMENT WITH most of what passes for the feminist account of sexuality stems from its denial of male domination. This denial takes the form of a libertarian sexual ethic which is the expression of a desire not to know what kind of world it is we live in. It is a failure to acknowledge the hegemony of the phallus as the defining principle of the relations of power within which we are situated. At best it is a failure to resist those phallic power relations. At worst, it is an embracing of them. It also involves a refusal to recognise what feminism has already achieved by way of challenging the phallic hegemony, in particular the deliberate denial of lesbianism and separatism as genuine political strategies.

As a consequence, the libertarian commitment fails to deal with female sexual specificity. By 'specificity' I do not mean something that sexuality 'is' for women—multiply orgasmed or 'frigid', clitoral or vaginal or both, involving the whole body or focused on the genitals, occurring within relationships or engaged in purely for bodily pleasure, monogamous or not. By 'specificity' I mean 'sexuality' as it relates to the interests of women. I mean dealing with the question of whether the 'sexuality' under discussion contributes to the interests women have in claiming a human status, or whether, and in what way, it does not. In too many feminist texts, 'sexuality' is treated as a common 'human' capacity available to all (at least in the West), whose problems and discontents are imposed or introjected from the social milieu. In doing so, these feminist texts reproduce the phallic norm, either by treating 'sex' as something women do only with men, or by defining it as something men do that women ought to do too.

The libertarian texts also fail to critique adequately enough the implications for women of the continuing hegemony of phallic sexuality. In particular, they evade questions about the consequences for female heterosexual desire of the involvement of the penis, given that organ's symbolic function as the marker of a 'human' status from which the female is excluded, and given the eroticising of that exclusion. Included in that questioning is the part lesbianism has played in the feminist challenge to the hegemony of the phallic function, by bringing into question its 'naturalness', its 'normalcy', its role as the norm of 'human' sexuality.

These failures are common to both the early and the later feminist writings on sexuality. The early writings adopted the libertarianism of the environment within which they were produced, the New Left, the counter-culture, and the 'permissive sixties'. They were highly critical of heterosexuality, and radical feminists in particular called on women to abandon it. They did not, however, recognise the central symbol of the phallus. Nor did they support lesbianism, or acknowledge it as a radical political practice.

The later writings expand on the theme of a spuriously sex neutral 'sexuality', by emphasising bodily pleasure and sexual pluralism. By avoiding questions of sexual domination and the eroticisation of relationships of domination and subordination, these writings ignore or distort issues of vital interest to women. There is little discussion of, for example, the possible nature of a female sexuality unencumbered by the demands of the

eroticised phallus; of the possibility of erotic relationships of equality and mutual recognition and respect; of the waxing and waning of female desire and activity at different life stages, under different conditions, within long term relationships, when ‘falling in love’. There are a number of texts which purport to give accounts of the constitution of female sexual desire under ‘patriarchal’, i.e. phallocratic, conditions, notably those feminist writings in dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis. What these texts address, however, is not female sexual *desire*, but female sexual *identity*, i.e. identity as one of two sexes. This is an important project in itself, but we need to be clear about what it does not do.

It is in this sense that I would assert that feminism has not had very much to say about female sexuality. As I see it, such a feminist debate would need to revolve around the central question of male domination and of how female sexuality is situated under such conditions. At the same time, we need to be clear about what we want, how to achieve that, and what prevents us doing so. This project would involve neither a wholesale rejection of the status quo, nor its mere reversal. It would be a sorting out process, a process of evaluation and decision about what we reject outright, what needs modification to give it a genuinely human face, and what we want to retain. It would need to remain firmly grounded in emotion, feeling and experience, but it must go beyond these too. Hegemonic social relations function most efficiently when they are encoded in systems of meaning embedded in the psychical processes of individuals. We control ourselves and comply with our own oppression to the extent that we blindly capitulate to the driving demands of our own emotions, and to the extent that we fail to question our desires and locate them within an explicit moral and political framework.

Lesbian desire is central to any feminist debate on sexuality, not, however, as *the* solution, either to male supremacy or to other mediated forms of relations of power. Lesbianism is central because of the challenge it poses to the compulsions heterosexuality imposes on the lives of women. But although lesbianism promises connections between women of mutual trust and respect, and sometimes fulfils that promise even beyond our original expectations, it does not always do so. Hence, we need to turn our critical gaze onto lesbianism itself. We need to know why we have failed when we have, in order to keep the process moving and avoid being stuck in confusion and bitter recriminations. But that is a task I do not address here.

This book is a critical overview of the feminist debate on sexuality. My purpose is to evaluate a number of feminist texts for their insight (or lack of it) into the problem of phallocentricity. My approach is informed by a consciousness of the role played by the phallus in the definition of what counts as ‘female sexuality’ under conditions of male domination, and by my conviction of the need for feminism to challenge the dominance of the phallus in the lives of women. The question I address to each text is: Does it acknowledge the existence of phallic domination? If so, how does it do so? If not, why not? It may seem at first sight as though a term like ‘phallocentricity’ is inappropriate in relation to such early ‘second wave’¹ feminist texts as *The Feminine Mystique*, *Sexual Politics*, *The Female Eunuch*, *The Dialectic of Sex*, etc, because it is a term which was not in current usage at the time those books were written. But although the term itself was not used, the idea behind it has been the chief motivating factor throughout this latest upsurge in feminist consciousness.

In its narrowest sense, I take 'sexuality' to mean that desire and activity which centres around, although is not confined to, eroti-cism, genitality, and orgasm. I want to insist on including that narrow sense of 'sexuality' within the definition, because I want to be clear about what it is that we are talking about. By itself, however, that definition is misleading for feminist purposes, because it implies that sexual desire/activity is a property of those individuals who experience that desire and engage in that activity, while saying nothing about the politics of sexuality. In contrast, I am concerned with sexuality as a relationship, not simply in the narrow sense of occurring between two (or more) individuals—in that sense, the definition would exclude masturbation and fantasy from the scope of the 'sexual'—but in the wider sense of occurring within the context of social relations which constitute what is to count as 'sexual', and which determine whose interests are served and whose elided or trivialised. My concern is not with the mechanics of sexuality—with what is done and how it is done—but with the meanings, purposes, sources and consequences of that desire/activity.

I am concerned to question the still prevalent belief in a universal, homogeneous 'sexuality' common to all, female and male alike. I want to avoid the prevailing tendency to subsume female sexuality under a general category of 'sexuality', because 'sexuality' without further qualifications remains a male prerogative, even in feminist texts with the best intentions. Women have different interests, purposes and desires from men in relation to sexuality, chief among those differences being the need to throw off male sexual domination of females. To argue, as some feminist texts have done, that, at some truer or more real level than we are conscious of at the moment, women and men are (or will be, or ought to be) alike sexually, is at best premature. At worst, those arguments reinforce the norm of the male. The 'equality' they assert is spurious, since it incorporates women into a framework which functions in the interests of the male and against the interests of the female. What passes for 'human' sexuality is only male under conditions of male supremacist ideology. Since it is also heterosexual, women must be there too, but as a logical requirement of 'normality' and as a resource to fuel male potency, rather than in their own right. The phallogentric ideology of 'sexuality' implicitly (never overtly) recognises only one 'sexuality', that which is concerned with the pleasures and processes of the penis, defining it as the only sexual organ with everything else ancillary to it, as stimulation, receptacle, means of elicitation, object of desire. Under such conditions, women's sexual interests cannot fail to be different from, and subordinate to, those of men.

The standpoint from which my questioning originates is that of lesbian feminism. The 'lesbianism' I am referring to is 'political' lesbianism (as, of course, it must be, if it is to be coupled with feminism). By 'political' lesbianism, I do not mean engaging in sexual activity with a woman merely for the sake of political correctness, for the sake of making one's sexual activity consistent with feminist principles without any intrinsic desire for the activity, or, more cogently, without any sexual desire for the woman with whom one is having sex. Although that is a common meaning of 'political lesbian', that is not what I mean by the term. I want to define lesbianism first and foremost in terms of a sexual desire for women which is experienced as arising spontaneously, and not in terms of an activity or connection unrelated to sexual desire. I would also want to include within the category of 'political lesbian' any woman who does not feel sexual desire towards women in the narrow sense, but is sexually

uninterested in men, identifies as a lesbian, loves women, and is committed to the interests of women.

The 'political' element I am referring to indicates a consciousness of what lesbian desire means within the context of male domination. It points to an awareness on the part of lesbians that our spontaneous erotic reaching out to women is not just a personal 'sexual preference' (although it is that too). It is also the realisation that lesbian desire challenges the normative status of heterosexuality, exposes the male domination at the heart of 'normal' relations between the sexes, and establishes connections between women unhampered by male demands. In that sense, I would exclude from the category of 'political lesbian' those lesbians who regard their sexuality as a private matter, with no relevance beyond their own personal preoccupations. At the same time, however, even that self-styled 'apolitical' lesbianism has political implications because it is a statement about female sexual unavailability to men.

The feminist standpoint which informs my critique is that of radical feminism. By 'radical feminism' I mean, in Catharine MacKinnon's phrase, 'a feminism unqualified by preexisting modifiers'. (MacKinnon, 1987b:16) This 'feminism unmodified' is not ancillary to any of the varieties of 'malestream thought' (to use Mary O'Brien's felicitous phrase—O'Brien, 1981), whether liberalism, socialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis or postmodernism. Radical feminism, as has so often been said, goes to the roots of women's oppression. What has been said less often is the way in which that is so. What is it which constitutes the roots of women's oppression? How is it possible to tear those roots up, and how should we proceed towards bringing the oppression of women to an end? As I see it, feminism is the struggle *against* male domination (or—to suggest a number of synonyms for the name of the enemy—against male supremacy, male hegemony, phallogocentricity, the malestream, the boys, or phallogocratic reality. The latter term is Nancy Hartsock's (Hartsock, 1987)).² At the same time, feminism is the struggle *for* forms of connection between women which are outside male control, which are unavailable to male definition. It is not sufficient for feminist purposes merely to refer to 'women's oppression'. That term by itself neither names the enemy, nor suggests any way out. The failure to name the enemy has led to some bizarre notions about the causes of women's oppression—that women are oppressed because of the weakness of our female biology or the strength of men's, because of our own misguided attitudes or the prejudices of others, or because we failed to get a tertiary education or interrupted our careers to have babies. And to focus our attention on women's oppression, without recognising the ways in which we have joined together to evade male control, is to leave us stuck in the role of victim.

Hence the standpoint from which I approach this investigation of feminist accounts of sexuality locates lesbianism at the centre, rather than as an addendum or an afterthought. It is a lesbianism which is both a challenge to male supremacy, and an erotic politics creating connections between women unfettered by male norms. Indeed, it is that very politics of women loving women which challenges the male hegemony, since to be a 'woman' within the terms of the phallogocratic reality is to be focused entirely on men and divided from other women.

In what follows, I often use the term ‘feminism’ without further qualification. When I do make distinctions, it is because they are relevant to the discussion at hand, and do not imply that the differences are irreconcilable (although I do not claim to have reconciled them). The ‘feminism’ I am referring to is confined largely to Anglo-American writings of the period from the late 1960s to the present, together with my own experience of the debates within the Women’s Liberation Movement in Australia from the early seventies. I have excluded Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, relevant and influential though it was, because the work of de Beauvoir deserves a lengthier critique than I can give it here.

I have also not considered any of what has recently come to be called (not entirely accurately) ‘French feminist theory’. I say ‘not entirely accurately’, because much of it is not feminist (although all of it defers to the French). In the first place, I find most of this work almost completely incomprehensible, despite a number of valiant attempts to read it (usually in English). Sometimes my lack of comprehension occurs at the basic level of the words on the page. I can discover no meaning at all in what I am reading, as though the text were written in an unknown foreign language. At other times, I can understand the words on the page well enough, but I cannot understand why such ideas and arguments are being conveyed in a feminist context. I have also listened to and read innumerable interpretations, an exercise which is ultimately futile because I cannot compare the adequacy or otherwise of any particular interpretation with the original texts. On those occasions when I have understood (or thought I did), what I have perceived the texts to be saying has not so far warranted what seems to me to be the enormous expenditure of time and effort necessary for adequate comprehension.

In the second place, the ‘French feminists’ have come to occupy the whole of the terrain of published and academic feminist theory, at least in Australia. Very rarely, to my knowledge, are the US and British feminist writings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which originally inspired and informed feminism in Australia and elsewhere, subjected to the detailed and admiring scrutiny and endless interpretations and reinterpretations zealously accorded the French. Is it because the Anglo-American writings are easy to read, unlike the French whose delight in obfuscation seems to outweigh any desire to communicate? But although their language is comparatively simple, the message conveyed by many of the Anglo-American writings is not. They were ‘deconstructing’ language and the world long before ‘postmodernism’ was heard of. Because I do not want to add to the sycophantic chorus, I have excluded the French from my account.³

The book is divided into two parts. This division mirrors what I have found to be a chronological division in feminist writings about sexuality, up to 1975 and after 1980, with a curious gap in between, for which I have no explanation.⁴ [Part I](#) deals with the earlier writings, [Part II](#) with the later period. The chapters in the first part deal mainly with heterosexuality because that is the emphasis of the texts themselves. Indeed, in much of the earlier writing heterosexuality was the only focus of attention, even to the extent that it was implicitly defined as the *only* form of sexuality (apart from tokenistic references to homosexuality and lesbianism, brief references to ‘bisexuality’ as the coming thing, and, in those texts with a Freudian bent, to a primal and/or revolutionary ‘polymorphous

perversity’).

But that does not give these works immunity from being asked questions about lesbianism, not only about whether or not they deal with lesbianism at all and if so, how they do, but also about the implications for a theory of female sexuality of the inclusion, or alternatively, the exclusion or marginalisation, of lesbianism. Moreover, because these writings contain a *critique* of heterosexuality, they have rendered heterosexuality highly problematic for women. In doing so, what they have to say does have relevance for lesbian feminism, although that is not how the original (heterosexual) radical feminists approached the question of sexuality.

In the later texts, the feminist debate on sexuality has for some time now been largely dominated by a libertarian socialist feminism. (This domination has not, however, gone unchallenged. See the work of the British revolutionary feminists in Coveney et al., 1984. See also: Bleier, 1984, chapter 7; Jeffreys, 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1990; Jackson, 1987; Cole, 1989; and *Lesbian Ethics*, vol. 2, no. 3, Summer, 1987. It would seem, too, as though the various Women Against Pornography and Violence Against Women groups are saying something startling about sexuality, given the violence of the reaction against them). As a consequence, the distinction between different forms of feminism which is most relevant for my purposes is that between a socialist feminism with more or less libertarian leanings on the one hand, and on the other, an adversary who rarely if ever speaks in her own defence, but who is variously identified as ‘radical feminism’, ‘lesbian separatism’, or more recently (and more pejoratively) ‘cultural feminism’. I have found this distinction important because it has arisen within recent feminist debates around female sexuality.

For a number of reasons the distinction is not a hard and fast one. In the first place, so-called ‘cultural’ feminism is not an identifiable form of feminism in the sense that it is not a term chosen by the feminists who supposedly subscribe to it, but rather a label applied to writings of which the labeller disapproves. The socialist feminist/ ‘cultural’ feminist split is not a confrontation between two equally matched adversaries, but a demarcation dispute set up by some socialist and libertarian feminists to distinguish their own position from that of an opponent who is not there.

Moreover, not only do most feminists subscribe to some socialist principles—a rejection of the capitalist mode of production and distribution of wealth, the abolition of hierarchical and oppressive distinctions between categories of human beings —, socialist feminism itself has moved a long way from Marxist first principles. In particular, socialist feminism no longer holds to the conviction that the working class is the agent of historical change (although it does tend to attribute to ‘the working-class woman’ a greater radical potential than the rest of ‘us’, without, however, acknowledging the difficulties involved in locating women within a class analysis). It is not surprising that socialist feminism has had to move so far from Marxism, given the incapacity of Marxist theory to deal with the situation of women (not to mention questions of sexuality). Neither is socialist feminism’s continuing socialist commitment the result of continued participation in organisations of the male Left (as has been alleged by some radical feminists). Socialist feminism has from the beginning been highly critical of the failure of Left political groupings to deal adequately with

questions of women's subordination, one of the main criticisms being that that subordination was reproduced within the organised Left itself.

Nonetheless, socialist feminists continue to refer their theoretical problematic to what they still claim is a 'Marxist' framework, even though in many cases it is a 'Marxism' transformed beyond recognition. The theoretical reference is usually to '(historical) materialism' and (what amounts to the same thing in this case) 'science'. In its less sophisticated version, this 'materialism' involves an appeal to the 'economy' as the determining force in social relations, although it is an 'economy' which has widened to include work and production traditionally performed by women. The commitment to Marxism/socialism shows itself largely in the issues with which socialist feminism is most comfortable—economic policy, the state, welfare, employment, equal pay, industrial action, and the economic functions of 'the family' as a reproducer of labour power. But this 'materialist' emphasis is not conducive to devising either a theory of sexual politics in the broad sense of relations between the sexes, or a theory of 'sexuality' (female or otherwise), since it locates 'sexuality' *a priori* in a domain other than the 'material' (and by implication, a domain other than the 'real'), a domain variously identified as 'consciousness', 'culture' or 'ideology'. By defining sexuality as an epiphenomenon, i.e. as a secondary manifestation of something more basic, no matter how 'relatively autonomous' (or 'overdetermined') sexuality is allowed to be, socialist feminism has rendered itself incapable of dealing with sexuality on its own terms.

The appeal to 'science', in its less sophisticated versions, (e.g. Guettel, 1974) reproduces the economic reductionist emphasis of the appeal to 'materialism'. In its more sophisticated versions, (e.g. Mitchell, 1974; Coward and Ellis, 1977) the appeal to 'science' subordinates feminism to some kind of 'higher rationality'. Rather than using feminist criteria to judge the truth or falsity of claims made by discourses developed in the interests of maintaining the male monopoly of 'reason' (Lloyd, 1984), the appeal to 'science' attempts to evaluate feminism in terms of those very discourses themselves. Feminism, as a self-acknowledged politics, is not allowed to arbitrate in the domain of knowledge. Instead, feminism is judged in terms of other, external and 'universal' criteria. But those claims on the part of 'science', to universality, disinterestedness, and disengagement from the mucky, flawed world of politics, are suspect, resting as they do on a denial of science's own social, historical and cultural location. That claims to disinterestedness can mask the influence of very powerful interests indeed, appears not to have occurred to 'science's' socialist feminist defenders.

In the absence of an account which has allowed sexuality its own realm of discourse, socialist feminism's approach has been characterised by a continuing subterranean commitment to the 'repression hypothesis'.⁵ (See McIntosh, 1976, for a criticism of the prevalence of this idea within feminism.) This commitment to a belief in the existence of 'sexual repression' takes the form of a more or less equivocal libertarianism. (For an extended critique of sexual libertarianism, see Jeffreys, 1990) By 'libertarian' I mean an insistence on freedom from constraint, a rejection of any form of restriction on sexual behaviour especially moral prohibition, the advocacy of a plurality of 'sexualities', and a reluctance to relinquish the vision of 'sexual liberation' (although not always without reservations). Underlying this libertarian commitment is a belief that there exists some kind of 'true' sexuality, an intrinsic property of the individual which is suppressed by 'society',

but which will come into its full flowering once the social restrictions have been removed. The political strategy which follows from this commitment to the 'repression hypothesis' involves the refusal to take a stand against any form of sexual desire or activity, and the pejorative labelling of any such stand as 'moralistic'. My disappointment with the later texts stems from this libertarian emphasis, the unwillingness to criticise, sometimes the outright support for, such oppressive forms of sexuality as lesbian sadomasochism and pornography.

It is not the business of feminism to be telling women what they should and should not do. I am not arguing that women who feel a pressing need to act on their sadomasochistic desires refrain from doing so. Given that 'power is sexy', that sexual desire is so constituted that it is evoked by relationships of domination and subordination, it is not surprising that so many women (and men) can only feel sexual desire while being dominated or dominating, and in response to degradation, humiliation and pain. What is surprising is that so many women escape, or have refused, that need. What I find disappointing in the later libertarian texts is their failure to recognise the phallogentric entanglement of sex and domination as a problem.

This libertarian emphasis is evident among both feminists in the US with a history of involvement in the New Left, and British feminists whose history includes involvement in traditional Marxist working-class politics. The irony of this socialist feminist commitment to a libertarian position on questions of sexuality is not only that its basis in liberal individualism comes into conflict with Marxism, but also that it conflicts with its expressed feminist commitment to a social constructionist theory of sexuality. This conflict between the individualist emphasis of sexual libertarianism and the thesis that sexual desire is socially, or 'patriarchally', constituted has, to my knowledge, not been recognised. (But see: *Homosexuality*, 1989, for the beginnings of an awareness of the conflict).

phallogentricity and the case for political lesbianism

AS A DESIGNATION of the central problem addressed by feminism, I prefer the term ‘phallogentricity’ (and the synonyms mentioned in the last chapter) to both ‘sexism’ and ‘patriarchy’, because the term ‘phallogentricity’ identifies the centrality of the phallus in defining and structuring relationships of domination. (See below). ‘Sexism’ has been too readily co-opted, probably because the original definition was too equitable. It referred (and still refers) to discrimination on the grounds of sex without locating the source of sex discrimination in male domination. (For such a definition, see: Summers, 1975: 22). Anne Summers argues that it is ‘necessary to look at the power structure which upholds and reinforces a sex distinction and to see who benefits from it’, and that it is ‘men [who] occupy dominant positions in all important political, economic and cultural institutions’. But that proviso is not built into the term itself. As a consequence, men can and do use it to complain about their exclusion from women-only spaces, to justify what they regard as their god-given ‘right’ to go any where they please, and to dismiss and trivialise any attempt to redress inequities suffered by women on the grounds that it ‘discriminates’ against their own male selves. Although it does have its uses as a description of discriminatory beliefs and practices directed against women, as long as it is used in the interests of women, and not as one more tactic for defending male privilege, its use is limited to a piecemeal device for attacking specific attitudes and behaviours.

The term ‘patriarchy’ is also inadequate, although not because it is ‘ahistorical’ (as some socialist feminists have argued). ‘History’ itself is a Western rationalist construct, which has its uses within the conventions of chronological and empirical linearity, but which has limited relevance for those excluded from the hegemonic apparatuses concerned with its making and recording—women (*as* women, rather than as appurtenances of or substitutes for men, e.g. queens in the absence of male heirs), indigenous peoples conquered and colonised by the West, ‘the poor and lowly’ everywhere. Moreover, ‘history’ always starts with the present, with current concerns and preoccupations through which the past is interpreted. In that sense, even ‘history’ is ‘ahistorical’, in the sense of anachronistic.

The problem with the term ‘patriarchy’ involves its literal meaning as ‘the rule of the father’, an inappropriate description of social relations in the West today. It is not fathers who rule, but men. In a social, legal and economic sense, there are no ‘fathers’ left in the West. Social institutions no longer buttress the power of fathers, and men do not acquire and hold power through their status as fathers. As Carole Pateman argues, ideological justifications for political power in terms of father-right were decisively defeated in a series of debates which occurred in Europe around the end of the seventeenth century. ‘Patriarchy ceased to be paternal long ago’, she said. She went on:

Modern civil society is not structured by kinship and the power of fathers; in the modern world, women are subordinated to men *as men*, or to men as a fraternity...the father is politically dead and his patriarchal power has been universalized, that is, distributed to all men... When the brothers make the original pact they...create a new form of civil right to replace paternal right... Patriarchal right is extended in an orderly fashion to the fraternity (all men)... Civil individuals form a fraternity

because they are bound together by a bond as men. They share a common interest in upholding the original contract which legitimizes masculine right and allows them to gain material and psychological benefit from women's subjection. (Pateman, 1988:3, 113—her emphasis)

But neither of the parties to the debate, neither the 'patriarchalists' nor the 'social contract' theorists, addressed themselves to the original source of political power, to what Pateman calls, after Adrienne Rich, 'the law of male sex-right' (p. 2), of male domination of women. This source was prior both to the power of the father and to any agreements between (male) 'equals'.¹

Although women in the West have formal and legal economic independence of men, men (although not all men) still own and control the production and distribution of wealth. Although more women are appearing in public life, they are isolated from other women and slotted into male-defined places unchanged by the sex of the incumbent. The male remains identified with the 'human' norm, the female an addendum to, or absent from, that norm. But the norm is not that of fatherhood, but of maleness, stark, unadorned, needing no other justification than possession of the valorised appendage.

This is the meaning of the term 'phallogentricity': that the phallus, the penis as symbol of 'human' status, plays the central and ruling role in defining social reality. In other words, men rule because they have penises. This is not a statement about anatomy, or rather it is not a statement about an anatomy unincorporated into a symbolic universe within which an anatomical feature is burdened with significance. Hence the abolition of phallogentricity is not dependent on universal castration, but on a collective refusal to be implicated in the products, processes, structures and institutions which reproduce and reinforce the power of the phallus and what it signifies. It is a statement about meaning, about purpose, function, desire and morality, about the signifier of and justification for domination. It is because of this centrality of the phallus in defining the relations of domination challenged by feminism that I prefer the term 'phallogentricity', instead of using the term 'patriarchy', despite the fact that the latter is the preferred term in most feminist discourse. 'Phallogentricity' names the enemy clearly and immediately.

As the referent of the phallus, the problem with the penis lies, not in its role as a particular anatomical feature, nor in its role as the male sex organ, nor in its role as the locus of male sexual pleasure. The problem with the penis is that it is *not* just another bit of anatomy. Anatomy in and of itself does not give rise to relationships of domination and subordination. The problem with the penis lies in the part it plays in the establishing and maintaining of hierarchical relationships of power, in its role as phallus, i.e. as the sign of the power of the male over against the female. The problem with the penis lies in its function as the symbol of the only 'human' status (or subjectivity, or sense of self, or personal identity) given recognition under conditions of male supremacy. As the phallus, the penis functions as the sign marking sexual difference. But again, sexual difference in and of itself need not give rise to domination. Domination is ensured to the extent that the penis, in its role as phallus, serves to separate out two mutually exclusive and differentially valued categories of individuals, penis bearers and non-penis bearers. One category—'male'—is identified through possession of the valued organ; the other category—'female'—is identified through

contemptible lack of that glorified possession.

This account of the signification of the penis is obviously at odds with the Lacanian insistence that ‘the relation of the subject to the phallus is set up *regardless* of the anatomical difference between the sexes’. (Mitchell and Rose, eds., 1982:76—my emphasis). In my account, this relation between subject and phallus is unequivocally set up *because* of the hegemonic meaning of the anatomical difference between the sexes. At the same time, I would insist that it *ought not* to be, that the identity between penis and phallus, between the male sexual organ and the sign and justification of male domination, ought to be shattered and swept away. The feminist aim is to render the phallus impotent, to sever its connection with the penis, and to ensure that the latter is reduced to *nothing but* anatomy.

The strategic importance of lesbian feminism lies in its attempt to do just that, by according the penis and its bearer no value or recognition at all, and by recognising value, strength and importance only in women. This selective recognition, towards women and away from men, does not have to be a permanent state of affairs. Like Marx, ‘I am not in favour of hoisting a dogmatic banner’. (Marx, 1975[1843]:207) What Marx said of communism also applies to feminism: ‘we have no business with the construction of the future or with organising it for all time’. Feminism’s task, like Marx’s perception of the present task of communism, is ‘the *ruthless criticism of the existing order*’. Central to that ‘ruthless criticism’, which ‘will shrink neither from its own discoveries nor from conflict with the powers that be’, is the lesbian feminist strategy of withdrawal of support from men and their interests. (See [chapter six](#)) That withdrawal need not be forever, but it will need to last as long as male supremacy does.

The dominance of the phallus under conditions of male supremacy is manifested at two crucial social sites: at the beginning of each individual life from the moment of birth through infancy, childhood and puberty, and when the penis is exercised in its primary adult function during the activity of heterosexual intercourse. Women and men are not born, but made. None of us comes into the world fully grown. The making process, often referred to as ‘socialisation’, is long, arduous, not always successful in producing the desired outcome (‘desired’, that is, in terms of the dominant interests), and must be inculcated upon the psyches of human beings, who are not the most malleable of material, being endowed with the potential for reason, consciousness and a capacity for making decisions and choosing between alternatives. The process of ‘making’ female and male individuals must start at once, at birth, before the onset of reason and consciousness, and must be maintained throughout their development. The phallus is the prime motivator and continuing reference point for the inculcation of male domination upon the psyches of the individual bearers of social relations. It is the phallus which marks the first significant social difference, between a valued presence and a contemptible absence, and which sets the psychic scene for the reality of domination.

The problem of heterosexuality for women is the involvement of the penis as the sign of male power and the instigator of female subordination. For women, the irony of heterosexuality is female desire for the instrument of their oppression. Of course, what most women desire is not the penis per se, but its bearer, the particular individual man she is relating to. But under present conditions the act of heterosexual intercourse acquires its

‘normal’ meaning by being structured around the penis, its erection, stimulation and ejaculation. Unless the penis is present and active, and the action results in ejaculation, sex cannot really be said to have happened. What happens in the case of the woman is irrelevant in determining whether or not sex has really occurred, unless she interrupts the penis in its performance. It is in principle possible for women and men to recognise each other as fellow participants in the human condition, because the phallogentric devaluation of the female and hyper-valuation of the male is not a physical necessity, but a moral imperative. As such, it falls within the domain of human action, and hence can be changed. But particular heterosexual couples who manage to achieve any degree of mutual recognition will be the exception, not the norm. And the actual and threatened violence with which so many males continue to exercise against females that symbol of their masculine prerogatives, suggests caution in any attempt to redeem heterosexuality in the eyes of feminism. As long as the penis functions as a weapon turned against women, even though all men all the time do not use it as such, heterosexuality will remain tainted with that meaning. Barbara Sichtermann, in *Femininity: The Politics of the Personal*, made a valiant attempt to defend heterosexuality. But her eloquent, although highly critical defence, can appeal in the last analysis only to a ‘female instinct’ for sex with men (p. 127).

Penis-possession, it is true, is a paltry and puerile justification for the male monopolisation of ‘human’ status, a miniscule foundation upon which to base the massive erection of male supremacy. But it is the very paltriness of the justification for men’s rule, merely that they possess a certain anatomical feature, which threatens that rule, and which requires violence to fend off the threat. That men rule because they have penises would be a laughable proposition were it not for the fact that the penis is frequently used as a weapon to intimidate and attack females. It would be a very rare woman indeed who has escaped having that particular weapon brandished at her, not to mention the many women who have been brutally assaulted with it.

None of the usual reasons suggested for male domination, either as justifications or as explanations, hold up under closer investigation. Men’s greater physical strength or aggression will not do as justifications, since male supremacist institutions are neither established nor maintained by brute force. Although violence is an everpresent threat in the lives of women, it is an *expression* of domination, not a cause or a legitimation of it. Neither is the appeal to men’s economic power, as, for example, in the feminist ‘domestic labour debate’, an adequate explanation, because although ownership and control of wealth is one of the ways of maintaining male domination, it is more pertinently and centrally the way in which hierarchies of domination are maintained between men. Moreover, it too is an expression of male power, not its cause. Neither is male supremacy engendered by women’s physical weakness, passivity, nurturance, childbearing capacity, (e.g. Firestone, 1970), or monopoly of child rearing, (e.g. Chodorow, 1978) all of which are either manifestations of already existent male domination, or could be managed differently were women not subordinate.

Neither is the source of male supremacy to be found in men’s existential *angst* at their irrevocable exclusion from immediate participation in the continuity of the human species, i.e. the birthing process, as Mary O’Brien so elegantly and delightfully argues. (O’Brien,

1981; O'Brien, 1989) I am not denying the existence of that male anxiety, nor O'Brien's interpretation of Western culture as a gargantuan compensation devised by men to solace themselves for their undeniable lack, and to gain some control over human reproduction. But male supremacy must have already been set in place for that compensation to take the form of female oppression. Without a prior male domination, the management of that male lack could have taken different forms, e.g. a profound male reverence for the female, or a matriarchy.

The theory which shows the most promise as an account of the making of men is the feminist re-working of psychoanalytic 'object relations' theory. (Dinnerstein, 1976; Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow, 1979; Flax, 1980; Flax, 1983; Benjamin, 1980; Benjamin, 1983; Keller, 1978; Keller, 1985; Harding, 1981) It is only a promise, however, and not an actuality, because there are grave problems with the way the theory is currently constructed.

The term 'object relations' is itself an inadequate designation of what is involved here. Nancy Chodorow says that 'in psychoanalytic parlance "objects" are people, aspects of people, or symbols of people'. (Chodorow, 1978:42 footnote) Jane Flax defines the term 'object' in more detail:

Psychoanalysts tend to call other persons objects. This terminology is meant to do justice to the ways in which we do objectify persons—through projection and introjection, for example—and to point to the process through which the cluster of feelings, experience and fantasies we have with and about other persons become *our* object, that is, part of our mental life and structure. In turn, these now internal processes can become an object for consciousness as we attempt to uncover their social roots, in analysis for example. In this sense, subject and object are aspects of one continuous process. (Flax, 1983:274n17—her emphasis)

But the 'object' involved here is not just any person, but the mother. 'Object relations' psychoanalysis differs from Freudian psychoanalysis chiefly in its emphasis on the importance for the development of the self of the relationship with the mother, what is still called in phallic nomenclature, the 'pre-Oedipal period', with its dynamics of growing recognition of self and other within the maternal connection. As Jane Flax put it, 'object relations' theory is concerned with 'a reconceptualization of the first three years of life which emerges as the crucial period of psychodynamic development, rather than the Oedipal period. Consequently (given patriarchal child-rearing patterns), the focus is on the mother-child relationship rather than the father-child one'. (Op. cit, p. 249) Yet the term 'object relations' gives no hint of this. Nonetheless, for the sake of its reference to a body of current feminist work, I will retain the term for present purposes.

While the emphasis on the importance of the maternal is necessary to redress the androcentric imbalance and to fill in the astounding gap within conventional psychoanalysis, so far feminist 'object relations' theory has persisted in throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and in so doing has ended up by blaming the victims (i.e. women who mother) of our present child rearing arrangements. Its concentration on the pre-Oedipal period, during which the first recognitions of self come into being through recognition of the first other, the mother, has meant that 'object relations' theory has absolved the phallus of the primary responsibility for the structuring of our current sexual arrangements, and instead has located that responsibility with the women who mother.

For Chodorow, male domination is a consequence of the fact that it is women who care for and provide the first human relationship for the very young: 'women's mothering is a central

and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself". (Chodorow, 1978:9) Dinnerstein makes an even grander claim: that 'the fact of primary female responsibility for the care of infants and young children' will be the death of us all because it 'maintains and deepens the underlying sickness...[of] our species' normal psychopathology...this basic human malaise...while superficially allaying its pain'. (Dinnerstein, 1976:4) That such horrendous burdens are the responsibility of women is a conclusion which can only be drawn by pusillanimously ignoring the main enemy—phallic power.

Both Chodorow and Dinnerstein recommend as a solution that men participate equally with women in the primary caretaking of infants. If such a rearrangement were to occur, they argue, then the intense ambivalences generated by the utter dependency of early childhood would not be resolved by a splitting of the human psyche into a dominant, detached, uncaring masculinity and a dependent, smothering and contemptible femininity, both of which are infantile and involve the suppression of aspects of the full human potential. Neither author considers the danger of such a recommendation as long as the phallus retains its present glorified status, and father-daughter incest and male sexual abuse of children continue at the present high level of incidence. This omission is particularly striking in the case of Chodorow who includes a number of examples of fathers' attitudes towards their tiny daughters. The following are comments from men asked to describe their two- and three-year-old daughters:

'A bit of a flirt, arch and playful with people, a pretended coyness.'

'Soft and cuddly and loving. She cuddles and flatters in subtle ways.'

'I notice her coyness and flirting, "come up and see me sometime" approach. She loves to cuddle. She's going to be sexy—I get my wife annoyed when I say this.'

(Chodorow, 1978:118)

That these men could describe their relationships with their daughters in such blatantly heterosexual terms, should have sounded a warning note to Chodorow. She does say, citing a paper called 'Fathers and Daughters' by Marjorie Leonard, that fathers 'must be able to make themselves available as a heterosexual love object and to offer affection without being seduced by their daughters' fantasies or seducing them with their own' (ibid.). But neither Chodorow nor Leonard seems to be aware of how often the fine line is breached, nor of the possibility that there may be no line at all between a father's 'availability as a heterosexual love object' and his 'seduction' of his daughter. It may be anachronistic to expect Chodorow to know about the high incidence of father-daughter incest (not to mention Leonard, whose paper was written in 1966), since most of the information has only become available again recently (although feminists in the nineteenth century knew about it—See Jeffreys, 1985). Nonetheless, those fathers' comments should have warned Chodorow against the advisability of recommending greater male access to children, at least until the underlying problem of valorisation of the phallus has been addressed.

While feminist 'object relations' theorists do not entirely ignore the Oedipal phase and its central problematic of obsession with and glorification of penis-possession and fear of its loss, they do tend to diminish its importance. To a certain extent, this diminution is justified in light of the absurdity of the conventional psychoanalytic perspective which obliterates the

importance of the primary caretaker in the child's life, the mother. While it is important to stress the fact that issues of autonomy and separation on the one hand, and merging, attachment and dependence on the other, occur most intensely and ambivalently in the first year of life in relation to a single, isolated female adult (under our present arrangements), those issues are structured from the beginning by the phallocratic reality of the social context into which the baby is born.

Ironically, Nancy Chodorow appears to be at least partly aware of this. The inference that the phallus dominates the processes of even the relatively isolated mother-infant dyad, that the penis is a significant differentiator from the moment of birth, is contained in statements like: 'a mother, of a different gender from her son', 'her son's maleness and oppositeness as a sexual other'. She also says that 'the early [pre-Oedipal] period is sexualised for boys in a way that it is not for girls, ...phallic-masculine issues become intertwined with supposedly nongender-differentiated object-relational and ego issues concerning the creation of a separate self.' (Chodorow, 1978:107) But she does not say explicitly that the sign of that difference is the male infant's penis, the only thing which differentiates him from the female infant, and which provides the promise of his eventual entrance into his phallic-masculine heritage.

She also argues that the 'core gender identity' of masculinity, the subjecthood of male supremacy, is more conflictful and problematic than that of femininity, because the male must divest himself so completely of his original identification with his first lover and caretaker, his mother. She says that both sexes need to separate from the mother if they are to develop a sense of autonomous selfhood, but males must develop a complete repudiation of all things feminine/female. They must 'come to deny the feminine identification within themselves and those feelings they experience as feminine: feelings of dependence, relational needs, emotions generally'. (Chodorow, 1979:13) Such a personality structure is indeed problematic because it is based on a misogynist lie, that the female is contemptible. The male ego is not at all fragile, however, because it is buttressed by all the weight of phallocratic reality. He knows who he is because the world constantly reassures him of the importance of his maleness. The problematic nature of the male ego is due to the fact that that reassurance is illusory, because it is based on such a puerile justification, and because it is dependent on the denial of women as important individuals in their own right. Recognition of women may be fended off in various ways, but the female presence continues to be felt nonetheless, not least because men continue to exploit women.

Chodorow does not make explicit the prior reason for the instability of the masculine ego, prior, that is, to the mothering process itself, and that is the paltriness of the justification for the male denial of the female. He is, or rather will be, in the case of the male infant, lord and master and the very model of the 'human' individual simply because he has a penis. It is because masculinity has such a tenuous basis that it must be constantly asserted and continually practised through the exercise of its primary adult function, phallic sexuality. The importunate and ungainsayable 'male sex drive' functions to shore up a male ego threatened by its own fragile origins. It is this 'male sex drive' which supposedly engineers men to rape. It requires prostitution as a resource to be mined to fuel male potency, the sexual objectification of females as always available receptacles for the valorised organ and its

bearer, the forcible coercion or enraged denigration of females who are unwilling to participate, and the exercise of the phallus as the paradigm of 'human' sexuality. It must be reinforced, elicited and exacerbated by pornography and by the depiction of females as ever desirous and happily willing to pamper and adore the penis and the ego it maintains.

Although feminist 'object relations' theory of the importance of the maternal promises to show us the way out, the original source for theorising phallogentricity is to be found in the work of Freud, in his concepts of the 'Oedipus complex', the 'castration complex' and the egregiously misnamed 'penis envy'. This latter phenomenon is misnamed because it is only secondarily a problem of the female psyche, and only to the extent that females acquiesce unquestioningly in the 'lack', by deferring to men because they are men, by accepting contemptible second-rate status, by failing to challenge dehumanisation, by eroticising domination, subordination and degradation. To the extent that women do feel envy and resentment towards men, it is an understandable reaction to the male monopoly of power and privilege. 'Penis envy' is, before anything else, a problem generated by a phallogentric culture.

Freud perceived the problem to the extent that he identified its source and delineated its consequences in the dehumanisation of women (not that he was aware that that was what he was doing), but *misperceived* it, and hence misnamed it, by his systematic failure to locate it accurately in male supremacy. As was often the way with Freud, he did show some faint glimmerings of insight into the implications of his theory for the lives of women. On most occasions where he discussed the castration complex, he referred to the contempt in which women are held because they lack the valorised organ. (Freud, 1905:113, n. 2; Freud, 1912: passim; Freud, 1918:272; Freud, 1923:311; Freud, 1925:336, 337; Freud, 1931:376). But although this caused him some uneasiness, he did not deplore it, except on one occasion (Freud, 1912) where he deplored the effect it had on the sex lives of *men*.

Put briefly, Freud argued that the human child, originally neither sex (from the infant's point of view, although identifiable from birth by others), becomes situated in culture as a sexed individual through its realisation of possession or lack of a penis. That is the first distinction. From that source flow all subsequent differentiations between already identified males and females. But the penis is not simply a distinguishing sign. It marks not just a difference, but a hierarchical one, a hyper-valued presence opposed to a devalued absence. The threat of its loss engenders anxiety, and its absence, a desire for its possession. That feminine desire is only vicariously appeasable, traditionally through relationships to father, husband, (male) child, less conventionally through male tolerance of female presence in the public sphere. Because it can never be completely assuaged, it keeps women bound to statuses dependent on male recognition. Unless, of course, we refuse to be implicated. (Men can refuse too, and some of them do some of the time.)

It is this situation which is challenged by lesbianism in particular and separatism in general. (See [chapter six](#)). It is the feminist practice which goes straight to the heart of women's oppression within male supremacy. It is immediate, i.e. not mediated by theory or political rationality. It is pure desire, owing nothing to reason, calculation or expediency. Indeed, the theorising is only just beginning. It was lesbianism's very claim to being the only radical sexual practice for women, which for a long time placed it beyond question, not,

however, because of that claim alone. What also placed lesbianism beyond criticism and discussion was the noisy denial which the claim aroused whenever it was made, or rather, whenever it was *seen* to be made, which was most occasions on which the issue of lesbian visibility within the women's movement was raised. The denial usually took the form of a demand that the hapless defender of lesbianism cease and desist from undermining the feminist credentials of heterosexual feminists. The effect was silence on the question of lesbianism's potential to subvert 'patriarchy', combined with a gracious acceptance of it as just a 'different' form of sexual activity. As a consequence, it was extraordinarily difficult to admit that lesbians had problems too, or to deal with the myriad of questions which the lesbian claim raised. Although I do not address those questions myself in this book, or at least, not directly, they provide the framework within which my arguments are set.

The theoretical framework outlined above would appear to have obvious implications for feminist practice. Logically, acceptance of the theory implies that all feminists should be lesbians, or, at the very least, abandon heterosexuality. That has indeed been argued by the early radical feminists and lesbian feminists, and more recently by Sheila Jeffreys (Jeffreys, 1990), the British revolutionary feminists (Only women Press, 1981), and lesbian separatists in general. Once lesbianism became an alternative for women, heterosexuality ceased to be one in any way that could be justified in feminist terms. In that sense, a 'feminist heterosexuality' is an oxymoron.

But life is not lived according to the strict dictates of logic. While consistency is all very fine in the abstract, even the radical life is rather more ambiguous and uncertain, full of dilemmas which cannot be resolved by cut and dried formulas. As Claire Duchen put it (in relation to another issue): 'The tailoring of desire to the logic of politics is not always possible or acceptable'. (Duchen, 1986:61) While lesbianism has become a genuine alternative with the advent of 'second wave' feminism, not all feminists can 'choose' it because desire is not under the control of the rational, conscious will. There were many women who learned that lesson the hard way, with pain and guilt on the part of those who tried the lesbian alternative from the best of rational political motives without a corresponding change at the non-rational level of desire, with pain and anger on the part of those who felt themselves used and discarded in the process.

Moreover, to be a lesbian in the narrow sense of sexually desiring women is not sufficient in itself to guarantee a political consciousness. Lesbians are not automatically more radical than heterosexual feminists. There are many lesbians who just want to be left alone to get on with their lives with as little trouble and strife as possible. There are other lesbians who are violently antagonistic to feminism, who want no more than 'community' acceptance of their own 'sexual preference', and who resent what they perceive as feminism's demands to 'rock the boat'. There are lesbians who feel no sense of solidarity and identification with women, who are male-identified and regard themselves as 'one of the boys', who evince typically male attitudes towards women and prefer the company of men. And there are lesbians who are still ashamed of their sexual desire, who hide it like a guilty secret, and who regard themselves as 'not real women'. It is only lesbianism as the self-conscious commitment to the interests of women, which poses a challenge to the phallic hegemony of the status quo.

Heterosexual feminists, too, are committed to the interests of women, and to challenging male supremacy. To that extent their feminist credentials are beyond dispute.

Heterosexuality need not always be oppressive. Although the meaning and purpose of the present hegemonic form of heterosexuality is to subordinate the female to the male, that form *can* be eroded by the actions, choices and decisions of individual women (and men). That does not mean that there are other forms of heterosexuality which do *not* function to ensure male domination. It means that women and men participate in a common human condition, and that it has always been possible to acknowledge that *despite* the prevailing norms of domination. Male supremacy denies human status to women, by universalising male interests as the interests of all, by suppressing female interests, by recognising only the male as the 'human' subject, and by defining women in terms of their servicing of men. To the extent that she insists on the dignity and worth of women, and recognises male interests for what they are and challenges them wherever they appear, any woman can be a feminist.

Hence, I would not argue without qualification that every feminist ought to be a lesbian. What *is* necessary, however, is that feminism give far more support to and validation of radical lesbianism than it has done so far. The attitude of liberal tolerance which defines lesbianism as 'just another sexual orientation' is a comfortable evasion of the issue, comfortable because it threatens nothing. It is a form of depoliticisation (Kitzinger, 1987), in that it denies the lesbian potential to undermine the phallic hegemony. And the criticism of lesbianism as 'divisive' and 'alienating' to the 'women out there' (where the hell do the critics think we came from?) is scandalous. Feminism, and not just lesbian feminism, has rendered heterosexuality problematic for women, but each of us has to react to that critique in her own way. For many of us it did mean abandoning heterosexuality, and it was joyous and easy (except for the agony of some of the men left behind) and immediate and happened spontaneously all over the world at the same time and is still happening. But we did not do it because someone else said we should, nor because it was 'politically correct',² but because the world had shifted and uncovered new possibilities.

part I
early writings

missing the point: betty friedan, ann oakley, and germaine greer

Betty Friedan—Joining the Mainstream

That Betty Friedan failed to recognise the problem of phallogentricity is not surprising, given her commitment to ‘the mainstream’ and her belief in the inherent goodness of the American way of life, sometimes referred to as ‘our nation’, and her faith that the problems facing women would be redressed by education and the correcting of wrong attitudes. It is not surprising, either, that Friedan missed the main feminist point about female sexuality.

For the Betty Friedan of *The Feminine Mystique*, sex was both not the problem and the main problem. It was *not* the problem in that the neurosis, boredom, and sense of futility experienced by the housewives of white middle America were not the result of sexual repression. (Freud was wrong, you see). But it *was* the problem because the typical American housewife was sexually obsessed. Sex had had to take the burden of her failure to grow into full adulthood, a failure due to her acquiescence in the imperatives of ‘the feminine mystique’.

This failure not only had terrible consequences for women; it also had terrible consequences for their husbands, who became impotent as a result of the inordinate sexual demands placed on them by wives seeking to substitute sex for the other deprivations in their lives. It was this female sexual obsession, combined with the feminine imperative that women live their lives through their husbands, which was largely responsible for misogyny, according to Friedan, or rather for the hatred which American men felt for women, all women, not just their wives:

There are, of course, many reasons for divorce, but chief among them seems to be the growing aversion and hostility that men have for the feminine millstones hanging around their necks, a hostility that is not always directed at their wives, but at their mothers, the women they work with—in fact, women in general... This male outrage is the result, surely, of an implacable hatred for the parasitic women who keep their husbands and sons from growing up, who keep them immersed at that sickly level of sexual fantasy.

(Friedan, 1963:237–8)

In other words, it was women’s own fault if men hated them. If they would just get themselves an education and a career, they would be able to stop placing so much importance on sex and making such burdensome demands on their husbands.

It was, of course, tertiary education Friedan was referring to. The women she was addressing had already qualified for admission, but had dropped out in favour of marriage and babies. The fact that higher education was (and is) prohibitively expensive—she mentioned one woman who paid \$420 for two part-time courses, and \$1,000 full-time, in the late fifties or early sixties (p. 317)—seemed a matter of small moment to Friedan, just another obstacle to be overcome with guts and determination. But even white American women, whose ‘middle-class’ status was wholly dependent on their husbands’ earning power, would be hard put to exercise the higher education option if their husbands refused to

provide the money. Moreover, there were (and are) large numbers of women for whom that option was not (and still is not) available. But then the option of 'the feminine mystique' was not either. They were too busy struggling to provide for themselves, their children, and sometimes their men, to be afflicted with ennui. However, I seriously doubt that they thereby escaped male hatred.

So sex *was* a problem to the extent that it was expected to compensate women for the lack of meaningful work, the stunting of their psychological growth, and the blocking of their 'higher human needs'. It was also a problem because it was the means whereby women who had everything going for them, money, intelligence and 'a good start in life', allowed themselves to be conned into giving up their opportunities for higher education and career in favour of 'love' (sexual, and heterosexual), marriage, motherhood, and domestic consumerism.

To give Friedan her due, she did not hold women solely responsible for their plight. She also made mention of those shapers of public opinion who directed the life choices of young girls. If they were to abandon their commitment to pushing 'the feminine mystique', and start educating girls towards autonomy, self-fulfilment and work 'of serious importance to society', then girls would not be pressured into narrowing their life choices to a single option:

We need a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self, without conflict with sexual fulfilment. A massive attempt must be made by educators and parents—and ministers, magazine editors, manipulators, guidance counsellors—to stop the early marriage movement, stop girls from growing up wanting to be "just a housewife", stop it by insisting, with the same attention from childhood on that parents and educators give to boys, that girls develop the resources of self, goals that will permit them to find their own identity. (p. 318)

Friedan did not consider the question of who was going to enforce this, because for Friedan there was no question of enforcement. She did not see those institutions which manipulated women as functioning to maintain male power. They were neutral, in her view, and their effects on the lives of women were merely the result of oversight, ignorance or inertia. All that was necessary to weaken the influence of 'the feminine mystique' was to make the situation clear to right-minded people and we could all join together to rectify it. For Friedan, men were never the enemy (a position she continued to maintain, and argued even more forcefully, in her later books). (Friedan, 1976; Friedan, 1981) Nor did they have interests opposed to women's interests. Both sexes stood to gain from the abolition of 'the feminine mystique', and men would automatically come to realise that without any special agitation on women's part. Women, of course, must do their bit by refusing to participate in the mystique, and by devising for themselves a 'life plan'. This need not preclude such perfectly understandable (to Friedan) feminine desires as marriage, motherhood, and 'true [heterosexual] love'. On the contrary, women's commitment to a 'life plan' would mean the strengthening of the institution of marriage, since 'girls with this kind of commitment are less eager to rush into early marriage, less panicky about finding a man, more responsible for their sexual behaviour... [They marry] on a much more mature basis' (p. 320).

For Betty Friedan, doyenne of liberal feminism, there was nothing terribly wrong with (hetero-)sexuality, marriage and the family, just as there was really nothing wrong with the present system over all. There was room for improvement, otherwise there would be no need

for a book like *The Feminine Mystique*. But once women were ‘encouraged to grow to their full strength as human beings’, through greater access to the same kind of education males already enjoyed (as long, that is, as they or their fathers were economically privileged), and to the same kind of work as men did (in the higher reaches of the occupational hierarchy, although traditional female occupations such as teaching and nursing were also acceptable), then women would come to know ‘sexual fulfilment and the peak experience of [heterosexual] human love’ (p. 275).

Men were not a problem, much less *the* problem. There they were, just waiting in the wings, eager and willing to welcome with open arms the floods of self-actualising women soon to be released from the constraints of femininity by the simple process of becoming more like them. Men had no problems in relation to women, in Friedan’s view. Or rather, the one problem she mentioned, male hatred of women, was merely the consequence of women’s dependence on them. When women became independent, men would love them unreservedly. It did not occur to Friedan that men might be dependent on women for the provision of love, nurturance, emotional and bodily sustenance, a cosy haven away from the trouble and strife of public life, the bolstering of an ego fragile in its rigidity, and all without reciprocity. (See: Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1984, for an exposition of this male dependence.) Neither did it occur to her, either then or later, that women’s autonomy might be savagely resisted by men, that the confinement of women’s lives to the narrow rounds of sexual objectification and domesticity served the interests of male supremacy, and that male identity was crucially dependent on women having none. Men would be better off if women were acknowledged as participants in the human condition—the humanity of the master is deficient for the very reason that he accepts or enforces the dehumanisation of the slave. But it is very difficult to convince the master of that. There are benefits to be gained from domination, not least of which is the monopoly of a ‘human’ identity which is inextricably (at least for the moment) entangled with being male.

For Betty Friedan, ‘human’ sexuality was, and remained, inescapably heterosexual. The (male) homosexuality she mentioned briefly was nothing more than a symptom of ‘the feminine mystique’, caused by (guess who?) mothers who had no other outlet for their frustrated creativity than to live vicariously through their sons: ‘an excess of love-hate is almost implicit in the relationship of mother and son—when her exclusive role as wife and mother, her relegation to the home, force her to live through her son’ (p. 239). The prevalence of (male) homosexuality was, for Friedan, ‘ominous’ and ‘frightening’. It was ‘spreading like a murky smog over the American scene’ (p. 240). There is nothing human about that.

Lesbianism might not have existed. Her single reference to it was a remark to the effect that ‘male homosexuality was and is far more common than female homosexuality’ (full stop) (p. 239–40). Later, it was forced on her attention by the lesbians in the National Organisation of Women (NOW), founded in 1966 by Friedan who was its first national president, after the success of her first book, and intended by her as a vehicle for including women in ‘the mainstream’ of American society. Lesbians, with no hope of inclusion in ‘the mainstream’, and no desire for it either, protested against their invisibility within NOW. (Martin and Lyon, 1972:286–92; Teal, 1971: 179; Abbott and Love, 1972:110–2) At the beginning of the second Congress to Unite Women, organised by NOW and held in New York in May, 1970,

while women were seated waiting for the meeting to begin, the lights suddenly went out. When they came on again, the walls displayed posters saying TAKE A LESBIAN TO LUNCH, SUPERDYKE LOVES YOU, THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IS A LESBIAN PLOT, and the meeting was confronted with women wearing lavender tee shirts saying 'Lavender Menace'. (The phrase was said to be Betty Friedan's, as was the phrase 'lavender herring' referring to the lesbian issue).

The point of the lesbians' protest was, and remained, a mystery to Betty Friedan (although NOW itself later included lesbian rights in its platform). In her second book, she referred to 'the abusive language and style of some of the women, their sexual shock tactics and man-hating, down-with-motherhood stance' at the Congress to Unite Women in New York. She described what she called 'a hysterical episode' which involved women who 'came up on the stage to cut off all their hair'. She complained that 'the message some were trying to push was that to be a liberated women [sic] you had to *make yourself ugly*, to stop shaving under your arms, to stop wearing makeup or pretty dresses—any skirts at all.' (Friedan, 1976: 138—her emphasis) In her view, 'the attempt to equate feminism...with lesbianism had always been a favorite device of those who wanted to discredit the women's movement—or frighten women away from it. Now that note was beginning to be pushed within the women's movement' (p. 140), and she didn't like it. 'I didn't want that issue even to surface and divide the organization...turn us against one another, or alienate the women "out there" who we sensed identified with us' (p. 141).

It did not occur to her, and neither could she be told, that the fear which lesbianism aroused, even as a civil rights issue, might have important radical implications for the relations between the sexes. For Friedan, male-female relations were basically OK. Once we had divested ourselves of misguided attitudes, summed up under the rubric of 'the feminine mystique', women and men would have no more problems in relation to each other. The only explanation she could devise to account for the 'shock tactics' and 'violence' of the lesbians' behaviour was that it was a CIA plot to discredit the women's movement: 'that sexual red herring of lesbianism did preoccupy and divide—or was used and manipulated to divide—NOW and the women's movement for months, for years' (p. 159).

Ann Oakley—Sex Differences and 'Biology'

Ann Oakley also missed the point, in her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, and for the same reasons Betty Friedan did. Oakley, too, failed to recognise the existence of male domination and the phallogocentric nature of heterosexuality as it is currently constituted. Like Friedan, she also identified the problem addressed by feminism as nothing more than a matter of 'beliefs' (false), 'attitudes' (nasty), 'prejudice' (ditto), and 'roles' (unequal). As she herself said: 'We can...best... explain the patterning of the sexual division of labour in particular societies...in terms of beliefs about masculinity and femininity and beliefs about maternity and paternity' (p. 146).

In this book, Oakley addressed herself to the question of whether or not there were any differences between the sexes. Her expressed intention was to investigate the question of the relative influences of 'biology' (defined at one point in terms of 'chromosomes, hormones,

gonads, and the formations of the internal and external genitals’— p. 164) and of ‘culture’ in shaping the differences between the sexes. But her answer was presupposed from the beginning—she started her investigation already convinced that ‘biology’ had little or no influence: ‘In fact prejudice has probably done more to determine the social roles of the sexes than biology ever could’ (p. 16). Or rather, ‘biology’ had no influence as long as it was sex *differences* which were under discussion. Whenever it looked as though ‘biology’ could be brought in as an ally to demonstrate that the sexes were the same, Oakley did not hesitate to do so. When ‘biology’ looked as though it might demonstrate the existence of irreducible differences, Oakley argued for its irrelevance, or ignored it.

Oakley’s overriding concern was to deny the reality of sex differences. That was not an easy task within a feminist context which had already exposed innumerable invidious distinctions between the sexes. Oakley resolved her dilemma by acknowledging sex differences up to a point, and then dismissing them because they did not manifest themselves at the ‘real’ level of ‘biology’. When ‘biology’ looked as though it might challenge her main concern to demolish sex differences, it was dismissed in its turn as inadequate, unreliable or unclear.

Any sexual differences there might be between the sexes were ‘merely apparent’, due to ‘cultural roles’, ‘conditioning and learning’, ‘the home situation’, or the ‘differentiated... adult roles of the sexes...in our society’. She questioned what she saw as the commonly held view that the ‘propensity for sexual behaviour...[is] different in male and female’. This view she regarded as ‘stereotypical’, and hence false, although, as she admitted, ‘many men and women conform to [these roles] in reality’. She summarised these ‘apparent differences’ as follows: aggression and dominance in the male; and receptiveness, dependence, passivity, lack of aggression, submissiveness, slowness of sexual arousal and satisfaction, distractibility, and ‘romantic idealism rather than lustful reality’ in the female (pp. 99–100).

But these differences, it would seem, were not really there, at least not at the level where it really mattered, at the level of ‘the physiological processes involved in copulation and orgasm’. According to the ‘scientific’ work of Masters and Johnson, and Kinsey, ‘the sex drive in men and women’ was so nearly identical that any differences were minor or irrelevant. Only two differences were mentioned by Oakley (once only, without further comment): the inescapably obvious one of penile erection in the male and vaginal lubrication in the female, and the fact that, although ‘50% of females are capable of having a further orgasm immediately [only one?]...this is true of only a few males’. All the other physiological reactions during sexual intercourse, including what Oakley regarded as the crucial one of ‘ability to reach orgasm’, were so nearly identical as to be indistinguishable.

And yet it seems odd that the differences which Oakley admitted do influence behaviour, should have failed to manifest themselves in the investigations of Masters and Johnson. As Nancy Chodorow commented in relation to the literature on the psychology of sex differences:

I am wary of this seemingly scientific investigation. The message of Maccoby and Jacklin’s book is that one cannot find any significant gender differences anywhere if one looks at the “hard scientific facts”. As support against biological arguments for gender differences, these findings may do the trick. But I was left feeling a little as if a magic disappearing trick had been performed. All the experiences of being manipulated, channeled, and restricted which women and men have been

commenting on, and which they have felt deeply and continuously, were suddenly figments of our imagination. (Chodorow, 1978:98 note)

Perhaps Masters and Johnson (and Kinsey) were asking the wrong questions. However that may be, so contorted is Oakley's logic, that it is difficult not to conclude that her haste in abolishing sex differences served a very important purpose, while at the same time masking both that purpose and its importance. Given her failure even to mention the problem of male domination, I suspect that that purpose was to deny its existence altogether. For if the sexes are not even 'different', the question of the male domination of females does not arise.

Having used 'biology' to abolish the sexual differences between the sexes, Oakley moved on to cross-cultural data with the same aim in mind. Her intention was to demonstrate that the ways in which 'we' (in 'industrial society') perceived the sexes to be different was a cultural phenomenon, and hence could be dismissed as a true account of the matter. In sum, her argument was that, because 'the whole area of human sexuality is subject to tremendous cultural variation', therefore 'the differences...in our cultures are not necessarily universal' (p. 107). While this is, of course, true enough, it would be irrelevant unless there was also some commonality across cultures. The ways in which other cultures were different from 'us' would have no lessons for 'us' unless there was also something in common. Oakley did not draw out this implication, and hence she did not say explicitly what 'we' might have in common with other cultures. Nonetheless, it is fairly clear from her discussion that the common factors are 'biological'. All peoples, for example, experience puberty and menstruation, but place different meanings on those events.

But 'cross-cultural comparisons' have serious problems. To the extent that they emphasise differences, they set up a 'them and us' dichotomy. While it is true that arrangements for the ordering of human existence are many and various, even within the same culture, that fact alone is at best irrelevant to the experiential reality of the ways those arrangements are lived. At worst, comparisons distort and trivialise those arrangements, patronise them as quaint oddities. Because they are so different from and other than 'our own', they do not seem real. Their interest for 'us' is merely aca-demic. Comparisons like these hide a covert racism of the 'noble savage' variety, an intellectual colonisation which investigates 'those people' from the rarified and uninvolved heights of Western scientific discourse.

Another problem with Oakley's account concerns the contradiction between her definition of 'sexual', and what she actually discussed. 'Behaviour is "sexual"', she said, 'if it refers to the kind of relationship between male and female in which copulation is, or could be, or is imagined to be, a factor' (p. 99). In other words, 'sexual' was identical with 'heterosexual'. And yet she discussed homosexuality, within the context of 'sexual deviation', at some length (p. 115– 121).

The discussion concerned what she regarded as a commonly held assumption that 'women are less prone to sexual deviation [than men]...and...that this has something to do with the strength and direction of the sex drive in males and females...governed by biological factors'. While she thought that there were fewer female 'sexual deviants' than males, she disagreed that the causes were biological —'we have no reliable evidence' (p. 116), she said. This was, after all, a difference between the sexes, and hence must not be allowed to be 'biological'. She suggested that the lesser incidence of lesbianism in comparison with male

homosexuality 'may lie in both social and anatomical factors'. In the case of the latter, because women are 'physically capable of heterosexual intercourse even if they are unaroused in the course of it', lesbians are more likely to marry than are male homosexuals. Note that Oakley was not saying that lesbians' 'anatomy' caused an *actual* lesser incidence of lesbianism, simply an apparent one. 'Anatomy' (a.k.a. 'biology') must not be allowed to cause any differences between the sexes, otherwise the 'differences' might really be there. There may be just as many female 'sexual deviants' as males around, but the 'true' incidence of lesbianism is hidden from us by lesbians' female propensity for getting married. The 'social factor', which contributed to the lower occurrence of lesbianism 'in our society' concerned 'a contributory cause of homosexuality—identification with a person of the opposite sex'. Because fathers are more likely to be absent from families than mothers, boys are more likely than girls to be deprived of an appropriately sexed identification figure—'it is the boy whose identification is in jeopardy [!], not the girl' (p. 119–20). Obviously male homosexuality and lesbianism are dangers to be avoided by proper child rearing methods.

But beyond these problems, it is Oakley's basic argument which is at fault. She expounds a common enough belief: that 'science' (in this case 'biology') can show us the error of our ways, that 'science' is the only source of truth. It is a commonly held view that the only reliable knowledge is that gained by way of the logic and method of science, or, more simplistically, is information which is presented under the imprimatur of a scientific discipline. In this sense, 'science' is the modern myth, unanswerable justification for just about anything at all. 'Researchers say...', 'University tests prove...', orates the advertising industry, that weather vane of every ideological wind that blows. So privileged is science as the only form of reliable knowledge that it is difficult even to conceive of anything else which might qualify as a contender for the title. Its old enemy, religion, is vanquished, art makes no claims to the status, and neither does philosophy (although it reserves for itself the right to make the judgement), politics is too obviously permeated with vested interests, and experience is incommensurable (as long, that is, as it is defined as a property of isolated, atomised individuals).

It is possible that my objection to Oakley's argument is somewhat anachronistic. Feminist criticism of science is of fairly recent origin, and there is by no means firm agreement among feminist philosophers about how to characterise scientific knowledge. (Harding and Hintikka eds., 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Pateman and Gross eds., 1986; Bleier, 1984; Bleier, ed., 1986; Harding, ed., 1987; Harding and O'Barr, eds., 1987, for example). But even at the time Oakley was writing, the relevance of scientific method to moral and political questions was debatable, and debated, within her own discipline of sociology. Moreover, I do feel she could have been more suspicious at the ease with which the authorities she quoted appeared to demolish sex differences. That she was not is yet another indication that her own demolition of sex differences was over hasty.

Because she was convinced that any differences there might be between the sexes were 'superficial', and hence unimportant, Oakley was not overly concerned with the question of a specifically female sexuality. Indeed, her purpose was to deny any such specificity, at any rate at the 'real' level of biological processes. Nonetheless, she did agree that there were some differences. There was the 'fact' (substantiated by Kinsey's research) that 'women take

longer than men to discover their sexual-genital excitability' (p. 104). That difference could be explained, it would seem, by 'the home situation of the average girl' which 'is a much more restricting influence on the development of sexual behaviour than that of the average boy' (106). Obviously, Oakley's implied preference was for change that would ensure that girls would become more like boys. Those girls who defied parental prohibitions, or who were not subjected to them, would (presumably) be right in there doing it with the boys. But that sexuality might have different meanings for sexually active girls than for boys, did not occur to Oakley.

Another difference she mentioned was the idea that 'sexuality arises spontaneously in the male but not in the female' (p. 107). She considered the possibility that there could be a biological (and hence real?) reason for this, in the different ways puberty affected the sexes: 'for the male [puberty] is an overtly sexual event...his sexuality is localised in the genitals by the start of seminal emissions...[whereas for the female, it] is marked by the onset of menstruation, which has a reproductive rather than a sexual significance' (p. 107). But these differences (which were undeniable because they fitted her criterion for truth) 'may be', she said, 'either accentuated or minimised by culture' (p. 108). So 'culture', which was the villain of the piece when it set the differences up, could come to the rescue and demolish them, or at least modify them, when 'biology' became too pressing.

But although she did not address the issue directly, Oakley obviously did have a concept of a specifically female sexuality. It was one that was, in various ways, inferior to that of males. Women were retarded in their sexual development in comparison with males, and they did not come to sexuality spontaneously as males did. Indeed, women's sexuality was dependent on male sexuality. 'It is clear from these figures [of Kinsey's]', said Oakley, 'that women... seem to need the aid of a male partner...to discover their [i.e. women's] sexual-genital excitability' (p. 104). But to attribute these differences to 'culture' is not to abolish them. Setting up a hierarchical dichotomy between 'science' (true) and 'culture' (false) does not mend matters either. Because we do not recognise sex differences 'scientifically', but rather experientially, psychologically, emotionally ('culturally'), 'science' is of very little, if any, help in changing that recognition. In saying as much, I am not suggesting that the 'scientific' data upon which Oakley places so much reliance is 'false'. To do so would be to set up the same dichotomy in reverse. It is not the question of whether or not Masters' and Johnson's findings are true which is at issue. Rather it is a question of whether science, in its guise of objective knowledge, is an appropriate vehicle for addressing problems which are not disinterested at all, but thoroughly imbued with relations of power.

In her haste to establish a premature sexual equality between the sexes, Oakley evaded the issue of phallogentrism. This is most evident in her treatment of 'penis envy'. Now, none of us likes the concept. But if it is renamed 'valorisation of the phallus' and given its proper attribution within male supremacist ideology, what it points to is even less likeable. And denying its existence will not make it go away.

Oakley took an empiricist line and assumed that 'anatomy' was neutral, inert, that it simply existed in some extra-social domain—she contrasted it with 'social role'—where its nature was manifested immediately, clearly, directly and unequivocally. She asserted that there were 'a series of processes' between 'anatomy' and 'social role', which needed to be

delineated before we could say that females envied males because they had penises. She said that women did envy men, but that that was only to be expected, that it was 'an entirely realistic perception of the male's social roles as superior in power, prestige and interest' (p. 125). What she did not realise was that penis-possession just *is* that superiority in 'power, prestige and interest', not, however, as mere bits of anatomy which simply hang there innocent of meaning, but as symbol and justification of all that the male is heir to.

Once again, it is anachronistic to expect Oakley to have realised all this. A lot of feminist theorising has happened since Oakley wrote her book, and the early feminist antagonism to psychoanalysis is perfectly understandable. Nonetheless, to assert, as Oakley did, that 'psychoanalytic theory does little to explain why male and female sexuality appear [sic] to differ' (p. 121), without saying why, is not good enough. Given psychoanalysis' claim to providing the definitive account of the sexual differences between the sexes, its 'failure' to do so is hardly self-evident. Oakley dismisses Freud for his 'male bias' (p. 123), but fails to see that, if that 'bias' is shared by the whole culture, including females, it cannot be treated as merely a problem of certain prejudiced individuals, or even prejudiced epochs, e.g. 'Freud's time', '[his] own sexually repressed and male-dominated society' (ibid.). Even in Oakley's bowdlerised account, phallogentricity manifests itself. Indeed, it is the very bowdlerisation which constitutes the problem, since it relies on mere denial of women's sexual 'inferiority'. While that 'inferiority' is a phallogentric construct, and hence 'false' in the sense that it denies women's interests in sexual autonomy, it has very real effects on women's lives. In that sense it is 'true' and needs to be taken seriously, not dismissed out of hand because it fails to measure up to the proper criterion for truth.

Germaine Greer

The title of Germaine Greer's first book, *The Female Eunuch*, went straight to the point—women are powerless because they lack the symbol of power, the penis. But her unabashed commitment to the heterosexual cause, and her conviction that it was up to women to 'humanize the penis', meant that she failed to follow through on her original insight.

There has recently been some discussion about whether or not Germaine Greer has disqualified herself from the ranks of feminism with her passionate defence of the extended family in her book, *Sex and Destiny*. The book has been regarded by some feminists as a recantation of her earlier feminist commitment. But in fact Greer has always been a champion of the extended family. In *The Female Eunuch* she called it the 'stem' family. Her defense at that time was based on her observations of this kind of family in Southern Italy, and was concerned mainly with the benefits for the children of such an arrangement. (Greer, 1970:221) In her later book she argued that it benefited women as well, because it gave women opportunities to form relationships with other female family members, and because they had important roles to play in maintaining the family's welfare. (Greer, 1984:243–4) Moreover, in both books she mounted a scathing critique of the privatised nuclear family typical of the affluent West. Hence her position on the family has not changed but has in fact remained consistent between the two books.

As far as Lynne Segal is concerned, Greer's feminist status has always been suspect.

According to Segal, *The Female Eunuch* was 'surely a pre-feminist text or at the very least an unusual feminist text' because it had, in Segal's opinion, 'little, if any, connection to the contemporary women's movement'. It was 'unrepresentative', said Segal, because 'the movement predominantly rejected Greer's individualistic anarchism and dismissal of collective action'. (Segal, 1987:88)

But this judgement is not quite fair to Greer. She did not dismiss collective action. She criticised the kind of collective action which involved women 'training themselves as a fighting force', on the grounds that warlike attitudes were 'the last perversion of dehumanized manhood' (Greer, 1970:315–6); and she questioned whether socialism was the way to women's liberation (p. 328–9). But she spoke approvingly of organised attempts to deal with specific manifestations of women's oppression, for example, single mothers' groups and a women's newspaper (p. 322). (Some support for Segal's position can be found in Dreifus, 1971.)

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell have a different view of the relevance of Greer's early text. They said it was 'powerfully written and often wise; it was widely publicized and wildly popular. It dug a channel through to the women's movement from the Love Generation, and introduced many thousands of women to a new sense of themselves'. (Coote and Campbell, 1982:20) I might add, too, that it had enormous scarcity value. There were very few texts around at the time which spoke directly to women about the difficulties we were having with men and children, marriage and families, love and work. And in that sense Greer's book was feminist, whatever its limitations and faults upon mature reflection.

Her chief fault was a persistent commitment to heterosexuality, undaunted by her own staunch critique. 'Sex', she said, 'must be rescued from the traffic between powerful and powerless, masterful and mastered, sexual and neutral, to become a form of communication between potent, gentle, tender people'. (Greer, 1970:18) However, the message throughout the book was that it was up to women to bring about the hopeful new sexual regime of strength and tenderness. Men would come to accept it too, once they saw and appreciated the human benefits women were offering: 'women must humanize the penis, take the steel out of it and make it flesh again... Men are tired of having all the responsibility for sex, it is time they were relieved of it' (p. 318).

While there is some truth in this argument—it is indeed important that women refuse to be complicitous in phallic power—to direct it towards women alone misrepresents the locus of power. It is not women, after all, who use the penis as a weapon to rape, assault and harass. Women do not possess that prized anatomical feature. How, then, are they to exercise any control over it? And I have a more than sneaking suspicion that, were men to lose responsibility for sex, most of them would react as though they had lost their manhood, a possibility that already fills many a male breast with rage and fear, masked though it might be with sneers and derision. There *are* men who prefer human dignity to manhood. But that is not a choice favoured by the masculine population at large (or not that I've noticed). Greer was not unaware of the possibility of male resistance to women's liberation. She said: 'It might be expected that men would resist female liberation because it threatens the foundations of phallic narcissism', but went on to say that 'there are indications that men themselves are seeking a more satisfying role' (p. 18). Nonetheless, I feel that she

underestimated the tenacity and seductiveness of phallogentrality and the will to dominate, and the benefits involved in defining one's 'humanness' by dehumanising another.

Not that that was all that Greer had to say to women. As she quite rightly pointed out, the abuse and the misery which women experience is not always visited on us by men. We can also be the agents of our own oppression—the dominance of phallogentrality affects the psyches of the oppressed as well as the oppressor. But Greer's faith in the retrievability of heterosexuality is naive and premature, especially in the light of what she herself had to say in her section called 'Hate', about the loathing and disgust men can feel towards the women they vent their own despised sexuality upon: 'Women have very little idea of how much men hate them' (p. 249). Her descriptions of the abuse to which women are subjected by men are enough to turn any self-respecting woman off men for life, especially when those descriptions evoke one's own experience. And she did not consider that, for a lot of women a lot of the time, it was a slim hope that enough men would change fast enough to make the investment in them worthwhile. (The chief complaint I have heard from heterosexual feminists concerns the dearth of adequate men).

According to Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, Greer stands accused of 'heterosexual chauvinism'. Her arguments, they say, serve 'to protect the conventions of heterosexuality, not to change them... [She] makes it plain that however many faults men may have, they are indispensable when it comes to sex, because penetration turns it into the Real Thing'. (Coote and Campbell, 1982:222–3) But while this is certainly the overt message of *The Female Eunuch*, Greer was sufficiently explicit about the other side of the argument to provide ammunition for any feminist to decide that the game is not worth the trauma, despite Greer's own expressed predilections.

Greer, too, argued from a repression hypothesis, but she was rather more explicit about what that might entail than most feminists who espouse it. It was not only women's *sexuality* which was repressed, she argued, but every aspect of their existence. Indeed, the link was a causal one—it was because women were repressed sexually that they were suppressed as human beings. For Greer, sexual repression was the source from which all other aspects of women's oppression flowed. The form this repression took was ignorance, initially a lack of knowledge of her genitals—'Women's sexual organs are shrouded in mystery' (p. 39)—and later, once the pattern had been set up, a lack of curiosity in general:

The acts of sex are themselves forms of inquiry...[and] it is exactly the element of quest in her sexuality which the female is taught to deny. She is not only taught to deny it in her sexual contacts, but (because in some subliminal way the connection is understood) in all her contacts, from infancy on ward, so that when she becomes a ware of her sex the pattern has sufficient force of inertia to prevail over new forms of desire and curiosity. This is the condition which is meant by the term *female eunuch*. (p. 68)

One problem with this Reichian thesis that sex is behind it all, is its implication that sexual liberation will lead to liberation all round. Greer did not explicitly argue such a case. Her vision of revolution was much wider than simply a sexual one. Nonetheless, despite the valuable insight of the metaphor of 'the female eunuch', Greer supplied us with only half the story. Women may indeed be lacking in knowledge of and curiosity about their own sexuality, to the extent, that is, that they embrace the ideology of femininity. But that 'lack' is a social construction of male supremacy, engineered by the rule of the phallus. Women lack curiosity

(to the extent that we do, that is) because the world is not ours to explore. And the world is not ours because we lack the badge of 'human' power and dignity (according to the dictates of phallic imperialism). The primary problem is not that women lack a spirit of inquiry, but that male domination requires the suppression of any enquiries women might make in our own interests.

Greer had very little to say about lesbianism, not surprisingly, given her heterosexism, i.e. the belief that heterosexuality is the only 'real' form of sexuality. Nevertheless, the little she did say—a single paragraph (p. 293–4)—provided an accurate if exiguous account of some of the political implications of lesbianism. She said that

Much lesbianism, especially of the transvestite kind, may be understood as revolt against the limitations of the female role of passivity, hypocrisy and indirect action... All forms of lesbianism involve an invention of an alternative way of life...[as long as it is accompanied by] the ability to choose lesbianism in an honourable, clear-eyed fashion, rejecting shame and inferiority feelings as a matter of principle.

She concluded by remarking that 'too often [the lesbian] is as blinded by spurious notions of normality as her critics are'. It is not clear what she meant by the reference to 'the transvestite kind'. Perhaps it was a reference to the importance of lesbian visibility, that to the extent that lesbians remain closeted, so does the political implications of lesbianism, and 'butch' lesbians are highly visible. But there are other ways of asserting lesbian existence, ways which do more justice to women's experience than dressing like men. Moreover, this account of lesbianism had no influence on the rest of her arguments. At one point, she even explicitly excluded lesbianism from the female sexual revolution. She said that the transforming of sexuality into 'a form of communication between potent, gentle, tender people...cannot be accomplished by denial of heterosexual contact' (p. 18). But for some of us, that is the *only* way it can be accomplished, at least for the foreseeable future.

early radical feminism I: heterosexuality, celibacy, lesbianism, and the female orgasm.

THE TERM ‘RADICAL FEMINISM’ was already being used by feminists in New York in 1968. Ti-Grace Atkinson said that she first used the term in public in June, 1968, in a press release in defence of Valerie Solanas who had been arrested for shooting Andy Warhol. (Atkinson, 1974: 14) In October, 1968, a group of feminists calling themselves THE FEMINISTS met ‘to begin a new kind of feminist movement: radical feminism’. (Koedt, Levine and Rapone, eds., 1973:368).

‘Radical’ feminism was to be distinguished both from ‘liberal’ feminism, as represented by the National Organisation for Women (NOW), and from socialist or Marxist feminism. NOW was insufficiently radical because it was ‘working for some kind of integration of women into the main fabric of society’, rather than ‘struggling to bring about really fundamental changes in our society’. And that segment of the women’s movement committed to working for a socialist revolution, subordinated the struggle against ‘sexism’ to the struggle against capitalism (op. cit, pp. 238–9).

Radical feminism placed women’s oppression by men at the centre of its politics: ‘radical feminism is concerned with the analysis of the oppression of women *as women*’ (ibid.—emphasis in the original). Initially, the radical feminist movement was seen as the struggle to demolish ‘the sex role system’. ‘To me’, said Anne Koedt in 1971, radical feminism ‘means the advocacy of the total elimination of sex roles’. (Koedt, 1971:248) The problem with sex roles was that ‘they are male political constructs that serve to ensure power and superior status for men’ (ibid.). The ‘sex role system’ denied women access to their full human potential, and trained or ‘socialised’ them into accepting that restriction. The male role also denied full humanity to men, but because men benefited from the system, they had more to lose from its destruction, and hence could not be relied on as allies.

Many radical feminists, however, realised that describing the main enemy faced by feminism as ‘the sex role system’ was inadequate because it did not name the power relations involved, even though feminists who used the terminology of ‘sex roles’ were fully aware of the function of those roles in the maintenance of male power. As THE FEMINISTS put it:

The inadequacy of the sex-role theory of oppression becomes obvious when one considers its implication: that both men and women are oppressed by their respective sex-roles. Which is comparable to: both slaves and masters are oppressed by the slave system. By adopting this theory the women’s movement has managed to skirt the issue of power and its relationship to oppression (op. cit., p. 238)

As a consequence, the terminology of ‘sex roles’ was superseded by that of ‘sex class’. As Ti-Grace Atkinson put it, the central tenet of radical feminism was ‘that women are a class, that this class is political in nature, and that this political class is oppressed’. She characterised the ‘sex class’ of women as: ‘the largest single political class in history’ whose oppression was ‘stable historically and similar geographically’. It was also the earliest and most fundamental oppressed group—‘the class of women is the key functional unit in all of

our social, economic and political institutions and values'. And it was 'dispersed over time' and 'throughout later class systems'. (Atkinson, 1974:42).

The class which was opposed to the 'sex class' of women, the class which oppressed women, was the 'sex class' of men. Men were the enemy. On this point, Atkinson commented: 'Several women...have suggested a certain reluctance to seeing men as the enemy...this reluctance is...the most natural thing in the world. I believe it's called the instinct for survival' (p. 89). Although the interests of each of these 'sex classes' were antagonistic, the conflicts were rarely confronted, said Atkinson, because of 'unnatural alliances or contracts between men and women [which are] against the best interests of the victims' basic class identification' (p. 42). These alliances were made through institutions 'created by men to consolidate their roles as Oppressors', institutions such as marriage, motherhood, family, sexual intercourse, love, religion, prostitution (ibid.). Atkinson insisted that the only way women could end their oppression was by refusing to engage in those institutions, and by organising 'with other women to change the definition of the female role, eventually eliminating it, thereby freeing herself to be human' (p. 42-3).

The early radical feminists were entirely clear about the nature and location of the enemy addressed by feminism. It was male power, however it manifested itself, whatever it was called—and they frequently used terms like 'male domination' and 'male supremacy', as well as 'sex roles' and 'sex class'—and however complicitous women, including themselves, had been with it. It is that recognition of the main enemy which is the common thread running from those beginnings to the present day.

They were relentless in their criticism of heterosexuality. THE FEMINISTS instituted a membership quota. Women who were in sexual relationships with men could not comprise more than one-third of their membership at any one time. 'We must destroy the institution of heterosexual sex', they said. They gave two main reasons for their rejection of heterosexuality. In the first place, heterosexuality was the institutionalisation of the domination of women by men:

the institution of marriage [is] inherently inequitable...this institution [is] a primary formalization of the persecution of women...at present [the] psychology [of heterosexuality] is dominance-passivity...the female is coerced into sexual relations with the male...sexual relations [are]...programmed to support political ends—that is, male oppression of the female. (Koedt, Levine and Rapone, eds., 1973:374, 376)

The second reason for their rejection of heterosexuality, and in particular of 'the myth of the vaginal orgasm', was the role it played in reproduction. This myth, which insisted on the vagina as the only female sexual organ, functioned to keep the female 'sexually dependent on the male', they said, and 'reinforce[d] the definition of the female as child-bearer'. The emphasis on the vagina, as 'the organ of reproduction in the female', functioned to maintain 'the institution of motherhood'. Motherhood set the pattern for the female's relationship to the male. In learning to serve the child and submit her will to the other, the female learned submission to the male.

But there is a problem with this argument. The purpose behind the male supremacist emphasis on the vagina as *the* female sexual organ, is not primarily to subordinate women to child-bearing and only secondarily to men. The emphasis on the vagina subordinates female

sexuality to the male directly, through the vagina's function as the 'appropriate' receptacle for the penis. Nonetheless, THE FEMINISTS, along with other early radical feminists, were unequivocal in their rejection of heterosexuality. Its destruction was a prerequisite for the feminist revolution. They were highly critical of 'liberal' or 'reform' feminists who merely wanted to reform male-female relationships while retaining the basic structure. Heterosexuality had to go. None of it was retrievable for feminist purposes.

They did not, however, see lesbianism as the solution. Although they were committed to relationships among women, they did not regard lesbianism as a vanguard showing the way forward to a woman-centred existence. Anne Koedt put the radical feminist arguments against the radical potential of lesbianism in her 1971 paper, 'Lesbianism and Feminism'. 'There is', she said, 'no magic that makes lesbianism proof positive of any high feminist motives'. Lesbians are no more immune than other women from complicity in 'sex roles', she said. Lesbianism is only a personal solution not a political one, and a civil rights issue not a radical one. Lesbianism is as restricting as exclusive heterosexuality, and no more likely to lead to what Koedt regarded as the truly radical sexual position—bisexuality. Lesbians pass judgement on the way other women conduct their lives. And lesbianism is only one rebellion among many.

But Koedt's arguments are flawed by the early radical feminist lack of a developed theory of sexuality. They had accurately identified heterosexuality as the central institution of male domination. But their commitment to heterosexuality was still too strong for them to take lesbianism seriously.

Celibacy

In the absence of a commitment to lesbianism, these feminists saw no alternative to heterosexuality but complete withdrawal from sexuality (except for masturbation). Hence, there were a number of early radical feminists who argued explicitly in favour of celibacy as the only radical alternative for women. These early writers saw 'sexuality' as intrinsically oppressive of women. It could only weaken women, and must be abolished if women were to take control of their own lives.

Feminist arguments in favour of celibacy did not originate with this current phase of feminism. As Sheila Jeffreys pointed out in her book, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, the feminist 'social purity' campaigners of the 1880s and 1890s also argued for celibacy as a means whereby women could take control of their lives. For their pains, they have been labelled 'prudes and puritans' and 'victims of a reactionary ideology' by historians, including feminist historians. From a reassessment and re-examination of what these women actually said in their writings, Jeffreys argues that their purpose was to 'gain more power and control within their own lives, and to remove the restrictions placed upon them by the exercise of male sexuality inside and outside the home'. As one of the women herself put it, their aim was to live "free from all uninvited touch of man". (Jeffreys, 1985:1–5)

Jeffreys also points out that feminists who are fighting the same fight today against male sexual violence receive the same treatment, accused of being 'anti-sex, prudish, puritanical, reactionary and potential allies of the moral majority' (p. 195), often by other feminists. But

there is a curious anomaly here. The attacks are reserved for feminists fighting against violent and degrading expressions of male sexuality. The early radical feminists who could quite legitimately be described as ‘anti-sex’ because they were against all and any form of sexuality whatsoever for women, have escaped scot free. This selectivity is puzzling, especially as feminists currently fighting pornography and male sexual violence are not arguing for celibacy or against sex, even heterosexual, simply its violent and degrading forms. Moreover, refusing to engage in heterosexuality, or, perhaps more accurately, accepting and acting in accordance with one’s lack of desire for it, is an obvious way of avoiding involvement in the more immediate of the phallogentric consequences for women—economic deprivation, hard work that was unacknowledged, unrecognised and unpaid, venereal disease, marital rape, enforced pregnancies, and continuous childbearing interrupted only by miscarriage, abortion, disease, menopause, death or luck. All these consequences were far more prevalent in the nineteenth century than now, hence the explicit arguments of feminists of that generation in favour of celibacy. That feminism has not, on the whole, defended celibacy as an understandable strategy in the light of its own critique, is strange.

This oversight may be a consequence of the still influential ‘repression hypothesis’. Because women’s sexuality has been suppressed, restricted, silenced or destroyed by the ‘patriarchy’ (or so the argument goes), the feminist enterprise is to fight for more and better (hetero-)sex for women by fighting for the removal of its more adverse consequences. In this context, to argue for celibacy is seen as arguing that women have no desire or need for sexual pleasure, and hence as arguing in favour of ‘repression’. But although the situation has improved recently under the influence of the ‘sexual revolution’ or the ‘permissive society’ (with or without quotations marks), the greater availability, efficiency and comparative safety of methods of contraception and abortion, and greater opportunities for economic independence and divorce, that has not in itself solved all the problems. Portraying an ‘unrepressed’ female sexuality as a more frequent and more enjoyable participation in heterosexual, ignores the phallogentric tendency at the core of sexual relations between the sexes. Perhaps those nineteenth-century feminists who asserted women’s right to say ‘no’, not only to men but even to their own sexual desire, were more realistic than their sisters who fought for the palliatives of safe abortion and contraception.

In her paper, ‘On Celibacy’, Dana Densmore recommended celibacy as a retreat from heterosexuality, a feminist refusal of humiliation at the hands of men. [Hetero-]sexuality was ‘inconvenient, time-consuming, energy-draining and irrelevant’, she said, a confidence trick perpetrated against women to keep them in subjection to men, and to disguise the fact that men despised, feared and degraded women. She argued that men did not care about women. What they cared about were ‘their own solipsistic creations, the versions of us they manufacture for their own amusement and pleasure and purposes’. Women must come to realise that men’s seeming admiration and respect was a fraud because it was based on the requirement that women pander to male egos. Women must get rid of their supposed need for male esteem, even though that will mean they are rejected by men, who will find them ‘repulsive’, will ‘cease to respect and admire’ them, and will regard them as ‘unnatural and warped and perverted sexually’. She said:

The supposed “need” for sex [with men] is something that must be refuted, coped with, demythified, or the cause of female liberation is doomed... We must come to realise that we don’t need sex [with men], that celibacy is...a state that could be desirable, in many cases preferable to sex [with men].

She suggested instead that feminists try a number of alternatives, including ‘doing interesting and absorbing things’, finding satisfaction in the ‘love and affection and recognition’ of ‘comrades who love you for yourself, and masturbation—‘Isn’t that a lot easier anyway?’, she said. (Densmore, 1970) She did not suggest lesbianism as an alternative to the problems of sexual relations between the sexes. She did not mention lesbianism at all.

Valerie Solanas and Ti-Grace Atkinson, on the other hand, argued against all sex, including lesbianism. In her *SCUM Manifesto* Solanas said:

our “society” ...if it’s not deflected from its present course and if the Bomb doesn’t drop on it, will hump itself to death.

‘Sex’, she said, ‘is not part of a relationship; on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, a gross waste of time’. She went on to say:

[SCUM have] seen the whole show—every bit of it—the fucking scene, the sucking scene, the dick scene, the dyke scene—they’ve covered the whole waterfront, been under every dock and pier—the peter pier, the pussy pier...you’ve got to go through a lot of sex to get to anti-sex, and SCUM’s been through it all, and they’re ready for a new show.

She was convinced that ‘the female can easily—far more easily than she may think—condition a way her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral and free to pursue truly worthy relationships and activities’. (Solanas, 1967:30–2)

To the extent that her ‘sex drive’ leads her to eroticise degradation, then a woman probably *should* ‘condition’ it away (including masturbation, fantasy and desire, since they would interrupt her thinking processes). But it is conceivable that sex could be something other than that, although Solanas did not present us with any alternatives. She was writing towards the end of the ‘permissive sixties’, at a time when many women were thoroughly disillusioned with a ‘sexual liberation’ which remained dominated by men and phallogocentric attitudes. But by arguing that the only way out was to give up on sex altogether, Solanas was tacitly agreeing that phallogocentric sexuality was all the sexuality there was, thus reinforcing the very male supremacist thesis she was attacking. Solanas, of course, was ‘mad’. Having shot Andy Warhol, ‘in the guts, although she aimed lower’, according to Betty Friedan, she was confined to a mental institution from whence Ti-Grace Atkinson smuggled out the *SCUM Manifesto*. (Friedan, 1976:109) Nonetheless, her *Manifesto* is a savagely sarcastic denunciation of the brutal phallogococracy that was the ‘sexual liberation’ of the 1960s (although I have reservations about the virulence of her denunciation of lesbian sex, at least I think it was lesbian sex she was denouncing with the terms ‘dyke scene’ and ‘pussy pier’).

Ti-Grace Atkinson agreed completely with Solanas. She too rejected sex, in any form, as a positive practice for women. She insisted that ‘our society has never known a time when sex in all its aspects was not exploitative and relations based on sex, e.g., the male-female relationship, were not extremely hostile’. (Atkinson, 1974:19) Although this statement could be read to mean that sex was bad for men too, her concern was clearly with the oppressive implications for women. The chief target of her attack was ‘the institution of [hetero-]sexual intercourse’, which was, she said, ‘in the interests of the male and against the interests of the

female’, and which ‘limit [ed] a woman’s human possibilities’. She advocated the abolition of sexual intercourse. This would come about, she asserted, if sexual intercourse were divested of its ‘social functions’, particularly the role it played in ‘society’s means to population renewal’. She believed that the abolition of this function of sexual intercourse was very close to being realised, because of ‘the work now being done on extrauterine conception and incubation’. Once that was achieved, she said, ‘on what possible grounds could you have anything remotely like what we know today as “sexual relations”?’

Sexual intercourse was to be abolished, not because it was directly oppressive of women, but because ‘the social function of the institution is to maintain the human species’ (p. 13). She also said that ‘the reproductive function of a woman is the only innate function which distinguishes women from men’, and that it is ‘the critical distinction upon which all inequities toward women are grounded’ (p. 1). But she did not say what it was about reproduction which oppressed women. There is nothing in reproduction which, by itself, would lead to the oppression of women. It is only oppressive when women have no choice in the exercise of their reproductive capacities, and when these are controlled by men, that is, once male supremacy is already established.

Hence, her argument is obscure. If the abolition of child-birth is to *liberate* to women, it needs to be demonstrated that reproducing the species through the medium of women’s bodies *oppresses* women. This can be demonstrated, and has been, but Atkinson did not do so. Neither did she refer to feminist work in the area. It is unclear why she introduced the issue of ‘population renewal’ at all, since she did not say how it contributed to women’s subordination.

Although Atkinson did not address the question of male control over reproduction, she did discuss the male interests served by sexual intercourse, in her discussion of what she called the ‘construct’ of vaginal orgasm (p. 17–19). She argued that, because the best way for the male to reach orgasm was by means of ‘the penetration by the penis into the vagina’, the female was expected to reach orgasm through the same mechanism. Because ‘the environment of the vagina is necessary for sexual intercourse’, she said, ‘either a woman must be forced to provide this environment or it must be in her interests to do so’. Women must be convinced that they experience the same sensations men do during the same activity. ‘It is only by claiming some such responsive equivalence that the institution of sexual intercourse can be justified between free parties’, said Atkinson.

In this discussion she came close to naming the phallogentric tendency of heterosexual intercourse, but not close enough. Indeed, she veered away from any such naming with her insistence that the main social function of sexual intercourse was ‘maintaining the human species’. Having identified the male domination of hetero-sexual intercourse, her references to reproduction were no more than an irrelevant addendum to the argument. As the situation now stands, at least in the affluent West, there is very seldom a connection between sex and reproduction. But that has not meant the end of phallogentric sexuality, of rape and sexual harassment, of women as objectified receptacles of male desire, of men as the definers and enforcers of what counts as ‘sexual’. Nonetheless, despite the obscurity of her argument, it is clear that she felt that heterosexuality was bad for women, and that we (herself included) should give it up.

But lesbianism, in her view, was no better because, she said, it was ‘based ideologically on the very premise of male oppression: the dynamic of sexual intercourse’ (p. 85). But even within her own terms that argument will not hold, given that she defined ‘sexual intercourse’ as ‘the interrelation between these two classes’, i.e. between the two sexes. Obviously, sex between lesbians is not an interrelation between the sexes, and hence does not fall within her own category of ‘sexual intercourse’. However, she also rejected lesbianism because lesbians singled out sex as ‘a special activity’. This singling out of sex was exactly what men did to women, she stated: ‘women are *defined* by this characteristic...for men... “a woman” is something to be screwed’ (p. 84—her emphasis). By defining women sexually, according to Atkinson’s account, lesbians were doing to women what men have always done to women.

But it is possible that sex between women can be a quite different phenomenon from heterosexual. Lesbian sex does not automatically avoid all the problems of sexual relationships. But given the obvious difference of lesbianism from heterosexuality, i.e. the absence of the penis, the organ which defines what counts as ‘sexual’—the question of lesbianism’s difference from heterosexuality does need to be raised. By failing to do so, Atkinson failed to demonstrate that lesbianism was as oppressive to women as heterosexuality.

Moreover, as Atkinson herself argued at some length, lesbianism has far wider implications than the sexual. She herself regarded lesbians as ‘the buffer between the male and female classes’ (p. 133). Because of their visibility, and to the extent that they *were* visible—lesbians who refused to come out were, in her view, ‘the greatest counterrevolutionary force *within* this early women’s movement’ (p. 145—her emphasis)—they would be in the front line when the Oppressor launched his counter-offensive against the feminist threat to his hegemony. But in order to fulfil this role of ‘buffer’ between other women and the enemy, lesbians, in Atkinson’s view, had to divest themselves of every taint of sexuality. It was only a desexualised lesbianism which could lead the feminist revolution, a revolution which involved, first and foremost, ‘the struggle to achieve a virtually sexless society...a society in which sex is pivotal neither personally, nor politically’ (p. 135). It was only by being purged of all sexual desire that lesbianism could become political. It must be transformed from its pre-feminist existence as a ‘private’ passion and ‘just “another” issue or “another” example of human oppression’, into a ‘commitment, by choice, full-time, of one woman to others of her class’, said Atkinson.

But once again, she failed to consider a vital point—that it is lesbianism’s very status as a sexual practice which constitutes its radical potential. Because lesbianism withdraws sexual emotional attention from men and focuses it upon women, it promises to undermine the hegemony of phallocentric sexuality and bring into question the subordinate statuses for women which are structured by phallic desire. It is a refusal to be implicated in male sexual supremacy, but one which is not made at the expense of passion. Atkinson herself wanted to identify as a ‘lesbian’ (by her own definition), because ‘any women who rejected men as a class might be potential allies’ (p. 136). But she was unable (or unwilling) to embrace the desire (at least by the time her book was published). It would seem, too, that she elevated her own personal necessity into a political imperative for all.

A more recent example of the pro-celibacy position is to be found in *The Celibacy Letters* in the journal *Heresies*. In a letter to the journal, Sandra Whisler said that her decision for

celibacy had been ‘one of the wisest, most self-affirming choices I have ever made...[it] has given me space to discover myself, to learn to love myself. I’ve developed a sense of my sexuality as a part of myself, rather than as a need that drives and consumes me, obliterating myself’. She went on to say that her only problem with celibacy had been the reactions of other women who could not accept or understand the reality of her choice, and who saw her as ‘sad’ or ‘sexually repressed’. She said that she ‘would never presume that another woman *should* choose celibacy’. But she felt that feminism would benefit from treating celibacy ‘as a viable sexual choice’. Like Densmore’s, the celibacy she was talking about included masturbation:

Making love to myself, I’ve learned that much of the power to make me feel and experience that I once gave to men...in fact belongs to me, is part of my own personal power—mine to own and exercise. Owning that power...has given me the strength to begin to own my *life*, to build a life and center apart from all the patriarchal madness. (Her emphasis)

It was not a permanent once and for all decision she had made, she said, but a series of decisions made again and again, with the possibility of becoming ‘involved in interpersonal sex again’ some time in the future. When or if she made that choice, she said, it would be with ‘a clear sense of myself as a woman—free and strong and whole’.

Again like Densmore, Whisler was advocating celibacy as a retreat and recuperation from heterosexuality. Unlike Densmore, however, she had considered the possibility of lesbianism. She considered herself ‘woman-identified and woman-centered’. Although it would appear that she had not experienced desire for or sexual activity with another woman, if she were ever to become sexually involved again, she said, it would ‘almost certainly be with women’.

Whether embraced with enthusiasm, relief or political fervour, celibacy ought to have an honoured place within second wave feminism, not only as a form of resistance to male sexual domination, but also as a breathing space or a bolt hole, a time to rest and take stock or a refuge from the claustrophobia that intimacy can engender, (not, I hasten to add, that intimacy need necessarily be claustrophobic). The celibate woman, the ‘spinster’, should be redefined as a marriage resister, a woman-identified-woman, and, like the lesbian, a deflater of arrogant male supremacist assumptions of the overweening importance of their persons and anatomical appendages. (Rich, 1980; Jeffreys, 1985; Raymond, 1986) But, to advocate celibacy as *the* solution to the problems of phallogentric sexuality (as opposed to an understandable alternative when the problems seem insurmountable) is to side-step sexuality altogether. Instead of facing the problems squarely and fighting them through despite the odds, it vacates the field and leaves the enemy in sole possession of the terrain. ‘Sexuality’ remains phallogentric and the prerogative of men.

Political Lesbianism

Whenever the question of the political status of lesbianism has been raised, in Australia as well as overseas, the debates have been savage. Lesbian feminists have been accused of arrogance and divisiveness, of ‘putting heterosexual women down’, of ‘alienating the women “out there”’, of setting themselves up as a political vanguard, of being moralistic, dogmatic

and blind to women's 'real' needs. Heterosexual feminists have been accused of collaboration, of colluding in their own oppression, of pandering to the enemy, of giving their best energies away to the oppressor. Interestingly, the factions have not lined up neatly with lesbians on one side and heterosexual feminists on the other. There were many lesbians who reacted angrily to what they regarded as the aspersions cast on the feminist credentials of heterosexual feminists. And there were heterosexual feminists who agreed with the critique of heterosexuality and with the political status accorded lesbianism as a challenge to male supremacy, but who were prepared to live with that contradiction.

After so many years, it is clear that the issues cannot be resolved to everybody's satisfaction. There have been a number of arguments marshalled against the political lesbian claim that heterosexuality is intrinsically oppressive of women, and that only lesbianism promises the possibility of a community among women, independent of male demands. It has been argued that this lesbian claim must not be made because it implies a failure of radical commitment on the part of heterosexual feminists, and that either that implication is empirically false, or that it is not the kind of thing that some feminists should say about other feminists. It has also been argued that relationships between lesbians are not entirely problem-free either, that they too can be anguished, emotionally traumatic, and imbued with power games. I have some sympathy with both these arguments. But neither they nor any of the other arguments against the lesbian claim defended heterosexuality as a feminist practice.

The arguments of the political lesbians (who tended to call themselves 'Radicalesbians' or just lesbians) against heterosexuality differed little from those of the other early feminist writers who argued for its abolition, except that the lesbians insisted that lesbianism was the only solution to the problem of heterosexuality. They also made a much broader claim than simply offering a solution to the problems heterosexuality generated for women: that a commitment to lesbianism was the only way forward for the feminist revolution. In the collection of articles from the lesbian feminist journal, *The Furies*, called *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, which was published in 1975, although most of the articles dated from 1972, the authors of the introduction put the lesbian claim thus:

Lesbian-feminist politics is a political critique of the institution and ideology of heterosexuality as a primary cornerstone of male supremacy. It is an extension of the analysis of sexual politics into an analysis of sex itself as an institution. It is a commitment to women as a political group which is the basis of a political/economic strategy leading to power for women. (Myron and Bunch, eds., 1975:10)

Because heterosexuality was a crucial factor in the maintenance of male supremacy, feminists must abandon it. At the same time, all feminists, indeed, all women, must embrace lesbianism if there was to be any possibility of a feminist revolution. To quote from the same volume:

Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy (p. 18).

And again:

Lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal, and economic basis of male supremacy. The lesbian threatens the ideology of male supremacy by destroying the lie about female inferiority, weakness, passivity, and by denying women's "innate" need for men (p. 33).

Arguments like these were reiterated more recently in a paper written by the Leeds revolutionary feminist group, called 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality'. (This paper, originally delivered at a conference in 1979, was printed in *WIRES*, the national newsletter of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, in 1981, and reprinted, along with the subsequent debate, as a pamphlet by Only women Press, called *Love Your Enemy?*). The purpose of the paper was to state clearly and unequivocally the authors' conviction that 'all feminists can and should be political lesbians'. They defined 'political lesbian' as 'a woman who does not fuck men'. Feminists should abandon heterosexuality, they said, '[b]ecause it is specifically through [hetero]sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained'. The authors insisted that

any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger... Every act of penetration for the woman is an invasion which undermines her confidence and saps her strength. For a man it is an act of power and mastery which makes him stronger, not just over one woman but over all women. So every woman who engages in penetration bolsters the oppressor and reinforces the class power of men.

Not surprisingly, these arguments once again created an uproar and split feminism into two mutually antagonistic and warring camps. That is not to say that all feminists without exception embraced one side or the other in the debate. Many women were bemused and uncertain; others were ambivalent, agreeing now with one side, now with the other; still others ignored the issue altogether, seeing no hope of any resolution, and preferring to get on with something more manageable. Nonetheless, the fact remains that there was no middle ground.

While I tend to agree with this early (and still current) lesbian feminist account of sexual politics, I have some disagreements with the way the ideas are expressed. I do not agree, for example, with statements to the effect that all women, or even all feminists, ought to be lesbians, however lesbianism is defined, for the reasons I outlined in [chapter two](#). At the same time, a feminism which does not accord lesbianism a central place, both as a passionate commitment to women and as an impassioned rejection of male supremacy, is a pallid, gutless, meaningless 'feminism', unlikely to change anything.

On the other hand, I tend to agree that 'Any woman can be a lesbian'. The import of this latter statement is that lesbianism is not something foreign to most women, not a weird, minority preference of no relevance to the majority of women, but a positive potential choice for women, an intrinsic part of female existence. There are innumerable empirical examples to support this. There are many women who found that feminism's validation and politicising of lesbianism had a profound effect on their emotional lives, sometimes despite themselves. Many of these women had initially fiercely resisted what they felt was a pressure to become lesbian, only to find themselves, unexpectedly and greatly to their own surprise, in love with a woman. In many cases, these were women who were not grossly unhappy in heterosexual relationships, who were entirely successful (in conventional terms) as wives and lovers of men, who enjoyed heterosex and who related to pleasant, supportive, caring men. Their eventual, whole-hearted embracing of lesbianism was not a reaction to bad experiences of heterosexuality, but the result of a deep-seated realisation that the feminist connection between women required a commitment at every level of their being, including those parts of

the self outside conscious control. I know of no better example of the coming together of the personal and the political.

The Female Orgasm Unchained

Another debate which preoccupied feminists in the early 70s involved the nature of the female orgasm. Feminist arguments were intended to undermine two ‘myths’: that women were less sexual than men, and that the vaginal orgasm was the only real orgasm for the mature woman. The data which was constantly cited as evidence that destroyed these myths did not come from the work of feminists, who do not on the whole have access to the resources necessary for large scale research (nor the inclination to engage in it). It came from the work of those famous and intrepid explorers of the sexuality of Western Man (and woman too) Alfred Kinsey, and William Masters and Virginia Johnson. (For a much-needed criticism of this kind of research by ‘sexperts’, see Jeffreys, 1990)

The idea that women were less sexual than men was supposedly thrown into disarray by the discovery that most women were capable of multiple orgasms. As Susan Lydon put it in her paper, *The Politics of Orgasm*, in 1970:

women are naturally multi-orgasmic; that is, if a woman is immediately stimulated following orgasm, she is likely to experience several orgasms in rapid succession. This is not an exceptional occurrence, but one of which most women are capable. (Lydon, 1970:222)

Dr. Mary Jane Sherfey put it thus in her paper, ‘A Theory of Female Sexuality’:

No doubt the most far-reaching hypothesis extrapolated from biological data is the existence of the universal and physically normal condition of women’s inability ever to reach complete sexual satiation in the presence of the most intense, repetitive orgasmic experiences, no matter how produced. Theoretically, a woman could go on having orgasms indefinitely if physical exhaustion did not intervene. (Sherfey, 1966:245–6)

That this was not generally known, Lydon put down to the fact that ‘woman’s sexuality, defined by men to benefit men, has been downgraded and perverted, repressed and channeled, denied and abused’ (p. 219). Although the work of Masters and Johnson ‘demolished the established myths’, she said, it had had very little impact despite its enormous popularity, ‘because a male-dominated American culture has a vested interest in [the] continuance [of the mythology]’ (p. 222–3). Nonetheless, she saw their work as ‘truly revolutionary and liberating’ (p. 222), a first step in a process whereby ‘woman at long last will be allowed to take the first step toward her emancipation, to define and enjoy the forms of her own sexuality’ (p. 228).

This conclusion was a little premature. The information about ‘multiple orgasms’ did have some impact on the lives of women. But it was not a revolutionary and liberating one. Rather, it became one more demand men could make on their female sexual partners. The pressure on women to fake orgasms did not, it would seem, recede in response to sexual liberation and Masters and Johnson. That it did not is not surprising, given that the male need for women to ‘reflect’ them ‘at twice their natural size’ remained undiminished. (Cline and Spender, 1987) And faking multiple orgasms is even harder than faking one.

Sherfey's paper was not feminist, despite its appearance in the classic feminist anthology, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, and despite the fact that her account of female sexuality fitted so neatly with the current feminist preoccupation. It was first printed in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*, a source which can hardly be said to have a feminist slant, although that in itself would not exclude the paper from the ranks of feminism. It was not feminist because of Sherfey's approval of what she called the 'ruthless subjugation' of 'women's inordinate orgasmic capacity'. She argued that 'the *forceful* suppression of women's inordinate sexual demands' was necessary, because that suppression 'was a prerequisite to the dawn of every modern civilization and almost every living culture' (her emphasis). It was required by the demands of family life within settled agricultural communities, villages and towns. It was only 'private property, kinship lineages, inheritance laws, social ordinances...[and the] carefully delineated and rigidly maintained large-family complex' which provided the security necessary for the individual to develop 'his [sic] uniquely human potentialities' (p. 249), she said. (Presumably women's orgasmic capacity was not uniquely human).

While feminists would not disagree that ('patriarchal') civilisation was based on the 'suppression' of the female, the typical feminist response to that fact (if it is one) is to deplore it. Sherfey, however, regarded it as a necessary step in 'human' development. She even went so far as to say that 'the rigid, enforced suppression...of women's sexual drive' would even now still be 'inevitable and mandatory', if women 'prove incapable of controlling it, thereby jeopardising family life and child care', because other forms of family life than those currently in existence 'cannot now be imagined' (p. 251). (It was at this point that the editor, Robin Morgan, felt obliged to intervene, by pointing out that alternative forms of family life were 'not only imaginable, but already in experimental practice'). Nevertheless, despite the problems, Sherfey's account of the insatiability of female sexuality suited feminist purposes at the time.

The vaginal orgasm was demolished with the discovery that the physical locus of all female orgasms was the clitoris. As Alix Shulman said in her paper, 'Organs and Orgasms':

The truth is, there is only *one* kind of orgasm, one set of physiological responses constituting orgasm... Apparently orgasm can be achieved by various routes...by means of intercourse alone...through stimulation of the breasts alone, or through stimulation of the mind alone, or during dreams... However, the Masters and Johnson research shows, the most reliable way of reaching orgasm for most women is by stimulation of the clitoris.
(Shulman, 1971:201—her emphasis)

The villain of the piece when it came to 'the myth of the vaginal orgasm' (the title of Anne Koedt's 1970 paper) was, of course, Freud, because of his assertion that women had to change their orgasms from the clitoris to the vagina as part of 'normal' feminine development. (Freud, 1933) But Freud was not alone in insisting that clitoral orgasms were a sign of immaturity in the female, and that only vaginal orgasms were worthy of an adult woman. He was simply an articulate and influential exponent of the general belief that the vagina stimulated by the penis was the locus of female sexual pleasure. Given the conviction that the only true sexual organ is the penis, it is only logical that it must be the source of sexual pleasure for both sexes, even in the teeth of the evidence. As Alix Shulman said: 'given our male-dominated society, the mere facts about female sexuality are not enough'.

(Shulman, 1971:203)

Anne Koedt gave a variety of reasons for the persistence of the belief in vaginal orgasms. She did not deny that women might have orgasms during intercourse, but said that these were triggered by indirect stimulation of the clitoris, or by psychological causes, fantasy, imagination or emotional involvement, rather than by sexual intercourse per se. She also said that women were often confused about the locus of their orgasms, and even about whether or not they had had one, because of ignorance about their own anatomy and sensations. Moreover, 'the vast majority of women', she said, who reported vaginal orgasms, were 'faking it'. She went on to suggest a number of reasons for this: the pressure the man brings to bear on the woman to bolster his perception of himself as a great lover; the woman's desire to hurry up the sex act; her need to 'catch' a man; her fear of asserting her own sexual enjoyment; her perception of sexual pleasure as the man's prerogative; her fear of being labelled unfeminine. (Koedt, 1970)

Alix Shulman suggested that the reason women have continued to believe in the vaginal orgasm, often despite their own sensations, was because women have been isolated from each other and unable to compare experiences: 'Though each one recognized that the sex myths did not describe her own experience, she assumed that they did describe the experience of other women'. Now that women were getting together and talking about their sexuality, they were 'discovering that their experiences [were] remarkably similar and that they [were] not freaks...that it is not they who have individual sex problems; it is society that has one big political problem' (p. 205).

Neither Shulman nor Koedt was arguing that it was women who maintained the 'myth'. Or rather, to the extent that women did so, it was only through ignorance. It was 'society' which perpetuated 'these myths', said Shulman, and by doing so, 'perpetuat[ed] the notion that women must be dependent solely on men for their sexual satisfaction and subordinate to the male interpretation of female pleasure' (p. 204). For Lydon, 'the definition of normal feminine sexuality as vaginal...was a part of keeping women down, of making them sexually, as well as economically, socially, and politically subservient' (p. 222). For Koedt, it was in the interests of men to maintain the myth of vaginal orgasm, because penile penetration of the vagina was the best method for male orgasm, 'from a strictly technical point of view'. Since it was the best for the normal heterosexual male, then it must be the best for the normal heterosexual female too.

Moreover, it was a feature of what Koedt called 'male chauvinism' that men could not or would not see women as autonomous individuals with needs and desires of their own which differed from those of men. 'Rather', she said, 'men have chosen to define women only in terms of how they benefited men's lives'. A further reason for the tenacity of the myth, she said, concerned the definition of the penis as the 'epitome of masculinity'. Because the clitoris was 'almost identical to the penis', men feared it as a rival to their own penile supremacy, and ignored it, or even mutilated or excised it, as in the practice of clitoridectomy. Yet another reason was men's fear of becoming sexually expendable if the clitoris rather than the vagina was recognised as the centre of female sexual pleasure. Koedt said that this fear 'has a great deal of validity if one considers *only* the anatomy' (her emphasis), that the existence of lesbianism pointed to the irrelevance of the male organ to female sexuality, and

that women chose men rather than women as sexual partners for ‘primarily psychological reasons’. Of course, women chose women for psychological reasons rather than anatomical ones, too, and ‘there [was] a fear on men’s part that women will seek the company of other women on a full human basis’, and hence, presumably, diminish the importance of men in their lives. Koedt concluded with a statement about the revolutionary implications of this new knowledge of the female orgasm: The establishment of the clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual *institution*...making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option’ (p. 166—her emphasis).

All this was very important, no doubt, and needed to be said. It was perhaps least important on the empirical level, since ‘scientific facts’, no matter how interesting or rigorously garnered, have very little influence when they contradict dominant norms. It was more important for the self-esteem of the women who heard the arguments, and for the picture it gave of a sexuality radically different from the phallic norm, as a polemic exposing the posturing of male sexuality as ‘human’ sexuality. It also served an important purpose in bringing into question the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality for women, at least to the extent that heterosexual activity was defined in terms of physical sensation alone. Anne Koedt put it thus: ‘it forces us...to discard many “physical” arguments explaining why women go to bed with men’. (Koedt, 1970:165) While I disagree that any argument can ‘force’ us to do (or not do) anything, the feminist debate surrounding the female orgasm did render problematic the compatibility of female and male sexual pleasure. Or rather, it was rendered problematic for a short time, within radical feminist circles. It seems subsequently to have been reasserted within ‘the malestream’, or never to have been seriously challenged, despite the evidence, which continues to be ignored or howled down.

early radical feminism II: kate millett and shulamith firestone

KATE MILLETT'S *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* were both very influential in the early 70s. *Sexual Politics* was even a bestseller—'I'm rich. Shamefully, pointlessly rich. Figuring it out behind the newspaper (tonight I'll eat steak in the Trattoria), I could live three years on my royalties.' (Millett, 1974:4) Both books are usually regarded as standard radical feminist texts. But although I would agree with that assessment in the case of *Sexual Politics*, I have some reservations about *The Dialectic of Sex*, because Firestone attributes women's subordination to 'child-bearing'.

Kate Millett

Millett's *Sexual Politics* went straight to the heart of the matter. Her book was an attempt to theorise 'power-structured relationships [between the sexes], arrangements whereby one group of persons [female] is controlled by another [male]' (Millett, 1970:23). The chief way that manifests itself, according to the emphasis in the book, is through a (male hetero-)sexuality which eroticises female sexual degradation, a sexuality which not only takes for granted that women are willing and always available receptacles for the penis, but glories in it. By focusing her attention on phallic sexuality, Millett exposed the central symbol of male power. A large part of the text is devoted to a detailed critique of some literary depictions of phallocentricity: D.H.Lawrence's glorification of the erect penis; Henry Miller's obsessive masturbatory fantasies of the ever-present availability of the female anatomy and the irresistibility of his own genital equipment; Norman Mailer's wallowing in the rape, murder and erotic degradation of women; Jean Genet's exposure of the inexorability of phallic supremacy even when there are no women available and the only objects of phallic conquest are other men (anatomically but not culturally).

However, in her theoretical section, 'Theory of Sexual Politics', Millett did not take up the implications of her own emphasis. The theory, which she admitted was only a 'sketch', a set of 'notes to ward a theory of patriarchy', contains no consistent theme tying it all together, despite the fact that the format of her book implicitly suggests phallocentricity as the central organising principle of women's oppression. The section consists of a series of unconnected analyses under eight separate sub-headings. I agree with Juliet Mitchell's criticism (although not for the same reasons) that, 'although [Millett's study] *isolates* different mechanisms, it doesn't confront their relationships; so we are left with a sense of the random and chaotic and *equal* contribution of each and all to the maintenance of patriarchy'. (Mitchell, 1971:83—her emphasis).¹ Apart from the statement that 'Coitus...is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes' (p. 23), Millett did not provide us with an account of how and why the particular form of the male approach to coitus she depicted served as a paradigm case of female oppression. It is as though Millett knew what she was saying by

emphasising these texts' over-valuation of penis-possession, but didn't know how to say it theoretically.

Despite the absence in *Sexual Politics* of any account of a sexuality which might be characteristically female, Millett did sometimes attribute a 'sexuality' to women. But the context makes it clear that the sexuality referred to is not female, or not in the sense that it arises from an intrinsic female desire to engage in the activity. For example, at one point she said: 'The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her [sic] sexuality for support and status'. (Millett, 1970:54). In this example it is obvious that what the woman desires is not sex for its own sake, but recognition. That she *can* use sex and her own body to achieve this end, is a comment on male supremacy and the eroticisation of male power; but it says nothing about her own sexual desires. On the information contained in the above statement, it is not possible to judge whether the woman involved does find erotic the male monopoly on knowledge/power, in which case she would be eroticising her own lack of autonomous access to power; or whether she is beating the phalocrats at their own game by remaining emotionally detached and manipulating the man (or men) to serve purposes other than her own sexual pleasure. In the former case, the woman's sexual desire is not autonomous, despite her subjective feeling that it is, because it reinforces her subordination. In the latter case, the sexuality is not the woman's at all, but a manipulation of male sexual desire to gain other ends.

It is possible that the book lacked an explicit account of female sexuality because Millett subscribed to the 'repression hypothesis'— if female sexuality is, and always has been, 'repressed', what is there to say about it beyond that simple observation? She presented a picture of a female 'sexuality' characterised by 'sexual inhibition', 'suppression' and 'taboo', and by the denial of 'sexual freedom'. The way to 'free' female sexuality was to do away with the prohibitions:

A sexual revolution would require, perhaps first of all, an end of traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos, particularly those that most threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage: homosexuality, 'illegitimacy', adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality. The negative aura with which sexual activity has generally been surrounded would necessarily be eliminated, together with the double standard and prostitution. The goal of revolution would be a permissive single standard of sexual freedom, and one uncorrupted by the crass and exploitative bases of traditional sexual alliances. (p. 62)

Millett went on to assert that what she called the 'first phase' of the 'sexual revolution' (from 1830 to 1930) was in fact 'a time of greatly increasing sexual freedom for both sexes...in particular...the attainment of a measure of sexual freedom for women' (p. 62–3), and that 'the sexual revolution had done a great deal to free female sexuality' (p. 240).

But even within her own terms it was not that simple. If (as Millett so cogently pointed out) D.H.Lawrence could use the new persona of the uninhibitedly sexual woman in the service of male supremacy and the glorification of the erect penis, if Henry Miller's detailed and explicit accounts of liberated copulatory exploits required the dehumanisation of women, and if Norman Mailer's similar accounts could act out that dehumanisation in the rape and murder of women without a word of protest from the literary fraternity which praised his writings, then the 'sexual revolution' (so-called) was not for women. Even if it resulted in permission for more women to engage in more sex with more (male) partners, it didn't

necessarily improve women's sexual lives, since its main consequence was to abolish traditional constraints on *male* sexuality. As Anselma Dell'Olio argued in 1972 in *The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War*: 'in truth, women had been liberated only from the right to say "no" to sexual intercourse with men...we were shorn of all protection...in the name of the New Morality'. (Dell'Olio, 1972:124–5. For a more recent critique of the idea that the 'sexual revolution' benefited women, see: Jeffreys, 1985; Jeffreys, 1990)

This sexual libertarianism, the view that sexual 'freedom' is merely a matter of easing constraints, lifting bans and doing away with moral judgements, has not gone unchallenged within feminism. Nonetheless, it remains influential. More recent versions involve a more or less fierce defence of all and any form of sexual behaviour as long as it is 'consensual', combined with accusations of 'moralism' directed to wards anyone who dares to criticise any of the behaviours in question. To criticise sexual libertarianism is not necessarily to argue for the imposition of punitive sanctions or legal penalties for 'unacceptable' sexual behaviour. It *is*, however, to argue for a more considered reassessment of sexuality and the part it plays in social relations of power.

Millett can be excused her defence of sexual libertarianism. In her case, it was merely a sign of the times. She can be excused because she accurately identified the main enemy addressed by feminism. She named the problem 'patriarchy', but she defined it primarily in terms of male supremacy: 'If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger'. (Millett, 1970:25) Not only did she locate the problem accurately in male supremacy, the emphasis of her book, although not her explicit analysis, also identified the violent eroticised phallus at the heart of women's oppression. In that achievement, she had very few equals at the time.

Shulamith Firestone (and Freud and Reich)

In her book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone did not locate male domination at the centre of her analysis. For that reason it is debatable whether or not her text can be called radical feminist, although it usually is so designated. It was not the power of men which constituted the main problem for Firestone. The determining factor in women's oppression, in her account, was 'biology'. While she variously named the problem as 'the massacre', 'female oppression', 'sex war', 'male privilege and exploitation', 'the oppression of women as a class', 'sexism', '[men's] tyranny over women and children', 'the sex distinction itself', and (once only) 'male supremacy', what lay behind it all was female biology. 'Unlike economic class', she argued, 'sex class sprang directly from a biological reality', specifically 'the natural reproductive difference between the sexes' (pp. 8, 9), institutionalised in 'the *biological family*—the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant, in whatever form of social organization' (p. 8—her emphasis). She also argued that it was 'menstruation, menopause, and "female ills", constant painful childbirth, wetnursing and care of infants', together with the long period of childhood dependency, which had 'made [women] dependent on males...for physical survival' (p. 8).

Firestone has, of course, been roundly criticised for her ‘biologism’, criticisms which need not be repeated here. The problem with her account is not so much the identification of ‘biology’ as a relevant factor in elucidating the nature of women’s oppression. At least the emphasis on biological reproduction places women at the centre of the debate, hence its attraction for many feminists. The problem with Firestone’s account lies in her characterisation of what constitutes the main enemy for feminism, an enemy which she located, not in male supremacy (she never did manage to tell us how women’s childbearing and nurturing capacities led to our subordination to men, nor what male interests were served by the dependency of women and children), but in women’s own bodies. Such a conclusion must be given no feminist credence at all. We are not responsible for the male supremacist social order, however inadvertently (although we can be complicitous with it). Feminism cannot afford to embrace the idea that women should take dangerous risks with our bodily integrity, in the interests, moreover, of a sexuality which remains intransigently phallic, which, at least as it is normally practised, is of little or no intrinsic interest to many women most of the time.

It would seem that Firestone was aware of this, judging by the following remarks:

even those women who appear to be sexually adjusted seldom are. We must remember that a woman can go through intercourse with almost no response... Though few women, because of the excessive pressure on them to conform, actually repudiate their sexual role altogether by becoming actively lesbian, this does not mean that most women are sexually fulfilled by interaction with men (p. 58)

But she failed to follow through the implication of her own insight. She attributed this state of affairs, not to the universalising of phallic sexuality as the norm of ‘human’ sexuality, but to ‘repressions due to the incest taboo [which] make a totally fulfilled sexuality impossible for anyone’ (p. 58).

Firestone was, however, somewhat ambivalent about what constituted the primary cause of women’s oppression. At one point, she said: ‘A book on radical feminism that did not deal with love would be a political failure. For love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression today’ (p. 126). It is this concern with ‘love’ which marks Firestone as a radical feminist. The early US radical feminists were unanimous in their scathing denunciations of ‘love’, by which they meant romantic heterosexuality. Ti-Grace Atkinson insisted with a fine rhetorical flourish:

And love. As long as we’re on sacred cows, let’s finish them. What is love but the payoff for the consent to oppression? What is love but a need? What is love but fear? In a just society, would we need love?... Scratch *his* love, and you’ll find *your* fear.

(Atkinson, 1974:7—her emphasis)

Bonnie Kreps said: ‘we must fight the corrupt notion we now call “love”, which is based on the control of another rather than on love for the growth of another’. And THE FEMINISTS said:

Love promotes vulnerability, dependence, possessiveness, susceptibility to pain, and prevents the full development of woman’s human potential by directing all her energies outward in the interests of others.

(Koedt, Levine and Rapone, eds., 1973:239, 375)

According to Firestone 'love' (for men) placed women in an impossible situation because it was a relationship of inequality. 'Love', she said, 'requires a mutual vulnerability that is impossible to achieve in an unequal power situation' (p. 132). Although she could conceive of the possibility of a love that led to mutual enrichment and growth, as things stood at the moment, love became 'complicated, corrupted, or obstructed by an *unequal balance of power*' (p. 130—her emphasis). Under present conditions, it was dangerous for women to love men, she argued, because men could not love in return. Men were protected against the vulnerability of love by their membership of the superior class. Either the man idealised the woman he was 'in love' with, in order to raise her above the common female herd and to justify his interest in her: 'A man must idealize one woman over the rest in order to justify his descent to a lower caste' (p. 131). Or he degraded her in order to distinguish her from his original forbidden love object, his mother. Either way, the woman was faced with unrealistic expectations to live up to or struggle against.

It was in this chapter that Firestone acknowledged male domination, and redeemed her radical feminist credentials. The *raison d'être* of love was the emotional exploitation of women by men: '*(Male) culture was (and is) parasitical, feeding on the emotional strength of women without reciprocity*', said Firestone (p. 127—her emphasis). The grand edifice of civilisation was a masculine construct, built on the emotional energy of women without acknowledgement.

Like Kate Millett, Firestone was a sexual libertarian. But again like Millett, Firestone's position was the result of a less than critical acceptance of the ideas around at the time she was writing. She was convinced of the existence of sexual repression, which was, however, not peculiar to women, in her view. (In this, she was at one with the male ideologues of 'sexual liberation', like many another radical woman at the time). Because sexual repression was a prerequisite for the continuation of 'the nuclear family of a patriarchal society' (p. 47), it was 'demanded of every individual in the interests of family integrity' (p. 61). Because at the time Freud was regarded as the source of a theory of repression, she used his work, and in particular her version of the theory of the Oedipus complex, to argue that 'in order to adjust to present civilisation the sexuate [sic] being must undergo a repression process in childhood'. (p. 45)

Firestone did not accept the Freudian schema uncritically. She was, after all, one of the first of the early 'second wave' feminists to criticise Freud. She argued, quite rightly, that Freudian psychoanalysis dealt with the same historical conditions as did the feminism of the turn of the century. But whereas feminism challenged those conditions, and in particular, 'the crucial problem of modern life: Sexuality' (p. 43), Freudianism diagnosed and reinforced those conditions.

However, her criticism that Freud did not question the social context of the psychological structures he observed (p. 45–6) is not entirely accurate. The point which Freud missed was not simply a matter of the 'social context'. He was, after all, very aware of social constraints of a certain kind on the sexual life of the individual. The point he missed was the question of male domination and female subordination and of whether or not something could or should be done about that. But he did not miss the point entirely. If he had, his work would be of no use to feminism, whereas it is, in fact, extremely useful in its account of the mechanisms

necessary for the establishment and maintenance of phallocratic reality. Not, of course, that Freud would have put it quite like that. He regarded his discoveries as having universal application, as indicating a reality that was ineradicable and inevitable. But we do not need to agree with him on this last point in order to use his discoveries for our own purposes.

Firestone started her account of the Oedipus complex with the male child. She apologised for this priority, but argued that this was the way Freud, and ‘our whole culture’, dealt with the issue. An adequate critique must follow the same priorities, she said, at least initially. Moreover, she was convinced that the effects of the Oedipus complex were more damaging to the male psyche, and more harmful in their social consequences, than the effects of the ‘Electra complex’ on the female child. This term, ‘Electra complex’, Firestone used to refer to the feminine Oedipus complex, attributing it to Freud. (However, he himself refused to use the term ‘Electra complex’, which he attributed to Jung, on the grounds that the masculine and feminine Oedipus complexes were so different, and that to use a separate term for the femininity process would imply an equivalence which did not exist: ‘We have an impression here that what we have said about the Oedipus complex applies with complete strictness to the male child only and that we are right in rejecting the term “Electra complex” which seeks to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes’). (Freud, 1931:375)

Firestone’s conviction that the psychological damage to the male caused by the Oedipus complex had ‘vaster consequences’ and a ‘much greater cultural significance’ than the damage done to the female (p. 46), was based on her perception that ‘the male sexual sickness, the confusion of sexuality with power, hurts others’, whereas ‘a damaged female sexuality is relatively harmless in social terms’ (p. 58). While I agree that phallic sexuality on the rampage is horrifyingly destructive, I cannot entirely agree with her on this score, because it is not simply a question of sexuality. What Freud exposed with his theory of the ‘Oedipus complex’, ‘castration anxiety’, ‘penis envy’, etc. was the dehumanisation of women (and of men, too, to the extent that their ‘human’ status rested on the exclusion of the female). However, to give *analytical* priority to the male does serve to identify the *actual* priority of the male under conditions of male supremacy. As long, that is, as the analysis remains focused on the task of undermining male supremacy, an emphasis which I am by no means sure Firestone has achieved in her account of the Oedipus complex.

The Oedipus complex is the process whereby the male child is socialised into acceptance of his masculinity. He is threatened with castration, a possibility made all the more feasible because of the existence of already ‘castrated’ beings, i.e. females. At the same time, he is given the promise of his eventual manhood and access to male power if he gives up all claims to and identification with his mother. ‘What finally convinces him [to give up his attachment to his mother]’, said Firestone, ‘is the offer of the *world* when he grows up’ (p. 51—her emphasis). As a consequence,

the male child, in order to save his own hide [or rather, penis], has had to abandon and betray his mother and join ranks with her oppressor. He feels guilty. His emotions toward women in general are affected. Most men have made an all-too-beautiful transition into power over others; some are still trying. (p. 52)

What Firestone did not mention in her exposition of the Oedipus complex is that one of its consequences is male contempt for the female, a contempt based on the male perception that

women lack the symbol of ‘human’ value, the penis, and hence are forever debarred from fully human status (under conditions of male supremacy, that is). Indeed, Firestone stated that boys felt contempt for *their fathers*: ‘deep down they have a contempt for the father with all his power’. (p. 51) But contempt is not an emotion available to the powerless—rage, hatred and resentment, yes. But contempt is typical of the way the powerful feel towards the weak who lack the benefits, privileges and prerogatives which the powerful reserve for themselves.

Firestone came close to a realisation of this masculine contempt (although no closer than Freud himself did) in her discussion of the ‘psychological dichotomy’ of ‘the good/bad woman syndrome’. (p. 59) (Freud called this ‘the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love’, or, in another translation, ‘the most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life’). This ‘compartmentalization of the [male] personality’ (Firestone, 1970:59) is a result of the demand on the male child that he split his sexual feelings from the rest of his emotional life because the former are inappropriate responses to his mother. In later life this ‘sexual schizophrenia’ (ibid.) typically manifests itself in the man’s inability to be *sexual* with ‘mother’-like women (his own wife and mother of his children, and respectable women in general), and his inability to *love* ‘appropriately’ sexual women—‘whores’, ‘sluts’, ‘tramps’, ‘loose women’. (Freud called this ‘psychical impotence’). By avoiding an examination of the full implications of this masculine contempt for women, Firestone presented us with a weakened version of Freudianism. If we are going to use Freud’s work as a metaphor for our times, there is no point in sanitising the nastiness of what he exposed. Making Freud’s theory more palatable than it actually was, is not going to change the reality that theory unveiled.

This same sanitising process can be seen at work in Firestone’s account of what she called the ‘Electra complex’. She said that the girl child, too, is originally attached to the mother, an attachment which is broken when the child realises that she is ‘castrated’. She then turns to wards her father, ‘to compensate’, said Firestone, and develops a hostility towards her mother because of the rivalry for her father’s affections.

But this is not quite what Freud said. In the first place, not only does the girl realise that she herself is ‘castrated’; she realises that her mother is too. As a consequence, she develops a feeling of contempt for her mother, and later for women in general and herself as well (although Freud did not mention this last vital point). As Freud put it: ‘as a result of the discovery of women’s lack of a penis they are debased in value for girls just as they are for boys and later perhaps for men’. (Freud, 1933:160–1) On Freud’s account, then, feminine self-contempt is a necessary prerequisite for the development of ‘normal’ (read: in a male supremacist social order) femininity.

Further, Freud’s language was much harsher than Firestone’s. He was, after all, describing a harsh reality, not that he himself showed any but the faintest awareness of that. His famous question towards the end of his life, ‘What do women want?’, showed a dim awareness of something wrong, as did his late revision of his theory of femininity. But it never occurred to him that his life’s work may have been a crucial part of the problem. He said: The turning away from the mother is accompanied by hostility; the attachment to the mother ends in hate’. (Op. cit, p. 155) And this hatred of the mother was not a consequence of rivalry for the father, as Firestone would have it, but a direct result of the girl child’s perception of ‘castration’—

she blamed her mother for having borne her as a girl rather than as a boy: 'girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being thus put at a disadvantage'. (Op. cit, p. 158)

Firestone's account of 'penis envy' also softened the starkness of the Freudian account. She argued that 'it is safer to view this as a metaphor', but then spoiled her own insight by translating the child's experience of the inequality of the differences between the sexes into a matter of accurate perception rather than a question of the power of symbolic representation. It is not the boy's anatomical appendage which the girl envies, she argued, but the effortless approval he receives from adults and the greater possibility he has of activity in and access to the world (p. 53–4). But although she is correct in questioning Freud's literalness in the importance he placed on 'the anatomical distinction between the sexes', to abolish the centrality of that distinction altogether is to miss the point of the discovery Freud made (despite himself), the phenomenon of phallogocentricity.

But Firestone's immediate mentor in her account of the part played by sexual repression in the maintenance of the nuclear family was not Freud, but Wilhelm Reich. Freud never argued for an end to sexual repression, although he deplored some of its more distressing consequences (mainly for men). Neither did Freud envisage an end to the 'nuclear family' (not a Freudian term), since he regarded its central mechanism, the Oedipus complex, as universal. It was the work of Wilhelm Reich and his popularisers of the (largely male) New Left of the 1960s which insisted on an end to 'sexual repression' and the destruction of the 'nuclear family'.

To a certain extent, the use of Reich's work in a feminist context is understandable. The concept of 'sexual politics' originated with Reich (Mitchell, 1974:197) (although he preferred the term 'sex-economy'). But he used it in a different sense from the way Kate Millett was to use it later. For Reich, the political dimension of sexuality was not sexual inequality, although he frequently deplored women's economic dependence on men, their confinement within the family, and the repressive effect that had on female sexuality. His concern was with the politics of class society, and with 'sexual repression' as 'the product of a fundamental modification of the human psychical structure to the benefit of the dominant system', i.e. capitalism. (Reich, 1972[1934]:62). He was committed to the idea that 'the personal is political'. He set up a number of 'Sexpol' clinics whose overall aim was 'the politicization of personal life' (Reich, 1974[1945]:199).

Much of what Reich said would not look out of place in a feminist text. He frequently referred to the 'patriarchal culture', and directed his chief attacks against the ideology of marriage, the family and compulsory permanent monogamy. At one point in *The Sexual Revolution* he prefigured the later feminist debate on the value to the capitalist production process of women's domestic labour. He argued that women's 'unpaid work in the household indirectly raises the profits of the employer', that without the housework performed 'gratuitously' by the working man's wife, the employer would have to pay the worker a higher wage, so that the worker in turn could pay someone to do the domestic work necessary to feed and clothe him and keep him in a condition to work efficiently. (Reich, 1974[1945]: 150–1)

But to use Reich's work unmodified for feminist purposes has major disadvantages. For

Reich, 'patriarchy' was an affair between men, the rule of the fathers over the sons. Women suffered too from the moral dictates of the 'authoritarian family', not, however, because women were in subjection to men, but because, like men, they were subjected to the 'dominant (capitalist) system'. Moreover, he regarded male and female sexuality as essentially the same. Not that he was unaware of differences: he was of the opinion that more women than men suffered sexual neuroses under present conditions, (Reich, 1974[1945]: 49, 109), and that the compulsorily monogamous family was especially repressive of women's sexuality (p. 151). But these differences were the result of capitalist society's interference in 'natural' processes. If society were to refrain from the moralistic control of sexuality, especially the demands for childhood and adolescent abstinence and for monogamous chastity, then sexuality would be free to take its 'natural' course. Because 'natural' sexuality was innately heterosexual, in Reich's view, the sexual lives of women and men would be equal once the social constraints imposed by capitalism were lifted.

Reich's conviction that there existed a 'natural' sexuality buried somewhere under the effects of 'society's' meddling, was dubious enough. Even more suspect was his conviction that there was a basic sexual similarity between the sexes, because that 'similarity' was not sex neutral. It was a phallogentric sexuality masquerading as neutral. This is not immediately obvious, particularly in the light of the amount of attention he did give to women. But then this attention could be seen as no more than a logical requirement of his insistence on the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality—it is not possible to have a male heterosexuality without the other sex, after all. But whenever Reich was speaking about sexuality in general terms, he was in fact speaking about male sexuality, a focus of interest which sooner or later became clear as the discussion proceeded.

For example, at one point in *The Sexual Revolution* he discussed an argument to the effect that sexual abstinence was less harmful than venereal disease. He disagreed with this argument. He said that the disease could be cured, but that the 'pathological character changes' which he was convinced resulted from 'prolonged abstinence' could not be overcome, or only seldom and with great difficulty. His alternative suggestion for the avoidance of the disease was 'intercourse only with a beloved partner and no recourse to prostitutes' (p. 111). He showed no awareness that this solution would not work for a woman who herself had never had 'recourse to prostitutes' but whose 'beloved partner' had. This situation was not uncommon in the days before the ready availability of antibiotics. One fascinating aspect of this statement of Reich's is the non-specificity of its terminology: not 'he' or 'a man' but 'one', not 'woman' but 'partner'. It is as though Reich had to disguise the masculine bias of his argument or it wouldn't work.

In his discussion of 'the typical phases of the sexual act', in *The Function of the Orgasm* (1973[1942]), the emphasis is on the male pattern with the female following suit. The point at issue here is not whether or not the sexes have the same sexual responses to the same stimuli—vaginal penetration and friction by the penis—but that Reich merely assumes that that is the case without further investigation. The female is there simply as a receptacle for the *real* sexual organ, the penis. The woman is allowed some active participation of her own. Indeed, it is required: The widespread passivity on the part of the woman is pathological, usually the result of masochistic rape fantasies' (p. 104). But since the woman's activity is

concentrated on the penis, the emphasis remains phallogentric. References to the penis, penetration and ejaculation occur more than three times as frequently as references to the 'female genital'. This is exclusively the vagina. There is no mention of the clitoris in Reich's description of female 'orgastic potency'.

This is not surprising, given Reich's conviction that vaginal orgasm was the only non-neurotic form of female orgasm. As Juliet Mitchell commented: 'Reich's insistence upon the superiority of the vagina at all stages [of female development] had an urgency to it that was missing from the Freudian notion of the two aspects of sexuality'. (Mitchell, 1974:222) Reich was adamant that the only healthy kind of orgasm for a woman was a vaginal one: 'It is known that frigidity is based on an inhibition of vaginal sensation', Reich asserted. (Reich, 1974[1945]:50) And he was adamantly opposed to the psychoanalytic view that a woman was 'genitally healthy' if she 'was capable of having a clitoral orgasm'. (Reich, 1973[1942]:99) This intransigent insistence, that only the woman who was capable of vaginal orgasm was sexually healthy, was necessary if Reich was to continue to maintain that phallic sexuality was 'natural' for both sexes.

Reich deplored the worst manifestations of phallic sexuality. He criticised those men who liked to boast and make a big show of their masculinity, men who possessed or conquered as many women as possible, who could "do it" again and again in one night'. He regarded such men as 'sadistic or conceited'. Their behaviour was a cover up for 'severe disturbances of erection and ejaculation'. They suffered, he said, from 'orgastic impotence'. (Reich, 1973[1942]:100) Nonetheless, he was convinced that sexual gratification for both sexes was dependent on the ability of the penis to 'function in a normal way'. It was *male* 'orgastic impotence' which concerned Reich, and *male* sexuality which was repressed by capitalist society. It was male impotence which was 'the cause of most psychic misery'. It even 'has a bearing on the cancer scourge', he said. (op. cit, p. 96) It was, therefore, the lifting of the sexual repression of the male which was the most important task for a 'sex-economic' political practice.

Firestone missed altogether the phallogentric nature of Reich's arguments. By following him so uncritically, she accepted the male as the norm, and by so doing obliterated female knowledge, experience and desire. For example, towards the end of her discussion of sexual repression she suggested some solutions to our current sexual malaise:

the separation of sex from emotion is at the very foundations of Western culture and civilization. If early sexual repression is the basic mechanism by which character structures supporting political, ideological, and economic serfdom are produced, an end to the incest taboo, through abolition of the family, would have profound effects: sexuality would be released from its straitjacket to eroticize our whole culture, changing its very definition.

(Firestone, 1970:60)

In this passage Firestone failed to recognise the different interests women and men have in relation to sexuality. Firstly, the question of the 'separation of sex from emotion' is a problem of the *male* psyche, not the female, as Firestone herself so cogently pointed out in her previous discussion on the 'good' woman/'bad' woman dichotomy. Whether or not it lies 'at the very foundations of Western culture and civilization', it is difficult to see what women could do about it when it is a male phenomenon which functions to keep men detached from, and hence in control of, sexual encounters with women. She herself argued exactly this point

in her chapter on 'Love'. Nonetheless, despite her later analysis of this aspect of the inequality in sexual relations between women and men, what she said in the earlier chapter showed no awareness of this insight.

Secondly, there is the question of 'an end to the incest taboo'. The kind of taboo she was talking about, following Freud, was mother/ son incest, the ban imposed on the son by the Oedipus complex and the threat of castration. Certainly, we need an end to the male denigration of mothers and women in general, which is currently the prerequisite for adult masculinity. And certainly we need an end to the ban on speaking out about that form of incest which is in fact far more prevalent, that which is perpetrated by fathers and other older males on daughters and young girls. But I hardly think that it is in the interests of women to call for the abolition of what few limitations already exist on the unfettered exercise of male power within families. The problem with the incest taboo is not that it works so well, but that it does not work well enough. Indeed, in the light of the feminist exposure of the extent of incestuous activity forced on daughters by fathers (and father substitutes), it would seem that the taboo works not against the activity as such, but against speaking about it. It is not the incest *taboo* we should end, but incest itself.

Then there is the question of her call 'to eroticize our whole culture'. This was a favourite catch-cry of the male New Left: sexuality had to be taken 'out of the bedroom', released from the confines of the marital couple, diversified into a 'polymorphous perversity' which de-emphasised the genitals and broke down the distinctions between sexual orientations. But what this slogan ignored was the fact that our culture was already permeated with a phallogocentric eroticism which defined all women as available to any man who cared to exercise his prerogative. The wolf-whistle, the male gaze, the touching and jeering in public places, the sexual harassment in the workplace, the sexual objectification of the advertising industry everywhere, are all manifestations of a pervasive eroticism to which women are subjected whether we wish it or not, and over which we have no control.

And yet, once again, Firestone later showed a clear awareness of the all-pervasiveness of phallogocentric eroticism. In her chapter on 'The Culture of Romance' she talked about the 'erotomania' characteristic of our times:

Stimulated to the limit, it has reached an epidemic level unequalled in history. From every magazine cover, film screen, TV tube, subway sign, jump breasts, legs, shoulders, thighs. [Heterosexual] men walk about in a state of constant sexual excitement... But in all this barrage of erotic stimuli, men themselves are seldom portrayed as erotic objects.

(Firestone, 1970:154)

Her earlier call to 'eroticize our whole culture' took no account of this kind of eroticism, this constant stimulation of male erethism, which, in this context, she argued *against*.

But despite this brief insight into the phallogocentric nature of the already all-pervasive eroticism of our times, she still tended to take the male as the norm and universalise it as relevant for everyone, including women. She defined eroticism as 'the concentration of sexuality...signifying the displacement of other social/affection needs onto sex', and argued against the channelling of needs for love, warmth and physical affection into the 'genital sexual encounter' (p. 147). This was stated in general terms—she used the word 'people', rather than 'men' or 'women'. But then she went on to illustrate the problem by talking about

men: how men are often relieved to be excused from sexual performance when all they want is physical affection, how they tend to look upon women as 'only things whose resistance to entrance must be overcome' (p. 148), how a man cannot even express affection for children unless they are his own. It is true that she was aware of the effect this cultural satyriasis had on female sexuality: how women are seen, and see themselves, as erotic objects, dependent for sexual fulfilment on the male. And yet this awareness was not maintained throughout her analysis. As a consequence, she often obscured the very differences she herself exposed, and asserted a sameness she herself argued did not exist.

part II
the question of socialist feminism

socialist feminism I: class, and ‘autonomy’ or separatism?

I HAVE SINGLED OUT socialist feminism¹ as a special category, not because I regard it as absolutely different from the rest of feminism, but because it defines *itself* as different. In particular, it defines itself as different from a brand of feminism which it variously labels ‘radical feminism’, ‘cultural feminism’, ‘lesbian separatism’, or ‘the anti-pornography movement’. (Mitchell, 1971:87–96; Eisenstein, ed., 1979:6; Coote and Campbell, 1982:26–33; Barrett, 1980:4; Snitow et al., eds., 1983:29–30; Eisenstein, 1984:xx; Segal, 1987:44 and passim) Hester Eisenstein characterised that difference as follows:

radical feminism...holds that gender oppression is the oldest and most profound form of exploitation, which predates and underlies all other forms including those of race and [economic] class; and socialist feminism...argues that class, race, and gender oppression interact in a complex way, that class oppression stems from capitalism, and that capitalism must be eliminated for women to be liberated.

(Eisenstein, 1984:xix–xx)

Coote and Campbell argued that each of the two positions has had from an early stage ‘different preoccupations, different analytical approaches and different strategic priorities’. They stated that ‘the gap between the two has seemed increasingly wide and unbridgeable’, although at the same time they acknowledged that, in relation to an ‘understanding of the forces which perpetuate female subordination, the majorities on both sides hold strikingly similar positions’. Radical feminism involved the ‘designation of women as an oppressed [sex] *class* and [the] formulation of the “pro-woman line”’, they said. (Coote and Campbell, 1982:27—their emphasis) Socialist feminists, on the other hand, they said,

were convinced of the importance of understanding economic forces and of Marx’s analysis of class conflict...in their view men oppress women not by virtue of their biological maleness but by virtue of their social and economic relations with women... The fight to end women’s subordination is...inextricably bound up with the class struggle and cannot be lifted above it—because capitalism itself is not only grounded in patriarchy, but has changed the shape of it. (pp. 32–3)

Class

But the issue is not quite as clear-cut as this. In the first place, socialist feminism is vague on the question of women and class. There is general disagreement with the radical feminist concept of ‘sex class’. Margaret Page, for example, objected to the term because ‘the concept of “sex class” remains within the framework of biological reductionism...[based on] the belief that sexual differences are biological, and therefore immutable’. (Page, 1978:36) But this accusation of ‘biological reductionism’, although it is endemic in socialist feminist discourse, misrepresents the radical feminist enterprise (as I argue at some length in the next chapter). Moreover, a feminist commitment can hardly be void recognising that *men* oppress women, (and not just ‘capitalism’ or ‘patriarchal institutions’). But men are not oppressive as ‘biological’ entities, but as participators within and beneficiaries of male supremacist social relations, and to the extent that they assert the overweening importance of their maleness at

women's expense and fight to retain male privilege.

But socialist feminism has not been able to provide us with an account of the relevance of economic class to the oppression of women. It tends on the whole merely to apostrophise the 'working-class woman' as the embodiment of at least two of the three great loci of oppression (and if she's non-Anglo she presents an even better example): The predicament of working-class women is the most subversive to capitalism because it spans production and reproduction, class exploitation and sex oppression' (Rowbotham, 1973b: 124). Beatrix Campbell sums it up in an apt phrase: 'that most coveted and elusive subject of socialist [feminist] struggle, the working-class woman' (Campbell, 1983:160). Socialist feminism has not, however, been able to go beyond such rhetorical flourishes.

There have been a number of socialist feminist attempts to theorise women and class. None of these attempts has succeeded in explaining women's oppression in terms of class or in terms of women's relation to capital. This failure is not surprising given that women's oppression can only be adequately explained in terms of male supremacy. What weakens socialist feminist attempts to account for women's subordination is their reluctance to recognise the central importance for the feminist struggle of the recognition of male domination as the main enemy. And it is this, rather than reliance on (economic) 'class' as an explanatory device to account for the oppression of women, which marks socialist feminism off from radical feminism.

Very few, if any, socialist feminists argue explicitly for 'class' as the sole determining factor in women's oppression. Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, however, come close. (Weir and Wilson, 1984) They make a number of token gestures towards indicting 'male power'. At one point they assert that 'the subordination of women in the twentieth century... resulted from the complex interaction of capitalist relations of production with institutions of male power' (p. 79). And they criticise at least one position with which they disagree—that of what they call 'discourse theory' as exemplified by the position taken by the journal *m/f* and some writings of Rosalind Coward—on the grounds that it fails to account for the fact that 'in all these different discourses it is men who have the power' (p. 84). Nonetheless, it is 'class' which is given priority in their analysis: 'the best conditions for change for women lie in a challenge to capital and mass campaigning for a socialist government...such changes can only be won through class struggle' (pp. 102–3). Their argument does not attempt to *explain* women's oppression in terms of 'class', i.e. they do not assert that it is the class position of women which is responsible for women's oppression. But by calling for a feminist mobilisation 'in the interests of the working class as a whole' (p. 103), it certainly implies that 'class' is *the* determining factor in the subordination of women. For if 'class' is not the main enemy, then their rallying cry is nothing more than a plea for feminists to direct their energies into struggles which are not in the best interests of women.

Michèle Barrett's discussion of what she calls 'gender' and class does not work either. She states, somewhat tentatively, that 'the relation between class and gender' is 'complex', but that 'one useful way of posing [it]...would be to argue that...women have a dual relationship to the class structure'. This duality she characterises as 'a direct relation of exploitation by capital insofar as the majority of women are wage labourers, and an indirect one insofar as many women depend upon the mediated wage of a male breadwinner'.

(Barrett, 1980:151) But her attempt to link these two forms of exploitation undermines her own efforts to demonstrate the relevance of a class analysis to the oppression of women.

She acknowledges that even women's 'direct exploitation by capital' as waged workers differs systematically from men's—'Women occupy jobs which are lower paid, more insecure, less likely to bring promotion than men...and are concentrated in particular, often low paid, industries' (p. 156). She also acknowledges that that 'direct exploitation' of women is dependent on women's 'indirect' relation to capital, through 'family structure...the ideology of domestic responsibility...[and in particular] their responsibility for childcare' (p. 157). She also says that the present system of familial arrangement for 'the reproduction of labour power' is not necessarily 'the most beneficial for capital' (p. 221).

So if 'the family' is 'the central site of women's oppression in contemporary society' (p. 214), but 'the family' is not necessary for capital, then neither is the oppression of women. Even women's exploitation in the work force, to the extent that it differs from the exploitation of men, is not necessary for the process of capital accumulation, since the exploitation of female labour is mediated and determined by 'the family', and capitalism does not need 'the family' as it is currently arranged. It does not follow from that that, therefore, women can be liberated under capitalism (and Barrett comes to no such conclusion). It *does* follow, though, that Barrett's attempt to fit women into a class analysis, and to argue for class as a determining factor in women's oppression, is unsuccessful because, for her, the primary site of women's oppression is 'the family', not economic class.

She does not help her case by insisting that 'Some capitalists are female' (p. 132). She promptly undermines this assertion, too, by the evidence she adduces to support it. She quotes Hilary Wainwright to the effect that "'women have an almost equal share in the ownership of wealth: they owned about 40 per cent of all private wealth in 1970'" (p. 133). (Barrett does not say whether this '40 per cent' applied to Britain or to the whole world, but I would assume it applied to Britain only). Wainwright herself appeared to believe that this figure implied some kind of equity between the sexes in owning capital. She said that "'there is little to be said about sexual inequalities as far as ownership of capital is concerned'" (ibid.). But her further comments make it clear that women's *ownership* did not mean women's *control*, since that 'ownership' was "'primarily for reasons of tax and inheritance'" and was "'family property, invested by the husband'" (ibid.). Hence those husbands had arranged things so that their wives could not scarp with the loot. So this supposed female 'ownership' of capital is not really ownership at all, since the wealth is not likely to be at women's free disposal.

Anne Phillips provides us with a different form of evasion of the problem of male supremacy in favour of 'class'. Her concern is not to give a causal account of the implication of class in women's oppression. But she devotes exclusive attention to the question of 'what may be differences between women'. (Phillips, 1987:22) Now it is important to point out, whenever it is relevant, that not all women are equally oppressed or oppressed in the same way (to the extent, that is, that they are not). But to devote exclusive attention to that enterprise at the expense of the ways in which phallographic reality privileges men and disadvantages women wherever they are situated in relation to men, is to misrecognise and misrepresent the feminist cause. Of course, if it is the case that it is the differences among

women which lie at the root of women's subordination, rather than 'differences' (i.e. domination) between women and men, then giving priority to elucidating differences among women *would* be the main feminist task. But this was not demonstrated by Phillips. And to concentrate on differences among women to the exclusion of male domination merely confuses the main issue.

The issue of class is also central to the 'capitalist patriarchy', 'dual systems' debates (e.g. Eisenstein, ed., 1979; Sargent, ed., 1981). But no discussion I have yet found provides an adequate account in feminist terms. Either 'women's oppression' is reduced to just another aspect of capitalist exploitation, with capitalism expanded to include 'women's work', underpaid in the work force and unpaid in the domestic sphere; or male domination is confined to 'the family' (e.g. Delphy, 1977[1970]), rather than being perceived as permeating the whole of the social order.

Socialist feminism has not so far been able to demonstrate the nature of the 'complex interactions' between the oppressions of sex and class (not to mention race). Its main attempt to fill in this gap in Marxist theory, in what was called the 'domestic labour debate', ended in disarray. It could not demonstrate unequivocally that women's unpaid domestic labour was a requirement of the needs of capital. This result is not surprising given that Marx himself had already defined the domestic sphere as 'outside the production process', in the realm of 'nature', and hence not an appropriate object of interest for a 'science' whose field of investigation was history: The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation', said Marx. (Marx, 1976[1867]:718)

Not that Marx was averse to setting out to write history from the 'natural bases' of 'living human individuals'. But he was not concerned with 'the actual physical nature of man', i.e. 'man's' own 'nature', but rather with nature as Other, i.e. 'the rest of nature'. (Marx and Engels, 1970[1845-6]:42) 'Men' (sex specific) transformed 'the rest of nature' through history by modifying and working on 'nature' to produce the means of subsistence, and in so doing transformed themselves. But sex and reproduction were 'man's' (generic) own 'nature', and hence not appropriate objects of concern for an analysis which started with 'man (sex specific) the worker'.

The domestic labour debate did serve the purpose of focusing attention on the importance of women's unpaid work in the home. Its failure lay in attempting to fit this aspect of women's oppression into a Marxist framework. Hence, on the question of the direct relevance of Marxist theory to an account of women's oppression, socialist feminism is not so very far from radical feminism, however much socialist feminists would like to keep the options open.

'Autonomy' or Separatism?

Another issue which breaks down any hard and fast distinctions between socialist feminism and radical feminism is the question of autonomy. On the one hand, like radical feminism, socialist feminism is committed to maintaining the autonomy of the women's movement and

to giving priority to the specific oppression of women. As Rosalind Coward put it, the feminist task is 'to bring forward women's oppression in its specificity, recognising that this will not be taken care of by changes in the economic relations of production'. (Coward, 1978:95) And Coote and Campbell said: 'We need an autonomous feminist movement no less now than we did in 1970' (p. 236).

On the other hand, socialist feminism is committed to socialism as the broad-based struggle to overcome all forms of oppression, usually characterised as "gender", race and class': 'Socialist feminism increasingly took root as a tendency that stressed the need to integrate an understanding of race and class into a more complex feminist analysis [than that of radical feminism]'. (Snitow et al., eds., 1983: Introduction, p. 27) Juliet Mitchell even went so far as to give socialism an explicit monopoly on overthrowing oppression: 'All oppressed groups', she said, 'workers, women, colonized—can have their oppressed consciousness, but the ideology they propagate must be either that that is dominant in the society that oppresses them (bourgeois ideology), or that that they have consciously espoused for the society that will overthrow this (socialist ideology)'. (Mitchell, 1971:96) Sheila Rowbotham was not quite so explicit, but the implication was there: 'Class and race cut across sexual oppression. A feminist movement which is confined to the specific oppression of women cannot, in isolation, end exploitation and imperialism'. (Rowbotham, 1973b:123–4)

Socialist feminism is caught in a dilemma between a need to recognise the autonomy of a women's movement which deals with the specificity of the oppression of women, and a commitment to socialism as a combined revolutionary movement struggling to end all forms of oppression. This dilemma has led to a distressing tendency to define itself as a political 'vanguard' for feminism because of the belief that only socialism can lead the way forward to revolution. Juliet Mitchell:

If we simply develop feminist consciousness (as radical feminists suggest) we will get, not political consciousness, but... simply a self-directed gaze, that sees only the internal workings of one segment; only this segment's self-interest. Political consciousness responds to all forms of oppression. (Mitchell, 1971:93–4)

Michèle Barrett:

The reason why radical feminism was unsatisfactory lay in its failure to provide an adequate analysis of the oppression it denounced with such certainty, and its parallel silence about an adequate political strategy for change. In posing women's oppression simply as the effect of male domination, it refuses to take account of the widely differing structures and experience of that oppression in different societies, periods of history and social classes. (Barrett, 1980:4)

Margaret Page:

The viability of the Socialist Feminist tendency lies in recognition of the need for an analysis which can move the WLM beyond the sterile alternative of either class war or sex war as primary areas of revolutionary struggle. It lies furthermore in accepting the responsibility for initiating the necessary debates and creating the organisational structures. (Page, 1978: 42)

And Sheila Rowbotham:

It seems to me that the cultural and economic liberation of women is inseparable from the creation of a society in which all people no longer have their lives stolen from them, and in which the conditions of their production and reproduction will no

And so say all of us. But to agree with this last statement of Rowbotham's is not to agree that 'scientific socialism' (as Mitchell called it) is the appropriate vehicle for theorising and combatting women's oppression (or racial oppression either, for that matter), or at least not in any version which has appeared so far. To insist that Marxism is peculiarly fitted to lead us all on the road to revolution is to ignore the current (and long-standing) crisis within Marxism itself. It is by no means a tried and trusted framework, whose efficacy has been proven time and again in the struggle against exploitation. On the contrary, despite Marx's strictures against the futility of 'pure thought', its battles have more often been fought in the groves of academe than on the barricades or the factory floor. Neither do Soviet Russia, Communist China or Cuba stand as shining examples of socialism in practice, although the peoples of those countries are better off now than under their previous regimes. The wealth produced by human labour continues world-wide to be concentrated in the hands of the few at the expense of the many, although the locus of the most extreme forms of exploitation has shifted geographically, to the peoples of the 'Third World'. In the West, capitalism has magnanimously, although not benevolently, provided more goodies for more people, including systems of social welfare (although the process of dismemberment has started). But Western countries contain large minorities of people deprived of the basic minimum for the maintenance of human dignity, who have no relationship at all to the means of production because capital does not require their labour power. Into the institutions of capitalist domination, Marxism has made few, if any, inroads. Arcane disputes in the institutions of higher learning have little if any ameliorating effect on social relations of power. Marxism hardly qualifies as the exemplar of the correct way to revolution. It cannot even rescue its own maidens in distress, much less anyone else's.

While it is true that the liberation of women is not achievable as long as there remain hierarchical and invidious distinctions between categories of human beings (because the categories contain women, too), that is not to say that only socialism can overcome those distinctions. Problems arise for feminism because women participate in all the categories, including the privileged ones. But to the extent that female heterogeneity gives rise to problems, those problems are not solved by appeal to a framework which allows no room for female specificity because it continues to universalise the male as the 'human' norm.

Neither are they solved by insisting that feminism give priority to causes which do not give priority to women. While it cannot be denied that issues of world peace, ecology, economic exploitation, racial hatred and violence, are as relevant to women as they are to men, feminism can do no more than hold a watching brief over them to ensure that women's interests are not buried in a welter of cockfights among men.² As Julia Penelope pointed out, there are feminists (whom she calls 'neo-humanist feminists'),³ who 'have accepted as valid the premise that feminism, if it is to be a viable political ideology, must have, *as priorities*, the struggles to end racism classism imperialism hunger, poverty, nuclear proliferation, pollution, anti-Semitism, and cruelty to animals'. (Penelope, 1986 II:27— her emphasis and punctuation) She acknowledges that 'there isn't a single issue around that *doesn't* affect Lesbians/Separatists/Radical Feminists', but points out that

accepting the assertion that one's political "credibility" requires a simultaneous (and equal?) commitment to *every significant political issue* of our times isn't feasible or realistic...we don't have enough time or energy to join every group, go to every meeting or demonstration, and still see to our own welfare and needs. (Op.cit., p. 28—her emphasis)

Which brings me to the question of socialist feminism's adamant opposition to separatism, despite its own insistence on the need for an autonomous women's movement, and its staunch critique of the failure of traditional Marxism to deal at all adequately with the issues raised by feminism (on this latter point, see especially: Coward, 1978; Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, 1979; Coward, 1983: 130–87). While separatism, according to socialist feminism, has the effect of isolating the women's movement from the 'wider' political struggle and from the struggles of other oppressed groups, socialist feminism gives no account of how 'autonomy' differs from separatism. Both, after all, involve placing women's oppression at the centre of the feminist project. When that project has come into conflict with Marxist principles, as, for example, on the question of class, or women's domestic labour, it is Marxism which has been abandoned, usually without explicit acknowledgement, not feminism. I suspect, however, that while both 'autonomy' and separatism address themselves to the question of women's oppression, separatism is explicit in identifying male supremacy as the main enemy. And it is socialist feminism's equivocation on this latter question which lies behind its antagonism to separatism and radical feminism.

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell argue that radical feminism does not necessarily entail separatism. They suggest that there are two possible responses which follow from the radical feminist argument that 'the fight for women's liberation is primarily *against men*' (their emphasis), as opposed to what they call 'a wider political strategy' (which they do not define, but which is presumably what they regard as the domain of socialist feminism). The first response they do not regard as separatist, as indeed it is not. It involves, according to Coote and Campbell, the fight 'to destroy *masculinity* as a social construct, and so transform men as human beings, with a view to developing a harmonious relationship in which they wield no power over women' (their emphasis).

But this is a strange recommendation for feminists to make. It is surely up to *men*, not women, to 'transform men as human beings'. It is hardly a feminist enterprise to recommend that women devote themselves to the task of trying to inveigle, manipulate, coerce or even argue men into changing. Women have done that for centuries, without any noticeable improvement in the ways men conduct themselves. Hopefully, it is possible that the changes women are making will have beneficial effects on men. But women's energies are needed for women. For too long women have focused on men and male interests. What feminism has revealed is the need for women to focus attention on ourselves.

Moreover, the destruction of masculinity may be perceived by men as the destruction of themselves, or at least of their most prized anatomical feature. Women can refuse to reinforce the masculine ethos and the male egos it generates, by withdrawing energy, support and recognition, and by divesting ourselves of the feminine requirement that women pander to men. But we cannot hold ourselves back waiting for men to change. There is too much to do among women together.

The second possible response is what the authors regard as separatism: 'seek[ing] to end the necessity of the biological distinction by establishing ways of living and reproducing

which are entirely independent of men...insisting that women must live separately from men, repudiating not only heterosexual intercourse, but boy children as well'. They do allow for a third possibility: 'For others, a degree of separatism is necessary, but as a strategy—in order to make the fight for women's liberation more effective—rather than as an end in itself'. (Coote and Campbell, 1982:29)

There have appeared over the years a number of statements asserting unequivocally that women must separate from men (and boy children—Penelope, 1986 I:23–4)⁴ as a prerequisite for the feminist revolution. First and foremost, that separation from men had to be sexual. 'Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution', said Jill Johnston in 1973, (Johnston, 1973:166) an argument which was reiterated in 1981 by the Leeds revolutionary feminists. (See [chapter two](#)). And there are many women whose separatist stance is intransigent and unequivocal. Julia Penelope, for example, prefers to identify herself as a 'Separatist' and a 'Lesbian' rather than as a feminist, because of what she sees as the 'diluting of feminist values in an effort to make them SEEM less threatening to the heteropatriarchy', the 'cosmetizing [of] WLM's ideology in order to appeal to the masses of women' (Penelope, 1986 II:26—her emphasis), and the betrayal of lesbians entailed in that process of dilution. While I agree with Penelope's criticism of the diluting of feminist values, I disagree with her rejection of feminism. (See also: Hoagland and Penelope, eds., 1988, especially Wittig, 1980) If feminism is or has become irrelevant to lesbians, the solution is to make it relevant, not to abandon it.

The contributors to the separatist issue of *Lesbian Ethics* are unanimous in their definition of 'Separatism' as a complete repudiation of all males without exception. As one writer put it: 'If a woman tells me that she is a Lesbian Separatist and...she allows a friend's boy child into her home or invites her father in order to get her mother to visit, then I know that what she means by "Lesbian Separatist" is not what I mean' (p. 10). And another said: 'I want a network of cadres, of dykes committed to planning and bringing about the downfall of men and if necessary their extinction' (p. 22). It could be argued (and indeed it has) that such a stance is unrealistic. But then feminism itself is 'unrealistic' to the extent that it challenges phallocratic reality.

But my own commitment to separatism is not so intransigent for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are some men I know whom I cannot define as 'enemy', although at the same time I would insist that no man can be a feminist and that all men benefit from male domination, not least because the world is created in their own image and likeness. Secondly, an absolutist separatist stance allows little room for acknowledging that each of us has to make her own decisions, which is not to deny that the making of decisions is highly problematic within a social order where certain 'choices' are more valued, better rewarded, or more self-evidently 'real' than others. I would agree that feminism has done too little to validate lesbianism, and that it has even at times been thoroughly offensive towards lesbians. I agree, too, that feminism remains preoccupied with heterosexual issues, although it could be argued that the continuing heterosexual hegemony requires that continuing preoccupation. I do not agree, however, that heterosexual feminists are part of the problem, and that my only allies are other lesbians. My commitment is to women in general. Lesbianism rates highly among my criteria of political solidarity. But it is not necessary—some of the women I trust

are heterosexual. Nor is it sufficient—some of the women I distrust are lesbians.

Another reason for my unease with absolutist separatism concerns what I have perceived to be its tendency towards essentialism. (This is not a term I use lightly—see [chapter ten](#)). As an example of this tendency, take the following statement:

We can be easily tempted to dilute our Lesbian Separatist consciousness to include [other lesbians and heterosexual females] ... Not only does this generosity of inclusion undermine and dilute Lesbian Separatism as an ideology and movement, it also undermines and insults the ability of lesbians to choose Separatism clearly and distinctly from other ways of seeing and being. (*Lesbian Ethics*, 1988:20–1)

Despite the use of the word ‘choose’, the tenor of this statement is that a ‘Separatist’ is something intrinsically different from other women, even other lesbians, and that there is a sharp dividing line between ‘Separatists’ and others. There is not only no common cause, there is outright conflict and no possibility of any meeting point. ‘Separatism’ is something in a pure, unsullied form which can be ‘diluted’ and ‘undermined’ by contact with any thing else. It owes nothing to anyone or anything, and is like nothing else in the world. It has no precursors, no connections, no allies, existing for itself, of itself and by itself. It is in this sense, and this sense only, that I use the term ‘essentialist’.

In contrast, because I regard separatism as relevant to all women, I see it as a continuum of choices, as a matter of degree, of more or less, and as a strategic necessity only as long as male supremacy lasts, although I do not see an end to the need for separatism in my own lifetime. I would prefer to regard separatism in that way because I see it as central to the feminist enterprise, and hence as something that any feminist participates in by virtue of her commitment to feminism.

I define separatism as the practice of women withdrawing attention, energy, interest and focus from men and male institutions, as a way of dislodging men from the central place they have arrogated to themselves in our lives, and of challenging male domination and the men who embody and uphold it. As Marilyn Frye argues, because male domination allows men to be parasitic on women, it is essential to deny men access to ourselves if we are to gain control over our own lives (Frye, 1983:95–109). And as Julia Penelope argues, we need ‘to withdraw from men, to withhold from them our energy, our nurturing, our care-taking of them’ if we are ‘to free ourselves from male domination’. (Penelope, 1986 II: 45)

Separatism is not only withdrawal from men, it is also the practice of women putting women first. Mia Campioni has coined the term ‘conceptual separatism’ to refer to the feminist-inspired capacity for ‘seeing women first’ (the phrase is Marilyn Frye’s). She defines it as ‘the ability to take ourselves as the independent norm of our thinking and being’ and the refusal of ‘any political and theoretical [or, I would add, emotional] alliance... [which] involve[s] an allegiance to concepts, categories, principles and modes of action that are derived from a negation of women’s experience *as women*’. (Campioni and Gross, 1983:136—emphasis in the original; and personal conversations) Lesbianism is central to that project because, as Marilyn Frye argues, lesbians who recognise that we have no stake in ‘phallocratic reality’ are ‘woman-seers’. Frye says:

The lesbian’s seeing undercuts the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for women was to be rendered automatic... If the lesbian sees the women [sic], the woman may see the lesbian seeing her...

The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she *can be* seen; she may also know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception. With this, there enters for the woman the logical possibility of assuming her authority as a perceiver and of shifting her own attention.

(Frye, 1983:172—her emphasis)

This process of recognition cannot be one-sided. In order to value the lesbian's 'seeing', the woman must value the lesbian, a not insignificant form of recognition within phallocratic reality where it is not even possible to define the 'lesbian' (as Frye argues in the last article in her book), much less respect her human dignity and worth. But this female recognition of the lesbian is not just a recognition of the lesbian as an 'other'. It is also the recognition of the lesbian 'within', the recognition that lesbianism is not just a characteristic or a choice of those nice women over there, but something of vital importance for the living of one's own life, even though, at the sexual level, it is not an actuality at the present moment.

Hence, although lesbianism is at the centre of separatism, although it is what gives separatism its characteristic focus, meaning, drive and pattern, that does not mean that every woman who participates has to be a lesbian in the strictly sexual sense. No one is asked to present her credentials, although I would suggest that a failure of commitment to the primary criterion of separatism, i.e. putting women first, would constitute sufficient reason for disqualification. But there are many heterosexual feminists whose commitment to women is unequivocal, and whose lives do not centre around men. Even Julia Penelope acknowledges that there are 'some heterosexual feminists [who] show, time and time again, that their commitment to feminist values is reliable and consistent'. (Penelope, 1986 II:45) She criticises the idea that 'the issue of giving energy to men' can be reduced to sex, 'as though that were the significant distinction', arguing that that is a misconstruction of the issue. She agrees with Ti-Grace Atkinson that what is more important is 'what you're willing to die for' not 'who you sleep with'. At the same time she says that 'we frequently choose *what* we're willing to die for on the basis of *who* we sleep with'. As a consequence, she says, '*generally* speaking it is more likely that I'll be able to rely on a Lesbian than a heterosexual feminist' (ibid., p. 46—her emphasis). She also says that 'heterosexuality makes wimmin collaborators in their own betrayal' (p. 50), although she does not say whether that in itself debars heterosexual feminists from participation in separatism.

It would seem at first sight as though it must. How can a woman centre her life around women, herself included, if her sexual and emotional desire and energy is directed towards a man (or men)? I do not know the answer to that question, or even if it is the right sort of question, because it is not a dilemma I face. But that kind of question seems to rely on a certain kind of assumption about the nature of sexuality. It assumes that sex is such an overwhelmingly driving force that it obliterates all other interests, desires or activities, not only during the sex act, but all the time. Phallocentric sex and its institutions do tend to have that effect on the lives of women. But heterosexual feminists can be aware of that tendency too, and make their own negotiations to deal with it. Many of them *are* a ware of the dilemma, and of the consequences for women of heterosexual desire and activity. They can also be aware of the need to affirm lesbianism as the feminist practice of women centring around ourselves, and proof that women can live life to the full without men. To the extent that heterosexual feminists can acknowledge this, then they too participate in separatism,

even if they continue to struggle with and relate to men.

Moreover, the question as posed sounds far too absolutist, as though refusing access to men was a once only decision. But of course it is not, not even for those of us who feel no need to make decisions about allowing male sexual access. For the male demand for access to women is ubiquitous and not confined to the sexual, and there is always the possibility that we might want to allow men access (if that is the right terminology), as friends, colleagues, interlocutors, or adversaries.

One of the more frequent objections raised by lesbians to heterosexual feminists availing themselves of the separatist, woman-centred space opened out by lesbians, is that heterosexual feminists take advantage of the supportive environment provided by separatism, only to feed the strength and energy gained therein back into relationships with men. While some lesbians have felt themselves 'used' in this way (although it has never been my experience), that is not always what happens. Sometimes the supportive environment of separatism (to the extent that it *is* supportive, and it isn't always) can provide heterosexual feminists with the strength to resist and keep on resisting, the knowledge to set the terms and conditions under which they allow men access, and the courage to deny access when it is in their interests to do so.

One objection raised by socialist feminists against separatism is that it involves some kind of running away from the real world, that it is, as Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell put it, a refusal to develop 'strategies which enabled women to survive *in* the world' (Coote and Campbell, 1982:224—their emphasis). But I find absurd this notion of being 'out of the world'. In the first place, even those women who have physically retreated to remote country areas are still 'in' the world—there are neighbours, helpful or antagonistic, suppliers, the legal system, intruders. But more importantly, 'the world' is not something which is outside us, which we can step out of and leave behind. It is possible that there were women who thought they could do just that, only to find that they brought the problems with them, or were faced with new problems no less 'worldly' than the ones they left behind. Moreover, this idea that separatism happens somewhere other than 'in the world' implies that 'the world' is only where men are, and that women who leave men are leaving 'the world'. While there is a certain amount of truth in that—the interests of men are currently purveyed as the interests of all—to take for granted that 'the world' is the world of men, and to arrange feminist political priorities accordingly, is itself defeatist to the extent that the male supremacist prerogative of defining what counts as 'real' and 'important' is not challenged at its source.

Coote and Campbell also regard separatism as 'defeatist', and Michèle Barrett can state categorically that 'the strategy of separatism...is no strategy at all, for it can never change things'. (Barrett, 1980:4) Hester Eisenstein agrees: '[by] withdraw[ing] from the world built by men, [separatists] withdraw from the struggle to change the world for the better'. (Eisenstein, 1984:xviii) Withdrawal from male enterprises, and from direct confrontation with those locations where power resides, *can* carry with it the threat of irrelevance. But I am not convinced that change always comes about by means of direct confrontation. Although it is one way of going about the struggle for feminists who are willing and able to direct their energies to it, there is always the danger of co-optation, tokenism and 'burn-out'. But overt resistance can reinforce the status quo, by providing it with a visible target to attack, and the

impetus to clarify its interests, purposes and priorities more precisely. And to the extent that masculine enterprises depend for their existence on women's support, withdrawal of that support, far from being irrelevant, promises to undermine them.

Moreover, if, as feminism has always argued, the fight is not only against a male-dominated world, but also *for* a 'new world for women' (the title of one of Sheila Rowbotham's books), then we need to start now, carving out a space for ourselves which is woman-centred, woman-identified, created by and for women, where men do not intrude (or at least not most of the time, and not as long as we can prevent it). That space needs to be both material and psychic. We need actual physical places where women can go to be with other women and from which men are excluded. But we also need psychic 'space', a consciousness which decentres men, which defines men as irrelevant unless we choose when, where and how they shall be, which denies them the importance they arrogate to themselves in the rest of 'society'. To create women's space, on all levels, *is* to change the male world because it provides an alternative to it (for the time being and for as long as is necessary).

Another objection socialist feminism raises to separatism is that it supposedly attributes all the virtues to women (the vices being all left to men). As Sheila Rowbotham put it: 'The dream of harmony can be acted out between women because it is assumed women have been mysteriously uncorrupted by living in the real world'. (Rowbotham, 1973b:xii. See also: Echols, 1983, 1984; Willis, 1979a; Eisenstein, 1984; Segal, 1987). But this is a misrepresentation of separatist politics. In my experience, the expectation of ever-lasting harmony is not a prerequisite for separatism. It is not even very sensible. To live one's life only with women, is to live with them warts and all (one's own included). It is hardly realistic to expect that it will be sweetness and light all the way, although some (all?) of us have at times been shocked to the depths of our being at just how bitter and agonising it can be. But those experiences have not meant the end of separatism, which continues to grow and flourish despite, or rather because of, its abandonment of 'the malestream'. There is, after all, nowhere else to go, and the relief which comes with the recognition that it is not necessary to keep banging one's head against the brick wall of male supremacy is worth it. Moreover, women are fully rounded human beings all by ourselves, capable of the full range of human experience, and lacking nothing.

Another criticism socialist feminism levels against separatism is that it is naive and unrealistic to expect to be able to live without men. Sheila Rowbotham:

The relationship of man to woman is like no other relationship of oppressor to oppressed. It is far more delicate, far more complex. After all, very often the two love one another. It is a rather gentle tyranny. We are subdued at the very moment of intimacy. Such ecstatic subjugation is thus very different from the relationship between worker and capitalist. The workers can conceive of their own world in the future in which the capitalist no longer figures. We cannot imagine our world in which no men exist.

(Rowbotham, 1973b:34–5. See also p. 117)

But we can and we do, and not only imagine it, but also live it. Not, of course, in any sense that denies that men exist as actual physical entities (or people). After all, even Rowbotham's apostrophised (male) 'worker' would not insist that the 'capitalist' must cease to exist as an actual human individual. (Would he?). As for the 'gentleness' of the tyranny,

Sheila Rowbotham must be a very fortunate woman indeed to have escaped any manifestation of male violence. Where has she been all my life?

For us (separatists), men do not exist as a driving force in our lives, sexually, emotionally, financially, professionally, personally, or not if we have any choice about it. Men are on probation, and must prove themselves worthy of our respect, affection, friendliness, love, instead of taking it all for granted as their god-given right. We live quite well without men in a world where, for most purposes, they do not 'exist'.

But the actual, concrete existence (or non-existence) of men is not the issue, despite the fine rhetorical flourish of statements like the one quoted above about the 'extinction of men' and the slogan 'Dead men don't rape'. The women's rage behind such statements is perfectly understandable, given the still accumulating evidence of men's massive and condoned violence against women (and children), and the failure of the phallocratic hegemony to prevent or even acknowledge it. (The latest enraging example I have come across is delineated in Campbell, 1988. In her account of 'the Cleveland case', Beatrix Campbell describes the concerted media campaign to distort, ignore and trivialise the evidence of widespread anal rape of children in order to defend the 'parents'—read: 'fathers'—suspected or accused of sexually abusing their children). The issue for feminism is the struggle for the abolition of the male supremacist *category* of 'men' as the only exemplars of 'human' status, as the 'natural' dominators of women, as justified exploiters of the earth and its resources and of powerless and subjugated peoples every-where. Separatism is the *only* strategy available to bring that about, by the withdrawal of recognition from men as the monopolisers of 'human' status because it is emblazoned on their bodies, and of energy, time and effort from institutions of male domination. The socialist feminist strategy of 'autonomy' is not radical enough because its reference point, that which the women's movement is supposed to be 'autonomous' in relation to, is confined to the organised (male) Left. But the male Left is not male supremacy over all. Feminism's antagonist is phallocratic reality across the board, not one small, limited, relatively powerless segment of it (powerless, that is, in relation to other forms of institutionalised male domination).

Socialist feminism's insistence on the term 'autonomy' owes not a little to a continuing, implicit adherence to the Althusserian concept of 'relative autonomy'. In the Althusserian context, this concept involved a theoretical attempt to avoid the pitfalls of economic determinism. It postulated that the level of ideology had its own autonomous status in relation to the economic base. As a consequence, Ideological State Apparatuses (e.g. the education system, the family) could be accounted for in their own terms without any necessary reference to the economic mode of production, at least at any point short of the (unspecified) 'last instance'. At that point (and whether the 'last instance' was historical, epistemological, political or teleological, Althusser never said) on the contrary, all social relations would be shown to be determined by the economy, that is, not 'autonomous' at all. Hence, the Althusserian schema had an inbuilt incoherence. Socialist feminism's 'autonomy' carries the Althusserian confusion over into feminism. To the extent that socialist feminism defines the object of feminist theory and practice as occurring on the level of ideology (following Althusser), it defines that object as 'autonomous' in relation to the economic base only until the 'last instance'. The confusion is compounded to the extent that socialist feminism defines

feminism's 'autonomy' of political organisation only in relation to the male Left. This implies that feminism's political 'autonomy' is derivative, provisional and temporary.

All this is not to deny that economic matters are of vital importance to women, literally vital in the sense that questions of women's access to and provision of goods and services, women's involvement in and exclusion from the 'wealth of nations', are frequently matters of life and death, and not only of the quality and length of the lives of women, but of children and sometimes of men, too. That this is so is elegantly and insightfully conveyed by Marilyn Waring in her book, *Counting for Nothing*. Waring discusses the workings of the United Nations System of National Accounts, the accounting system which defines what counts as economic wealth world-wide, and upon which are based calculations of Gross National/Domestic Product—who produces and consumes what and how much—, economic growth and investment, and provision of 'aid' to 'developing' countries. What Waring demonstrates is that the economic situations of women are not determined by capital or class, or not directly, but by male domination. Women are every where excluded from the accounting process, both as producers of and contributors to wealth, and, with frequently tragic consequences, as recipients and beneficiaries, in favour of men. Socialist feminism, with all its insistence on the importance of the economy, has not managed to produce so impressive a documentation.

*in defense of 'cultural' feminism*¹

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST 'cultural' feminism largely proceeds by means of a one-sided battle, engineered by a libertarian socialist feminism, against a form of feminism which is not named 'cultural' by the feminists who supposedly adhere to it. The debate is one-sided because it is not a symmetrical struggle between two evenly matched and equally convinced opposing points of view, but rather a series of arguments set up by socialist feminists against an opponent who never speaks in her own defence, and who is, more often than not, a creation of the critics' own preoccupations. It is a strange debate, this campaign against 'cultural' feminism. It involves innumerable misinterpretations, misrepresentations and misquotations, with the critics' own point of view rarely spelled out in any coherent way. There are so many misreadings, so many errors in interpretation, so many 'straw women' busily set up and triumphantly demolished, so many shadows bravely challenged and vanquished, that it hardly seems worth acknowledging the debate. However, the feminist writers under attack are among the most brilliant thinkers of this 'wave' of feminism, and the ideas under attack are central to feminist thought. Those ideas and writers must be defended if feminism is not to be weakened from within.

One of the chief opponents of 'cultural' feminism is Alice Echols. (Echols, 1983; Echols, 1984)² There have also recently appeared two volumes which purport to demonstrate radical/'cultural' feminism's supposed faults in some detail: Lynne Segal's *Is the Future Female?* and Hester Eisenstein's *Contemporary Feminist Thought*. (For similar arguments, see also:., 1982, Part II; and Alcoff, 1988. For the more explicitly libertarian arguments, see: *Heresies*, 1981; Snitow et al., eds., 1983; Vance, ed., 1984; *Feminist Review*, eds., 1987). Echols' examples of 'major cultural feminist texts' are: Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, Kathleen Barry's *Female Sexual Slavery*, and 'the now-defunct Los Angeles-based magazine *Chrysalis*'. (Echols, 1983: 78n7) Hester Eisenstein names Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin and Robin Morgan. Lynne Segal lists 'Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, Judith Arcana, Mary Daly, Dale Spender and their many followers' (Segal, 1987:3–4).

Echols does not explicitly contrast 'cultural' feminism with socialist feminism. Neither does she identify her own position as socialist feminist. Her commitment to a kind of Marxist perspective must be read off from her use of certain key terms—'false consciousness', 'material basis', 'material conditions', 'material reality', and the Althusserian 'overdetermined' (pp. 63–4)—and from her unexamined epistemological distinction between a realm called the 'material', and another called variously 'psychological', 'consciousness', or 'cultural'. It is her assumption of a 'material'/'ideological' split, an assumption which she appears to find unproblematic, which is largely responsible for her deprecation of a strand of feminism concerned, as she sees it, with consciousness rather than with concrete issues like work. The pejorative term 'cultural' is intended to imply that its adherents ignore the 'real'

world, and by doing so reinforce the status quo and the very relations of power feminism is struggling against.

As Echols uses it, 'cultural' is a pejorative term intended to identify a type of feminism which, in Echols' words, 'has disturbing implications for future feminist practice and has already had deleterious political consequences' (Echols, 1983:63). She distinguishes it from radical feminism, with which it has similarities as well as differences. Although she regards radical feminism as an 'earlier antecedent' of 'cultural' feminism, she sees it as being less concerned with the 'psychological' or 'consciousness' aspects of women's oppression at the expense of the 'material basis'. 'Compared with today's cultural feminists', she said, 'radical feminists of the late 1960s and the early 1970s seem like raging materialists' (ibid.).

According to Echols, the term 'cultural' feminism was coined by 'the *reconstituted* Redstockings, a New York radical feminist group, ...in their 1975 publication *Feminist Revolution*'. (Echols, 1983:78n7; 1984: 67n3—her emphasis)³ But according to Brooke, the author of a paper entitled 'The Retreat to Cultural Feminism' in *Feminist Revolution*, the term was coined by a socialist feminist. In Brooke's view, this socialist feminist got it all wrong, because she identified 'cultural' feminism with radical feminism, and because, as a socialist, she regarded radical feminism as 'non-political'. (Brooke, 1975, 1978: 79). Brooke, who identified as a radical feminist, was as antagonistic towards socialist feminism as she was towards 'cultural' feminism. In fact, she saw them as equally culpable in presenting feminism as 'lifestylist'.

'Cultural' feminism, according to Brooke, was 'a deradicalizing and distortion of feminism'. It was 'the belief that women will be freed via an alternate women's culture [a belief which] leads to a concentration on lifestyle and "personal liberation"... [It was] an attempt to transform feminism from a political movement to a lifestyle movement' (pp. 79, 83). It was located in 'women's centers...run...by the friendship cliques who stay around the center...universities...women's communes, and women's art (cultural) centers' (p. 80), and in 'the therapy model of liberation' (p. 81). Brooke insisted that 'cultural' feminism was antithetical to radical feminism, despite the fact that the term 'radical feminism' was of ten used 'to describe cultural feminism' (p. 79). While 'cultural' feminism, she said, located women's oppression in 'culture', radical feminism located it in 'power, men's class power' (p. 79):

Cultural feminism sees ideology as the cause of oppression. It avoids the whole issue of power, bases its thought on moralism, psychology, sex roles, and culture, and is fatalistic in its political views. It is therefore directly inimical to revolutionary change, since real revolution deals directly, and basically, with power (as does politics generally), and with real conditions (p. 83).

Despite Brooke's antagonism to socialism, she uncritically accepted a dichotomy which is central to Marxist epistemology, the opposition between 'culture' and 'ideology' on the one hand, and 'power' and 'real conditions' on the other. (See the next chapter). Although her 'real conditions' were not economic, her paper did have a slight Marxist tinge to it, which is possibly why Alice Echols found it congenial, despite its superficial anti-socialism.

Behind the more recent socialist feminist and libertarian attacks on 'cultural' feminism lies the desire to deny the existence of sex 'differences'. Although the arguments take the form of a denial of those particular sex 'differences' supposedly described by 'cultural' feminism, the

aim is to deny sex ‘differences’ altogether. The denial of sex ‘differences’ on the part of ‘cultural’ feminism’s detractors serves the purpose of denying the existence of male domination. For if there are not even any ‘differences’ between the sexes, the question of domination does not arise. (See [chapter ten](#)) ‘Sexuality’ is a crucial stake in the battle over sex ‘differences’, because phallic sexuality is the crucial mechanism for the subordination of the female. As a consequence, the libertarian ire has been chiefly directed against feminists fighting pornography and male sexual violence against women.

This need to deny sex ‘differences’ explains the popularity among socialist feminists of a text like Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society*. This book is not a socialist feminist text, and yet it is cited by socialist feminists as though it were. It contains only a single isolated reference to ‘Western capitalism’ (p. 204—Oakley’s preferred term is ‘industrial society’), and no discussion of ‘the working-class woman’, wage labour, domestic labour, the ruling class state, or anything else which would identify a Marxist theoretical background. It is not only not Marxist. Its approach is actually antithetical to Marxism, because it treats history as a set of ideas, rather than as the changes in the forces and relations of production. The book belongs more appropriately within liberal feminism, with its attribution of causality to ‘beliefs’ and ‘attitudes’. A single example of this emphasis, which is repeated throughout the book, is the following: We can...best...explain the patterning of the sexual division of labour in particular societies...in terms of beliefs about masculinity and femininity and beliefs about maternity and paternity’ (p. 146). But because Oakley’s task is to demolish sex ‘differences’, her enterprise sits very comfortably with the socialist feminist task of denying male domination.

Hence, one of the chief ‘errors’ of ‘cultural’ feminism, according to its libertarian critics, is its supposed insistence that there *are* significant sexual differences between the sexes. Lynne Segal is quite clear on this point. It is the insistence on the reality of sex ‘differences’, however characterised, which flaws ‘cultural’ feminism, in her view. She is concerned with what she sees as an increasing ‘celebration’ of ‘gender’ difference, in contrast to the ‘initial denial of fundamental difference between women and men in the early seventies’. (Segal, 1987:ix, x) But if there are no ‘fundamental’ differences between the sexes, does that mean that what differences there are are superficial, and not worth addressing? Does that make feminism superficial too, and not worth the effort? Segal does not say.

Sometimes the criticism is couched in terms of the *kinds* of differences ‘cultural’ feminists supposedly attribute to each sex. As Alice Echols put it:

Cultural feminists define male and female sexuality as though they were polar opposites. Male sexuality is driven, irresponsible, genitally oriented, and potentially lethal. Female sexuality is muted, diffuse, and interpersonally oriented. Men crave power and orgasm, while women seek reciprocity and intimacy. (Echols, 1983:71)

But the authors cited do not in fact characterise female and male sexuality in the ways the critics say they do. To expose the prevalence of male sexual violence against females, and to denounce its socially condoned portrayal in pornography, is not to be ‘convinced that male sexuality is, at its core, lethal...[and hence] reduce it to its most alienated and violent expression’, as Echols insists ‘cultural’ feminists claim. The concern of the authors cited by

Echols is certainly with the ‘most violent and alienated expression’ of male sexuality. But they make no claims at all about something that might be labelled ‘male sexuality’ as such. Indeed, their hope is that ‘male sexuality’ *need not* be expressed violently, and *must not* be if the world is to become a better place for women.

As for Echols’ distaste for the way ‘cultural’ feminism supposedly characterises female sexuality, I can only agree with a statement by Hester Eisenstein, one of ‘cultural’ feminism’s more sympathetic and considered (and less shrill) critics. She said that: To hold, as Daly, Dworkin, and others did, that a feminist perspective fundamentally opposed sadomasochism, or to say that female culture was opposed to, and an alternative to a death-loving male culture, seemed valid enough statements’. (Eisenstein, 1984:141)

However, Eisenstein was worried about the ‘reactionary tendencies’ of the ‘gynocentric analysis’ of ‘cultural’ feminism. What she saw as its commitment to ‘biological reductionism’ meant that it had

abandon[ed]...the original revolutionary insight of Millett, Firestone, and others, that gender differences were socially constructed, and that they were susceptible, therefore, to transformation (ibid.).

Alice Echols, too, was worried about the reactionary nature of ‘cultural’ feminism. By way of demonstrating this, she asserted that it was engaged in ‘promoting an overdetermined psychological analysis of gender asymmetry’, had an ‘attachment to traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity’, and was ‘committed to preserving rather than annihilating gender distinctions’ (Echols, 1983:64, 66). It called for the validation of ‘female identity’, she argued,

without questioning the extent to which that identity has been conditioned... In advocating a return to a female sexual standard, cultural feminists ignore the extent to which femaleness functions as the comple-ment to maleness and therefore reflects dominant cultural assumptions-assumptions that encourage political expediency. (pp. 67, 69)

But is this what ‘cultural’ feminism does, or more specifically, what the authors mentioned above do? It is certainly not my reading of the same texts. Far from ignoring ‘dominant cultural assumptions’ of femaleness and maleness, these texts, and others like them, play an important part in the feminist enterprise of exposing, criticising and undermining such assumptions. As an example of the way in which ‘cultural feminists’ supposedly reinforce rather than challenge ‘gender distinctions’, Echols quotes from Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*:

Raymond argues that those women who support the integration of male-to-female lesbian [sic] transsexuals into lesbian communities “would have us believe that all boundaries are oppressive. Yet if feminists cannot agree on the boundaries of what constitutes femaleness, then what can we hope to agree on?” (Echols, 1983:66–7; Raymond, 1979:109–10)

This is supposedly evidence that ‘cultural feminists argue that women’s oppression stems from the repression of the female principle’, in contrast to the early radical feminists for whom (according to Echols) ‘women’s oppression derived from the very construction of gender’.

But Raymond’s book is just about ‘the very construction of gender’. That is the tenor of her entire argument—that male-to-female constructed transsexuals can take on the feminine role,

and even be socially recognised as ‘women’ because they play the role so well, even better than many women do. But they are not women because the role of femininity is all they have. Moreover, they continue to behave like the men they have been brought up to be, by insisting on their ‘right’ to intrude into women-only spaces, by imposing on women, and by demanding women’s recognition. Like all feminists, Raymond is insisting that women are something other than what the conventional definitions of femininity say we are. She makes no appeal to a ‘female principle’. Rather, she is referring to a process of self-definition, of distinguishing ourselves from ‘the male-made masquerade’ (in Mary Daly’s words).

Lynne Segal, too, is worried about what she sees as the reactionary implications of ‘cultural’ feminism. She is concerned that the idea that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed has ‘dropped out’ of the feminist analysis (Segal, 1987:ix), and in its place has sprung up a ‘biological reductionism’ which is reactionary and ‘defeatist’ (passim). In the light of these developments, feminism is, she feels, ‘falling back upon the traditional consolations of the powerless’ (p. 3). She defines ‘cultural’ feminism as ‘a new form of radical feminism...[which] celebrates women’s superior virtue and spirituality and decries “male” violence and technology’ (p. 3).

In contrast to what she perceives as the reactionary politics of ‘cultural’ feminists, Segal gives us her own version of what she perceives to be the genuine feminist article:

the excitement of the feminism I once knew was precisely its promise that we *could* transform our own ideas of ourselves as women, hopefully keeping what was good in what we had learned from subordination, to create quite new relations between women and men, and between women and the world. We did not want to be like men; we wanted to be something new, and better (p. 4–5—her emphasis).

(I note in passing the absence of any mention of ‘new relations’ between women and women). She then goes on to criticise Susan Griffin’s ‘new idealised image of women’ which seemingly does not qualify as ‘talk of transformation and change’ such as Segal’s own. As evidence of Griffin’s supposedly false and reactionary idealisation of women, Segal quotes an edited version of a passage from *Woman and Nature*:

“We [women] can read bodies with our hands, read the earth, find water, trace gravity’s path. We know what grows and how to balance one thing against another...and even if over our bodies they [men] have transformed this earth, we say, the truth is, to this day, women still dream”. (p. 5—The elision and interpolations are Segal’s)

She expresses some agreement with what she thinks Griffin meant in this passage, i.e. ‘that women are in many situations warmer, more sensitive and more caring of others than men’. She also says that it is these very ‘mothering and nurturing activities, and the social beliefs which support them’ which maintain women’s subordination. They have never been ‘materially valued’, by which she presumably means highly paid, but rather ‘applauded only with the hypocrisy of cheap sentiment’. She goes on to state that the fact that women engage in these ‘activities’ does not make women better than men, that women can be as competitive, elitist, nationalistic and racist as men.

All of which is true enough (although it is doubtful that women are equal to men in ‘competitiveness’, etc.). But it is beside the point, since it is not a counter argument to Griffin’s, but rather one example of those ‘straw women’ mentioned above. Segal has

demolished an argument which she herself has set up, although it bears little relation to what the writer she is criticising was actually saying. In the first place, Griffin was not talking about motherhood or even about nurturance, but about the witch burnings and the ‘activities’ of which the witches were accused and for which they were condemned and killed. Here is the section of the passage which Segal left out of her quotation:

Many of us who practiced these arts were put on trial. We stood at the gates of change, but those who judged us were afraid. They claimed the right to order the future. They would have had all of us perish, and most of us did. But we kept on. Because this is the power of such things as we know—we kept flying through the night, we kept up our deviling, our dancing, we were still familiar with animals though we were threatened with fire and though we were almost to a woman burned.
(Griffin, 1978:175)

Segal misses the point because of her literalist and empiricist bias. It is not surprising that she left out the bit about ‘flying through the night’, a statement which cannot be criticised on empirical grounds since Griffin can hardly be said to have meant it concretely. Indeed, no part of Griffin’s text can be taken as a literal account of what women ‘are’ in any actual sense. It is not a realist text. It is, rather, an extended poem or song, allusive, allegorical, metaphorical, a chorus of strophe and antistrophe, male supremacist assertion and feminist response. The female ‘superiority’ which is portrayed here is intended to counter male supremacist versions of ‘woman’, and, in Segal’s own words, to ‘transform our own ideas of ourselves as women’. Segal may not like the way in which Griffin does this, but she cannot claim that she does not attempt to do it.

Indeed, much of what Segal argues is essential to the feminist enterprise is exactly what radical feminism is attempting to do. One aspect of that enterprise, Segal says, ‘would begin by reassessing or, as they say now, “deconstructing” all existing conceptual frameworks and bodies of thought to expose the assumption of a male subject or viewpoint’ (p. 35). To the extent that ‘deconstructing’ means anything, it is a radical feminist project, and one which Mary Daly for one accomplishes brilliantly in her critique of male-supremacist mystification.

Segal also criticises ‘the feminist search for women’s harmonious union with her bodily needs and functions’ in the work of Adrienne Rich (p. 9), and yet speaks approvingly of ‘feminists...busy seeking greater knowledge and control over their own bodies’ (p. 82). The latter comment appears in the context of a discussion of ‘women’s health groups’, and here Segal’s empiricist bias is showing. Her preference is for women who get out there and actually *do* something, opening centres and setting up

active groups...promoting self-examination and self-help for women...[providing] acupuncture, naturopathy and keep fit classes...develop[ing] better sex education for young women in schools...fighting for better social provision and social benefits for childcare (pp. 82–3).

All these are important activities. The empiricist bias lies in extolling them as worthier or more ‘real’ than attempts on the part of ‘cultural’ feminists to work to wards the same end, if in a different mode. Why is it revolutionary when ‘women’s health groups’ work ‘to expose the chilling inadequacies of the obstetric and gynaecological care women were receiving’, but reactionary when Mary Daly does it in *Gyn/Ecology*? Why is it revolutionary when those same groups ‘stress...the connections between physical, psychological, social and political factors’, but reactionary when Adrienne Rich recommends that we ‘think through the body’?

Segal does not tell us. Or rather, the reasons she gives do not hold up under close investigation.

The chief reason, according to all the critics, appears to be ‘cultural’ feminists’ supposed appeal to ‘biology’. These critics do not appear to notice the oxymoron involved in juxtaposing ‘cultural’ with ‘biology’, which raises the interesting question of why is it called ‘cultural’ feminism if it supposedly reduces everything to ‘biology’. (For an answer to that question, see the next chapter). It is, moreover, a strange kind of ‘biology’ which is alleged here. It is not a biology which speaks about the objects of biological investigation, about bodily cells, tissues, morphology, chemistry, fluids, processes and functions of organs, but a ‘biology’ reduced to a single fact, that there are two sexes.

The argument that radical/‘cultural’ feminism is, variously, ‘essentialist’, ‘biologistic’, ‘ahistorical’, or ‘idealist’, is a popular one among socialist feminists. Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* has been the work most consistently, and most cogently, criticised on these grounds. (Mitchell, 1971:87–91; Barrett, 1980:11–12, 195–6; Coote and Campbell, 1982:27–8). Firestone’s argument that it is women’s child-bearing capacity which is the root cause of women’s oppression is an obvious example of ‘biologism’, defined by Michele Barrett as ‘the assumption that gender differences are the natural and inevitable outcome of biological differences’ (Barrett, 1980:195). Firestone’s argument is also essentialist and ahistorical, (Mitchell, 1971:89–90) because it treats childbirth as something inevitably outside women’s control, and posits a purportedly value-neutral solution to the problem—technological replacement. In doing so, Firestone’s argument transforms into a technical problem what is at base a sociopolitical and moral one. (Janice Raymond makes this point about the ‘medical model’ approach to transsexualism— Raymond, 1979:2, 120). But although socialist feminist arguments concerning essentialism, etc, are cogent in relation to Firestone’s argument about childbirth, their attribution to radical/‘cultural’ feminism in general has more to do with unexamined assumptions within socialist feminism itself (as I argue in the next chapter) than with any weakness in the radical feminist account.

For Alice Echols, Janice Raymond is one of the chief offenders in this supposed appeal to ‘biology’ as an explanation for the differences between the sexes. She criticises Raymond for her ‘curiously cavalier disregard for whether these differences are biological or cultural in origin’. (Echols, 1983:63). But this statement hardly counts as evidence for Raymond’s ‘biologism’. To argue, as Raymond does, ‘that the origin of these differences [between the sexes] is probably not the important question...whether they spring from socialization, from biology, or from the total history of existing as a woman in a patriarchal society’, (Raymond, 1979:114) is not at all the same thing as arguing that ‘biology’ is the cause and sole origin of sex differences. What Raymond is arguing is that the differences exist, whatever the cause, which she explicitly avoids addressing.

Echols’ objection to a statement by Susan Brownmiller appears on the surface to be more pertinent. She says that Brownmiller argues that ‘rape is a function of male biology’, and quotes her as saying: “‘By anatomical fiat—the inescapable construction of their genital organs—the human male was a predator and the female served as his natural prey”” (p. 65). But that apparent pertinence is deceptive. That quoted statement of Brownmiller’s appears in a chapter called ‘In the Beginning Was the Law’. It is the second sentence in the chapter and

is preceded by the sentence: ‘From the humblest beginnings of the social order based on a primitive system of retaliatory force—the *lex talionis*: an eye for an eye—woman was unequal before the law’. (Brownmiller, 1975:16)⁴ Brownmiller was talking about *law*, not ‘biology’. It is a law justified with reference to the possession of a certain bit of anatomy, and hence phallogentric law, but it is law nonetheless. It is also ‘ahistorical’ law, not because it appeals to ‘biology’, but because it is part of Brownmiller’s hypothetical account of the origins of society. While I disagree with the way Brownmiller has expressed this—it is not ‘natural’, and neither is it ‘inescapable’ although it is mightily intransigent—yet she has identified the basic justification of men’s supremacy, their mere possession of that particular anatomical conformation. But that identification is not about ‘biology’, but about meaning and morality, about a social construction appended to a bit of anatomy overloaded with significance.

Both Echols and Eisenstein assert that Mary Daly’s work is ‘biologistic’. Echols said: ‘For Daly, the “emptiness” of male biology explains male dominance’. (Echols, 1983:65. See also: Eisenstein, 1984:xii, 141) My first reaction to this assertion that any of Mary Daly’s arguments made reference to ‘biology’ was to dismiss it as absurd. Her work makes no claims to the status of an empirical science like biology. It is simply not in the same epistemological category. It is metaphorical rather than literal, poetic rather than empirical. Whatever Daly’s argument is about, it is not about biology. Here is Daly herself: This [male] awareness of emptiness has a causal relationship to the rigid role definitions required by patriarchal males, for the male, sensing his inner barrenness, is “deeply dependent on the structure of society to define his role”. (Daly, 1978: 360. The quote Daly uses is taken from a male supremacist author called George Gilder). The barrenness Daly is referring to is a moral one, the patriarchal male’s lack of ‘such qualities as emotional strength and independence, forcefulness, courage, integrity, vitality’ (ibid.). It is true that Daly prefers to use the terms ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness’ rather than ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. But the use of such terminology is not intended to imply a biological basis for sex differences, as should be clear from the text. On the contrary, it is intended to appropriate for political and moral purposes the residual space left for ‘biology’ by the ‘sex-gender’ distinction so favoured by socialist feminism. (See [chapter ten](#))

Another offender in this matter of ‘biologism’, according to Eisenstein, is Andrea Dworkin: ‘In Dworkin’s view’, she says, ‘the chief engine of history appeared to be male sexual violence, possibly rooted in biology’. (Eisenstein, 1984:122) The only way I can understand this statement about ‘the chief engine of history’ is by analogy to the Marxist concept of the working-class as the agent of historical change. But such a concept is entirely foreign to the task Dworkin is engaged upon. To the extent that she is writing ‘history’ at all—and I do not know of any occasion where she claims to be doing so in any specific sense—she is writing a history of male violence. That she does *not* regard this as ‘rooted in (male) biology’ is evidenced by her acquaintance with and affection for a number of male persons who do not behave violently, even though they possess the requisite (male) biology. Moreover, her writings attribute no causal-ity to ‘biology’, male or female. To quote her on the question of the aetiology of and solution to the problem of male violence:

in order to stop rape, and all of the other systematic abuses against us, we must destroy these very definitions of masculinity and femininity, of men and women... We must excise them from our social fabric, destroy any and all institutions based on them, render them vestigial, useless. We must destroy the very structure of culture as we know it...we must eradicate from consciousness and memory all of the images, institutions, and structural mental sets that turn men into rapists by definition and women into victims by definition. (Dworkin, 1976:47–8)

Hardly a statement about ‘biology’! Nor is it a statement about the impossibility of transformation. On the contrary, it is a statement about the *necessity* of transformation if women are to be accorded full human status, and men to acquire a genuine humanity not based on women’s subordination.

Dworkin herself, in an article published in 1978 in the journal *Heresies*, explicitly repudiated what she referred to as ‘the most pernicious ideology on the face of the earth... biological determinism’, in far more scathing terms than Eisenstein’s. She drew a parallel between what she saw as the insistence on the part of some feminists that men are a biologically inferior species or race, whose violent behaviour arises from innate causes and who must therefore be eliminated, and the Nazi ideology of racial purity and their practice of extermination of the racially ‘impure’. (She prefaced her article with two quotations from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*). One can sympathise with her hatred, as a Jew, with this kind of argument. But it is possible to give the argument a kinder interpretation.

In the first place, the women who espouse it have no power, and although it might be objected that neither did Hitler when he wrote *Mein Kampf*, the two situations are not comparable. Hitler intended to acquire the power to exterminate all those defined as ‘enemy’ within the terms of the ethos of the German soldier male. (Theweleit, 1987, 1989) Feminists who embrace ‘biological’ theories of male power and/or female superiority (and their numbers are far fewer than the critics seem to think) are struggling against oppression and thoroughly despise the ideas and methods of the oppressor. And the kind of power for women envisaged by feminism takes account of violence and domination and explicitly and directly repudiates it.

In the second place, the method which Dworkin heard proposed for the ‘elimination’ of men is utterly different from the methods of the Nazis. It involved ‘developing parthenogenesis as a viable reproductive reality’ (p. 111). Another method I have heard of is refusing to give birth to and/or rear male children, and, since there is no certain way of ensuring that only female children are born, refusing to bear children at all. Yet another method is refusing to nurture and service males, a practice which may lead to their physical extinction if men cannot learn to provide their own life-support systems. While these proposals may be ethically and practically debatable, they hardly constitute a program of extermination in any way comparable to the practices of the Nazis.

In her introduction to this article, republished in 1988 in her collected writings (Dworkin, 1988:110–116), Dworkin points out that the article was widely available at the time it was first printed, and that her earlier works, *Woman Hating* (1974) and *Our Blood* (1976), also repudiated biological determinism. That she could continue to be accused of espousing exposes the shallowness of this form of feminist debate.

Lynne Segal, too, saw it as her bounden duty to expose the ‘biologism’ of ‘cultural’ feminism. Throughout this book’, she says, ‘I have repeatedly encountered and criticised the

appeal of biological reductionism' (p.180). But she has done no such thing—she has not criticised it because she has not encountered it. Or rather, she has not encountered it within feminist ranks, although she does launch a lengthy critique of male sociobiologists (pp. 179–87). This critique is accurate but irrelevant, since she adduces no evidence to link the writings of the sociobiologists with the writings of 'cultural' feminists. She does, however, *assert* a link, in the teeth of the evidence. 'A kind of homegrown radical feminist sociobiology has in fact [sic] emerged', she says, 'around the issue of male violence and war' (p. 176).

A chief offender is Andrea Dworkin whose disclaimers to the contrary Segal cavalierly brushes aside. Dworkin is placed squarely in the sociobiologists' camp, 'despite her criticism of them', as Segal acknowledges. But the quote Segal uses to back up her assertion shows no sign of the 'biologism' it is supposed to represent: "'male aggression is rapacious. It spills over not accidentally, but purposefully. There is war. Older men create wars.'" (Dworkin, 1981:51) This quotation is taken out of context, but even without the context, there is no hint that Dworkin attributes the rapacity of male aggression to biological causes. Segal even admits as much. This form of radical feminism...does emphasise the role of culture—in particular the role of pornography—in inculcating male violence'. (As a brief but important aside, I would like to note that Dworkin does not argue that pornography 'inculcates' male violence. She argues that pornography is one expression of it). Segal then goes back on her own admission by saying: 'the role of culture for Dworkin, as for the sociobiologists, is one where it interacts with male biology in some inevitable and immutable way'. Again the quotation she uses to 'prove' this assertion contains no suggestion of inevitability or immutability. (Segal, 1987:176)

In a peculiar twist of logic, Segal manages to conjure away one of the main pieces of evidence against the likelihood that Dworkin *would* say such a thing, Dworkin's dedication of her book, *Pornography*, to John Stoltenberg. 'Irritatingly', says Segal, 'these writers often list their own men friends and companions as the sole exceptions to their own rules—leaving other women's male companions, and hence other women themselves, as suspect!' (p. 177). Dworkin's dedication is mentioned in a footnote as evidence of this nasty, unfair practice (p. 260n43). But Segal cannot have it both ways, or rather she can, but only at the expense of the 'intellectual rigour' she claims to uphold (p. 35). She cannot argue, without paying the price of incoherence, that 'separatists' are committed to a biological determinist account of male violence, and that they make exceptions for individual males, since the latter cancels out the former. Presumably they would also allow other women to make exceptions too, although I doubt that anyone need ask their permission.

As I argue in the next chapter, behind this objection to 'biology', there lies an unexamined and unquestioning commitment to the Marxist version of materialism. In other words, radical/'cultural' feminism is criticised by socialist feminism for giving priority to the 'wrong' kind of basic 'reality'. But in fact radical feminism does not make the distinction. When Adrienne Rich speaks about the female body, she is not speaking about an inert or rampaging physicality which structures, motivates or drives our existence whether we will it or not. That is a phallogocentric view of the female body, a view which is exhaustively criticised by all these writers. She is speaking about our bodies as we experience them, live

them, find them meaningful:

In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body*, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized—our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multipleasured physicality.

I know no woman...for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power.
(Rich, 1976:290—her emphasis)

As for the accusation that the work of Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Robin Morgan, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin, and others, ‘abandons’ the social construction of sex differences, that is very far from being the case. On the contrary, their work is squarely and unambiguously within that tradition (as most of the excerpts already quoted here demonstrate). The main purpose of these works is twofold: to expose in detail and at great length the ways in which phallogentric culture (‘social construction’), and those who act in accordance with that culture (ditto), have dehumanised women; and to present their view of the possibilities of a woman-centred culture (ditto) with which to counter male supremacy. To insist, as radical feminists do, that there are differences between the sexes, and that those ‘differences’ are the stuff of male domination, is not to appeal to ‘biology’, nor to be pessimistic about the possibility of revolutionary change. In fact, it is to insist on that very possibility, else why would we bother?

Socialist feminism itself is not proof against the blandishments of biological essentialism, as is demonstrated by its firm adherence to the ‘sex/gender’ distinction (see [chapter ten](#)), and its adoption of Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society* as one of its own. This text is unashamedly ‘biologistic’ in its appeal to ‘biology’ as the final arbiter on questions of sexual ‘difference’, as long, that is, as ‘biology’ comes up with the right answers. (See [chapter three](#))

As a further example of the socialist feminist ease with ‘biological’ explanation, there is Christine Riddiough’s statement, in her paper in the socialist feminist text, *Women and Revolution*, to the effect that ‘[women’s] oppression comes from two sources: the apparent lesser strength of women and the reproductive role of women’. Her solution was similar to Firestone’s: ‘we now live in a society that is technologically and socially capable of controlling reproduction. This gives us the potential for negating those differences between men and women’. (Riddiough, 1981:76–7)

None of this is even noticed by those socialist feminists who continue to find the kettles of others far blacker than their own pots. Michele Barrett, for example, says that Kate Millett’s characterisation of men ‘as a group who rule “by birthright”’ is one example of an assumption ‘about the causal role of biology’. (Barrett, 1980:197) But this statement of Millett’s is not about biology, it is about rights. The problem that Millett is addressing is not that males are born (not even that they are born of women), but that they are born into a social order which identifies them as entitled to rights, privileges and perquisites denied to females.

Moreover, even socialist feminists cannot wholly avoid acknowledging the importance of biological reality in the lives of women. As Rosalind Pollack Petchesky argues, for example,

in her discussion of abortion, the feminist principle of ‘bodily integrity’, of ‘a woman’s right to choose’, of ‘control over our bodies’, has ‘an undeniable biological component, inseparable from its social and moral aspects...as long as women’s bodies remain the medium for pregnancies’. She does not even see any problems in regarding this component as ‘a material necessity’. She is quite comfortable with the idea that there are ‘different levels of meaning’, biological, moral and political, contained within the feminist stance on abortion, levels which are not mutually exclusive, but rather together add to the ‘force and complexity’ of the feminist enterprise. (Petchesky, 1980:98–9) I am not criticising Petchesky’s argument because I agree with it. But the interesting question is why ‘cultural’ feminists are accused of ‘biologism’ when socialist feminists who appeal to biology are not.

Another alleged ‘error’ of ‘cultural’ feminism, according to its critics, is its tendency to portray women as ‘superior’ to men. Lynne Segal is concerned that ‘an apocalyptic feminism has appeared which portrays a Manichean struggle between female virtue and male vice, with ensuing catastrophe and doom unless “female” morality and values prevail’. (Segal, 1987:ix) Hester Eisenstein, unlike Segal, did not basically disagree with what she described as

a woman-centered perspective [which] located specific virtues in the historical and psychological experience of women... [and] sought to isolate and define those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of strength and power for women, and, more broadly, of a new blueprint for social change (Eisenstein, 1984:xi–xii).

She objected, however, to what she saw as ‘cultural’ feminism’s

implicit attribution of female superiority to physiological causes...its renunciation of rationality and clarity as fundamentally male and therefore flawed...its pessimistic depiction of women as the innocent, passive, and powerless victims of male violence...[and its assertion of] a doctrine of female superiority to men (pp. xii, xix).

But the woman subjected to rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, etc, *is* a victim of violence, *is* innocent, is probably passive and is certainly powerless. Where is the wrong in saying so? Moreover, I have not noticed any ‘renunciation of rationality and clarity’ in the texts under discussion. On the contrary, I have found them entirely rational and wonderfully clear.

As for that supposed ‘doctrine of female superiority to men’, that is not my interpretation of the ‘same texts. To depict women as powerful, strong and beautiful is a necessary counterweight to male domination and misogyny. The argument is not that women are superior to men, but that women are superior to the ways in which we are defined in phallogocratic ‘reality’. These texts are in part hymns of praise to women, as well as savage exposures of male supremacy and criticisms of men who find their ‘humanity’ through the degradation of women. But the female superiority depicted in these writings is an insistence that women are superior to male supremacist definitions of them, not that women are more ‘human’ than men, but that women are human too. This message is quite clear and distinct, and displays a generosity entirely lacking in so many male-authored depictions of the ‘human’ condition.

The clearest expression of this is to be found in the work of Andrea Dworkin. (See also: Morgan, 1977:8, 16; and Rich, 1976:215) Dworkin is obviously convinced that men can and

will change if only she can make clear enough the evils that male supremacy brings down on the heads of all of us. Her concept of the human is genuinely universal because it does not rest on the exclusion or subordination of anyone, but insists on the inclusion of women into a sphere that men have falsely reserved for themselves, and by that inclusion to change the nature and definition of what it is to be human:

[This book] is part of a planetary movement to restructure community forms and human consciousness so that people have power over their own lives, participate fully in community, live in dignity and freedom. (Dworkin, 1974:17)

And again:

[Feminism] proposes, in the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “the individuality of each human soul... In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny...” This is simply a recognition of the human condition, in which women are included... Feminists have a vision of women, even women, as individual human beings; and this vision annihilates the system of gender polarity in which men are superior and powerful. This is not a bourgeois notion of individuality; it is the recognition that every human being lives a separate life in a separate body and dies alone. In proposing “the individuality of each human soul”, feminists propose that women are not their sex; nor their sex plus some other little thing—a liberal additive of personality, for instance; but that each life—including each woman’s life—must be a person’s own, not predetermined before her birth by totalitarian ideas about her nature and her function, not subject to guardianship by some more powerful class, not determined in the aggregate but worked out by herself, for herself. (Dworkin, 1983:190–1)

Dworkin even argues explicitly, and at some length, against what she calls ‘the woman-superior model’. (Dworkin, 1983:204–10) She sees it as one kind of antifeminism, functioning either to keep women in their place and exclude them from the privileges and prerogatives reserved for men, or as a male projection blaming women for eliciting men’s own pornographic desire. She says that it takes two forms, the spiritual or moral, and the sexual. In terms of the former, Dworkin says,

the woman is superior to the male by definition...her sex makes her moral or gives her the responsibility for a morality that is sex-specific...that men are hard put to match (but then, they are not expected to try)... The morally good woman is put on a pedestal—a small, precarious, raised stage, often mined, on which she stands for as long as she can—until she falls off for jumps or it goes boom. (Op.cit., p. 204, 206)

The purpose of this, says Dworkin, is to elevate ‘woman’ into an abstract principle far removed from the actuality of real living women, and hence to exclude actual women from effective participation in the world:

the woman-superior model of antifeminism is operating to keep women down, not up, in the crude world of actual human interchange. To stay worshiped, the woman must stay a symbol and she must stay good. She cannot become merely human in the muck of life, morally flawed and morally struggling, committing acts that have complex, difficult, unpredictable consequences. She must not walk the same streets men do or do the same things or have the same responsibilities. Precisely because she is good, she is unfit to do the same things, unfit to make the same decisions, unfit to resolve the same dilemmas, unfit to undertake the same responsibilities, unfit to exercise the same rights. (p. 206)

The supposed sexual ‘superiority’ of women, says Dworkin, is ‘purely pornographic’. It functions to absolve men of responsibility for rape and other forcible sex acts because it defines men as ‘suffer[ing] arousal passively’. Erection and the urge for penetration are seen as outside men’s control and elicited by women (or females of any age). In the discourse of

pornography, women are not allowed to be the powerless recipients of coercive sex acts—they are seen as provoking them, and hence as powerful. In the male pornographic mind, ‘because he wants her, [because] he needs her, [because] he is being driven by a desire for her...she wants it, they all do’ (p. 209 and passim). The pornographic male’s lack of control over his own erection, desire and subsequent actions is vested in a mythic ‘power’ of women who provoke, entice, and ‘ask for it’. Such an ideology is a distortion of the real source of power-as-domination.

The conviction on the part of socialist feminists that radical feminism ‘goes too far’ in attributing superiority to women rests on misreadings of the texts under discussion. Radical feminism does indeed portray women as superior human beings, but as a necessary counterweight to the phallogocentric devaluation of women. It is only by misinterpreting the texts that this could be defined as such a bad thing.

Yet another objection raised against ‘cultural’ feminism is something called ‘false universalism’. Hester Eisenstein regards the weaknesses in recent feminist thought as, in part, the result of ‘a false universalism that addresses itself to all women, with insufficient regard for differences of race, class, and culture’. (Eisenstein, 1984: xii). She does not object to universalising per se: ‘A feminist perspective’, she said, entails the assumption ‘that all women in the world, whatever their race, religion, class, or sexual preference, [have] something fundamentally in common’. The universalising becomes false (and an ‘-ism’) when ‘what women [have] in common... outweigh[s] all of their other differences, or (to put this another way)...the similarity of their situation as female [is] more fundamental than their economic and cultural differences’. (Eisenstein, 1984: 132). I am not entirely sure what distinction is being made here, since a project which concerns itself with what women have in common must necessarily give priority to that commonality, make it more fundamental.

Such fine distinctions aside, the main problem with ‘false universalism’ is racism (or so it is asserted). The form this racism takes involves feminists addressing themselves primarily to the situation of comparatively privileged white Anglo women, while purporting to speak for ‘all women’. Eisenstein attributes this tendency to ‘some radical feminist texts’, while the contributors to the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, attribute it to ‘white middleclass feminists’. This accusation of ‘racism’ is not made only by Eisenstein, nor is it confined to socialist feminism. It is a charge which has been levelled by women of colour, black, Third World and ethnic minority women against ‘white, middle-class feminists’ for some time now. And there can be no doubt that the issue of racism within the women’s movement is a vexed and agonising one. Within Anglo, English-speaking feminism there is often a cultural hegemony which must infuriate those women whose experiences are once again left out. It is important that this hegemony be challenged wherever it is encountered. And if feminism is found to be irrelevant, the solution is to make it relevant. As Pat Parker, a Black Lesbian Poet and revolutionary, put it:

I say let us reclaim our movement. For too long I have watched the white-middle class be represented as my leaders in the women’s movement.

I am a feminist. I am neither white nor middle class... You and I are the women’s movement. Its leadership should come from us.

(Parker, 1980:241)

But because the issue is so vitally important, it is important, too, to be as clear as possible about what is going on. Charges of racism are very serious charges indeed and should not be made lightly. The indiscriminate use of the charge of ‘racism’ trivialises it and empties it of meaning. Unless the charge is justified, and can be argued to be so, it merely confuses the issue. It stifles debate, silences dissent, and generates irresolvable antagonisms. It is for this reason that I have carefully considered the accusation levelled against the writings discussed below, and found it wanting.

According to Eisenstein, certain feminist writers engage in ‘false universalism’, and by so doing, ‘align feminist theory with a form of neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism’. (Eisenstein, 1984:133–4). This ‘false universalism’ supposedly manifests itself in ‘the rhetorical habit of referring, without modification or disclaimer, to “all women”’ (p. 133). But these writers are saying no more than Juliet Mitchell said in *Woman’s Estate*: ‘Feminism...is, by definition, available to all women...it is about being women’ (Mitchell, 1971:96—her emphasis). But that does not mean that Mitchell, or any other feminist writer, is speaking for all women—none of us can.

One of the chief offenders is supposedly Susan Brownmiller. Eisenstein cites a criticism on the part of Alison Edwards to the effect that Brownmiller was guilty of ‘outright racism’ because she ‘fail[ed] to grasp the crucial differences between the experience of black and white women, and in particular, the enormous differential of power, measured by both income and range of options, that separated black from white women’ (p. 133). This accusation is grossly unfair to Brownmiller who was very much aware of ‘crucial differences’. Here is Brownmiller herself on that very issue:

In the slaveholding South, revolt and rape by dehumanized black hordes was the classic white male nightmare. The purity of white womanhood, enforced by social mores as compelling as the whip, was as critical a touchstone of white masculinity as the system of slaveholding itself. Aware of his wholesale transgression against the black female slave, which he refused to conceptualize as criminal rape, the slaveholder was eternally vigilant against a reverse of that syndrome. (Brownmiller, 1975:217. See also: 219)

Brownmiller did not examine in any detail the nature of relationships between the white women of the slave owner’s household and his black female slaves. But her omission was not ‘racist’—she was not unaware of differences in the social situations of black and white women. (Whether the ‘differential of power’ between white and black women in the ante-bellum South was ‘enormous’ is debatable, given that both were in subjection to the white man). Her omission was the result of her particular focus of attention. She was writing a book about rape, and however badly female slaves were treated by the wives of slaveholders, black women were not raped by white *women* (although black women were often blamed by white women for being raped by white men).

One of her main purposes in her chapter, ‘A Question of Race’, was to redress a certain imbalance in the way the male Left has traditionally regarded the question of black male/white female rape. She did not deny the part that the myth of the ‘black male rapist’ played in justifying male white supremacist atrocities, (see above) as Eisenstein, citing Angela Davis, alleged that she did. But she was highly critical of the tendency among the male Left to defend black men charged with raping white women by blaming the women for ‘crying rape’ or telling ‘lies’, rather than locating the responsibility where it really lay, with

the white men who set the women up, ignored any objections they might have had, and were responsible for the farcical ‘trials’, and the convictions, executions and lynchings of black men. Her rejection of a social system which could murder with impunity is unequivocal. But she refuses to hold white women responsible for something they were powerless to prevent. As she put it: ‘from slavery onwards, the black man’s fortune was inextricably and historically linked to the white woman’s reputation for chastity, a terrifying imbroglio that the black man and the white woman neither created nor controlled’ (p. 221). And again: ‘It was a white man’s game that was played out in the Scottsboro trials, with black men and white women as movable pawns, and white men judged interracial rape according to their own particular property code’ (pp. 232–3).

Another supposed offender in this question of ‘racism’ is Mary Daly. In her ‘Open Letter to Mary Daly’, Audre Lorde takes Daly to task on two counts, firstly, because she deals only with ‘white, western-european, judeo-christian...goddess-images’, and ignores images of powerful and divine women from Africa; and secondly, because she depicts non-European women only ‘as victims and preyers-upon each other’:

What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections that exist between us.

(Lorde, 1980:94–5)

My own reading of Daly’s references to goddesses was that her purpose was not so much to present a feminist mythology within which women could find images of female strength and divinity, nor to uncover a universal female heritage. Rather, it was to criticise and expose the ways in which Western European patriarchal religion and mythology had distorted the goddess-worship which preceded it. If that interpretation is correct, then her confining of the discussion to Europe was intrinsic to her purpose.

But to the extent that Audre Lorde is saying that she found *Gyn/ Ecology* personally irrelevant, I find myself in some agreement, although for different reasons. I have my own problems with *Gyn/ Ecology*. I loved the punning trickery of Daly’s use of language, as she opened words up, turned them over, moulded them into new shapes, unveiled them in unexpected dimensions, as well as her brilliant exposure of the sadism of misogyny (the atrocities caught me by surprise, but fascination with her critique carried me through). But her depiction of the community of women irritated me because it ran so counter to my own experience. Not that I found it false, but I found it to be only half the truth. She spoke about the ecstasy without the agony, the love without the fear, the connection without the tearing apart. She spoke about the bright side of women together and ignored the problems and confusions. I was never entirely convinced that the only Sins were those of the Fathers, given how much pain I had experienced at the hands of women.

Lorde’s second objection—that Daly depicted women of other cultures as victims—is a problem which is common to feminism in general. How is it possible to speak out about the atrocities committed against women, while at the same time asserting women’s strength? Besides, Daly did not confine her depiction of women’s victimisation to other cultures—most of the Second Passage of her book is devoted to Western Europe, to the witchcrazes and modern Western medical practices. Moreover, Lorde accuses Daly of *not* doing something

that in fact she does do, and quite explicitly. Lorde says:

Your inclusion of african genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many and varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other (p. 95).

But ‘the many and varied tools of patriarchy’ was just what Daly’s book was all about, that male power expressed itself variously—I had never heard of female genital mutilation until feminism—but that the commonality was the subordination, suppression and confinement of women in the interests of male domination. Moreover, I simply must disagree with Lorde that Daly ‘ignored’ the question of how and why ‘those tools’ were used by women against each other. To quote just one example, in relation to the practice of footbinding: ‘since torture and mutilation of a small girl was carried out by her mother and other close female relatives, the lesson of “never trust a woman” was branded on her soul, and the emotional dependency upon the seemingly less involved males was guaranteed’. (Daly, 1978:136–7) Obviously Audre Lorde is angry with Mary Daly (although she writes more in sorrow than in anger), and her anger stems from her feeling that once again her own reality is excluded. But I cannot see how Daly, given her own cultural background, could have written about black American experience without being tokenistic or patronising.

I also want to defend Adrienne Rich and Andrea Dworkin against Eisenstein’s charges of racism. The charge against Rich is indirect, through a chain of implication rather than an overt accusation. The connections are as follows: Eisenstein says that Rich’s concept of ‘patriarchy’ is ‘ahistorical’ (p. 76) and in a footnote refers the reader to the concept of ‘false universalism’, the chief problem of which is that it is ‘racist’. But to call Rich ‘racist’, even by implication, is grossly unjust because she explicitly condemns the racism of American society with great insight and at some length throughout her writing.⁵

The charge against Dworkin is explicit and reiterated. In the text Eisenstein says: ‘Dworkin’s use of language was extravagant (and occasionally racist)’ (p. 122), and in a footnote she quotes a passage from *Pornography* which is intended to demonstrate this: ‘For Dworkin’s (unconscious) racism, see, for example, her uncritical acceptance of the stereotyped generalization that “Hispanic communities in the United States” are characterized by “the cult of machismo...lived to its fullest: gang warfare...” (p. 158), in contrast presumably to all other ethnic communities’ (p. 164n15).

The passage quoted appears in the context of a discussion of a particular piece of pornography, photos and text, which depicts a Mexican jailer (hence the ‘Hispanic’), his Anglo male prisoner, and a Mexican woman who is the Yankee’s ‘lover’. Dworkin’s purpose is to decode the racism of this little opus. The point she is making about ‘the cult of machismo’ refers to the ‘bribe’ which is offered to men of an oppressed racial group by the white male oppressor—‘the myth of masculinity’. Although defined as racially inferior, exploited economically and deprived of human dignity, the male of the lowly’ race is allowed to define himself through a hypermasculinity which outdoes even that of the ‘superior’ white male. He can be a superstud and a macho man in return for complicity in his own oppression. ‘And so’, said Dworkin, ‘in Hispanic communities in the United States, one

sees the cult of machismo, the cult of masculine suicide, lived to its fullest: gang warfare, the organized supermasculine packs that maim and kill each other because masculine pride depends on it'. Later she goes on to say: The genius of the bribe is in the fact that, metaphorically speaking, no matter which gang wins the battle, the white man wins the war'. (Dworkin, 1981: 158) Far from 'contrasting' the gang warfare among Hispanic males with the peaceableness of 'all other ethnic communities', Dworkin is arguing that it is one point on a continuum of masculinity. She is not arguing that the violence is intrinsic to a particular ethnic identity, but that it is a consequence of racism and racial oppression, and of male complicity in masculinity across racial boundaries.

As for any insistence that Dworkin is guilty of 'false universalism', that she has 'insufficient regard for differences of race, class, and culture', the charge is, quite simply, false. Here is Dworkin herself on that very issue:

The analysis in this book applies to the life situations of all women, but all women are not necessarily in a state of primary emergency as women. What I mean by this is simple. As a Jew in Nazi Germany, I would be oppressed as a woman, but hunted, slaughtered, as a Jew. As a Native American, I would be oppressed as a squaw, but hunted, slaughtered, as a Native American. That first identity, the one which brings with it as part of its definition death, is the identity of primary emergency... The fact, for instance, that many Black women (by no means all) experience primary emergency as Blacks in no way lessens the responsibility of the Black community to assimilate this and other analyses of sexism and to apply it in their own revolutionary work.

(Dworkin, 1974:23-4)

There is a great deal more I could say about the campaign against 'cultural' feminism, especially about Lynne Segal's text, most of which I found both offensive and absurd. I have not, for example, defended Dale Spender whose work deserves better than the crass, superficial dismissal involved in Segal's epithet 'philosophical idealism' (p. 24). I suspect that Segal's antagonism stems from Spender's ability to name the enemy clearly, and to back up her arguments with lots of data. Neither have I dealt with Segal's rather silly account of what was said about female sexuality by feminists in the early 70s (esp. p. 79-81). But a detailed critique of every instance would take a book all in itself.

I will conclude with a brief examination of Segal's account of rape and sexual violence against women. She asserts categorically that 'Men's power, in my view, is not reducible to direct sexual coercion of women' (p. 103). Rape is not, says Segal, 'the single or even the primary way men maintain their power over women' (p. 105). But no one is saying it is. As evidence that they are, Segal cites Andrea Dworkin (once again). 'Dworkin', she says, 'states with finality that male power "authentically originates in the penis"' (ibid). As indeed it does, not, however, the penis as a bit of anatomy—that it is *not* just another bit of anatomy is part of the problem—but the penis as phallus, as signifier of 'human' status marking the invidious distinction between the sexes. Segal also says that 'the maintenance of men's collective power is [not] the primary explanation of rape' (p. 105), and then proceeds to contradict herself with the following statement:

It is certainly true that the assumption that masculinity should confer lifelong mastery, authority and privilege on men in relation to women, an assumption central to all ideologies of masculinity, makes some men prone to sexual coercion and violence. (p. 153)

The 'some men' she is referring to are those 'for whom much of their daily lives confirms only failure and impotence' (ibid.). Is she saying, then, that powerful, i.e. ruling class, men do not rape, and, by implication, that only working class or unemployed men do? But no. In a statement on the next page, she makes it clear that what she is referring to is a mere psychological quirk on the part of 'some men'. 'Men who rape', she says, 'are frequently manifesting a contemptible inadequacy and weakness, if not mental disturbance'. With this statement she has blithely dismissed the feminist insight that rape is not an act committed by a few deranged individuals, but a systematic reign of terror waged by men (even though all, or even most, men do not actively participate) against women.

But this is an interpretation I have 'read into' Segal's argument. Her own explanation is more equivocal (and confused), although she obviously regards it as important since it is italicised in her text: '*men's violence towards women, I would suggest, comes from the inequalities of power between men and women as much as from any internal psychic dynamic in men*' (p. 153). But this statement is meaningless, both in itself and as a counter argument to 'cultural' (or any other sort of) feminists who would certainly not disagree that men's violence towards women stems from inequalities of power. And what does the conjunction 'as much as' mean? I do not know of any feminist account which appeals to 'internal psychic dynamics' without also exposing 'inequalities of power'. But then Segal's book is full of such confusions.

The next chapter gives some theoretical reasons for the campaign against 'cultural' feminism. I suspect, however, that there are deeper motives at work, the chief of which is a marked reluctance to acknowledge the importance, intransigence and force of the hierarchical distinction between the sexes. This latter question is dealt with in more detail in [chapter ten](#).

socialist feminism II: 'science' and materialism

BEHIND SOCIALIST FEMINISM'S antagonism to radical/'cultural' feminism lies its continuing adherence to the Marxist materialist account of history/society, i.e. to what is often referred to as historical materialism. It is this adherence which explains the curious oxymoron involved in the socialist feminist insistence that 'cultural' feminism is 'biologistic'. The reasoning behind the contradiction appears to proceed as follows: 'cultural' feminism is 'cultural' because it is not sufficiently 'materialist'. And it is not 'materialist' because it ignores class relations, and hence takes no account of the 'real material base' of society, i.e. the forces and relations of economic production. But because, in socialist feminist eyes, all accounts of social relations must necessarily appeal to the 'real (material) world', 'cultural' feminism must be appealing to another kind of 'materiality', i.e. 'biology'. But 'biology' does not qualify as a 'material base'. Since it is the 'wrong' kind of 'materiality', it must be 'ideological', i.e. 'cultural'.

It is this adherence, too, which lies behind socialist feminism's criticism of radical feminism as 'ahistorical', and its designation of the domain of women's oppression as 'ideological', 'psychological' or 'cultural'. As Zillah Eisenstein put it: 'For radical feminists...patriarchy is rooted in biology rather than in economics or history...the roots of patriarchy are located in women's reproductive selves'. (Eisenstein, ed., 1979:17) Heidi Hartmann said: 'feminist analysis by itself [i.e. without Marxism] is inadequate because it has been blind to history and insufficiently materialist'. (Hartmann, 1981:2) Iris Young asserted that 'radical feminist theory...tends to view patriarchy as determining women's situation. It tends to view patriarchy as merely a psychological or cultural phenomenon, rather than as a system having a material base in social relations... [It] tends to view patriarchy as basically unchanging through most if not all history'. (Young, 1981:45)

But these descriptions of the radical feminist enterprise are a distortion of it, couched as they are in terms which separate 'history' and 'economics' out from 'psychology', 'culture' and biological reproduction, and grant epistemological ascendancy to the former over the latter. They are descriptions which make sense only within a framework already committed to the Marxist version of social relations, and a peculiarly economic one at that. They make no sense at all within a strictly feminist framework which is concerned with the situation of women on its own terms, and which appeals neither to 'biology' (with a few exceptions) nor to 'history' (at least not in a Marxist sense). It is only by clinging to the almost unidentifiable rags and tatters of 'historical materialism' that socialist feminists could even make statements like the above.

Marx and Engels characterised historical materialism as follows:

As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are...coincides with their production [of the means of subsistence], both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production...the *intercourse* of individuals with one another...is again determined by production... We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process...men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along

with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.

(Marx and Engels, 1970[1845–6]:42, 43, 47, 48—emphasis in the original)¹

Taken as a statement of the nature of human existence in general, i.e. ‘life’ (rather than simply as a counter argument to German Idealist philosophy), this argument of Marx and Engels gives ontological primacy to productive labour, to activities which are typically and predominantly engaged in by men. On this interpretation, only men—the ‘real workers’—can participate fully in ‘life’ and ‘consciousness’. ‘Real, active’ women and their ‘real life-processes’ are excluded from this account of the ‘material conditions’ upon which the ‘nature of individuals’ depends. Excluded is that typical category of woman, the housewife, who does not produce her own means of subsistence, and who cannot express herself through what she produces because she produces ‘nothing’. Excluded, too, is that subjecthood established by the bourgeois deployment of sexuality identified by Michel Foucault, ‘*la femme “oisive”*’, the ‘idle’ woman, the woman who suffers from ‘nerves’ and who is afflicted with ‘the vapours’ or, more recently, ‘suburban neurosis’, the woman whose sexuality manifests itself ‘hysterically’, displaced, distorted and crippling, the bourgeois wife, who represents ‘value’ but does not produce or own it. (Foucault, 1976:160; 1978:121) And mothers are excluded, too, since the existence of adult (male) workers is already presupposed in Marxist discourse. In the light of the exclusion of typical female existence from Marx’s definition of the material basis of human life, it is not surprising that it sits uneasily with a feminist commitment.

Nonetheless it remains an important aspect of socialist feminist practice. In its crudest form, the materialist argument proceeds as follows: first, that there are two realms of existence, the ‘material’ and the ‘ideal’ (in the sense of ‘ideas’, not in the sense of ‘ideals’), which are ontologically distinct no matter how interdependent, or how one might be determined, overdetermined, distorted, transformed or influenced by the other; second, that the sphere of the ‘material’ has ontological primacy, i.e. it is more ‘real’ than the realm of ideas; and third, that it is the economic dimension of human life, the production, consumption and distribution of wealth, which is accorded privileged status as the epitome of reality.

Of course, such a crude statement of the problem does less than justice to the ingenuity with which Marxists, and socialist feminists, have attempted to leave behind the economism implicit in historical materialism while retaining the full force of the Marxist critique of capitalism. Margaret Page, for example, stated that ‘we [socialist feminists] cannot afford to cling to a conception of “materialist” which is limited to an assertion of economic primacy’, and that ‘the feminist analysis which we hold cannot be accommodated within a marxist problematic’. She insisted that socialist feminism was not concerned with ‘a soldering together of two already constituted problematics, one of which asserts the primacy of economic class struggle, the other [of which] asserts the primacy of the sex class struggle’. (Page, 1978:38, 39) But she did not offer us a third alternative, beyond referring vaguely to ‘the need for explicit commitment to exploring the interrelationships between feminism and other areas of struggle’, and the need to ‘start thinking of theoretical work as a valid and necessary form of practice’ (pp. 41, 42) On another occasion, however, she stated that

‘ideology itself is a material force, and cannot simply be subsumed under the economic as a perpetually secondary factor’. (Page et al., 1977:20)

With this statement we have arrived at the chief of the ways in which Marxists have attempted to avoid economism, i.e. through the use of the work of Louis Althusser (sometimes, oddly enough, without acknowledgement). With his insistence on the ‘materiality’ of ideology, his arguments for the ‘relative autonomy’ of any particular ideological apparatus—the law, education, the family, etc.— from the economic base, and his view that psychoanalysis was a ‘science’, Althusser’s work appeared to offer an opportunity to save Marxism for the feminist cause.

The appeal to ‘science’, as defined by Althusser, is a more sophisticated version of ‘materialism’. The favoured candidate these days for a ‘science’ with which to ground the feminist problematic in a ‘material base’ is the Lacanian reinterpretation of linguistics and psychoanalysis. While this appeal to ‘science’ certainly avoids economism, it gives rise to yet another problem, at least from the standpoint of a feminist commitment, if not from the standpoint of any political commitment at all, in that it remains caught in an objectivist epistemology. ‘Science’ makes claims to the production of a disinterested truth, a pure knowledge for knowledge’s sake uncontaminated by particular vested interests. But politics is, above all else, ‘interested’, i.e. engaged in the defence or assertion of the interests of particular groups in opposition to the interests of other particular groups. The consequence for socialist feminism of the importation of ‘science’ into its own ranks has been that the primary concern of feminism, the struggle against male supremacy and the locating of women in the centre of our own reality, has been shoved into the background.

There are, however, many socialist feminist accounts of women’s situation which are still caught up in an ‘economic materialist’ framework. Take, for example, Michèle Barrett’s statement of the Marxist/feminist problem:

The central issue here concerns the autonomy of ideology. Attempts to locate gender and sexual practice in an *absolutely* autonomous realm would lead to...relativism and idealism..., and they also lead to a failure to theorize the relations that exist historically between economic and ideological structures... The ideology of masculinity and femininity, of heterosexual familialism, is too deeply embedded in the division of labour and capitalist relations of production to crumble under cultural and ideological offensive alone. (Barrett, 1980:61–2—her emphasis)

At another point, she said: ‘If we accept the importance of ideology in an analysis of women’s oppression the question arises whether we should see that oppression as located solely at the ideological level’ (p. 251). She herself did not, she said, because to do so would involve accepting one or other of two equally untenable assumptions. Either we would have to accept that the level of ideology was completely autonomous from the level of ‘the economic relations of capitalism’, and hence that ‘gender relations’ existed independently of ‘class relations’. Or we would have to accept that the ‘material’ (=economic) relations between ‘men and women’ were different from and independent of those of capitalism. She also rejected a third possibility, that is, ‘that the ideology of gender is necessarily determined by the material relations of capitalist production’.

Her suggestion for solving the problem was to pose the question ‘historically’ rather than ‘theoretically’, by asking whether or not capitalism had been progressive for women—her answer was ‘no’— and whether or not women’s liberation was achievable under capitalist

conditions. Again her answer was 'no', although with minor reservations. The obvious conclusion, dictated by 'fundamental political imperatives', was 'some kind of alliance between the women's liberation movement and the left' (p. 257). She admitted that there were 'some major areas of at best a difference of political emphasis, and at worst outright conflict'. But, she said, there were 'many issues where objective interests might coincide' (p. 258).

But Barrett's suggestions do not resolve the dilemma because she retained the 'materialist'/'idealist' split, and the priority of the economic. By changing the question from 'theory' to 'history' she merely side-stepped the issue. No feminist would disagree with her insistence that women's liberation is not achievable under present conditions. What is debatable is the question of whether or not the characterisation of present historical conditions as primarily capitalist, with the political priorities which follow from that, is appropriate for feminist purposes. Moreover, 'some kind of alliance' of feminism with the male left is not good enough. There is the major question of why, if the politics are so imperative and fundamental, those alliances have not already happened. The answer is, of course, outright conflict and the failure so far of 'objective interests' to coincide.

What has come to be known as the 'domestic labour debate', too, was explicitly economist in intention. The designation, 'domestic labour debate', refers to a number of attempts (Maxine Molyneux mentions fifty articles in the British and American socialist press alone—Molyneux, 1979:3) to demonstrate the falsity of the traditional Marxist view that housework, unpaid work typically performed by women isolated in the household, was non-productive because it produced no commodities for exchange in the market (i.e. when the traditional Marxist view addressed itself to the question of housework at all). On the contrary, the proponents of the domestic labour thesis argued, housework played an essential part in the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production because it produced the commodity 'labour power', both daily, by providing physical, emotional and sexual sustenance for the adult male worker, and generationally, by bearing and raising the next generation of docile workers. Because it was unpaid, it kept down the cost to the capitalist of labour power, and (in some versions) contributed to 'surplus value', that proportion of the value added by labour to commodities which was appropriated by the capitalist. (Benston, 1969; Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Seccombe, 1974; Seccombe, 1975; Delphy, 1977(1970); Edmond and Fleming, eds., 1975; Gardiner, 1975; Campioni et al., 1975; Vort-Ronald, 1974; Hartmann, 1976; Eisenstein, ed., 1979; Molyneux, 1979; Barrett and McIntosh, 1979; Kaluzynska, 1980; Fox, ed., 1980; Burton, 1985)

But the argument did not work, even in Marxist terms. Most of the reasons for its failure were derived from arguments appealing to the more arcane levels of Marxist disputation. As a consequence, I find them incomprehensible, at least without devoting a great deal of time and energy to a task I do not feel is worth the effort. Eva Kaluzynska summed up my own feelings when she asked: 'Why did we have to get to grips with value theory to appreciate what a drag housework was?'. (Kaluzynska, 1980:27) However, one of the more accessible arguments for the failure, in Marxist terms, of the domestic labour debate is provided by Maxine Molyneux. She argues that it is unlikely to be the case that women's unpaid provision of domestic services to men serves to cheapen the cost of labour power to capital, given that

‘it is precisely where the value of labour power is lowest...[i.e. in the case of] single workers and migrants...that the input of domestic labour is often most minimal’. (Molyneux, 1979: 11) She also argues that it is quite conceivable that ‘the ending of housework as a women’s responsibility and the removal of this form of female oppression could occur with no loss to capital whatsoever’, at least in terms of the domestic labour debate itself, since the debate provides no account of why it should be *women* who perform housework (p. 21). This gap in the domestic labour argument is a consequence of its focusing attention exclusively (with the exception of Delphy, Molyneux notes) on the benefits for ‘*capital*, rather than, for instance men’ of women’s subordination (p. 22—her emphasis).

Which brings us to the main reason why the debate failed in feminist terms—it failed to account for women’s subordination to men, i.e for male supremacy. As Rosalind Coward argued, ‘these accounts all fail to explain sexual division...they presuppose sexual division. It is a natural division which is utilised by the capitalist economy’. (Coward, 1983:270) Although many of the contributors to the debate dealt explicitly with sexual, emotional and psychological relations between the sexes, the services performed by women for the benefit of men, they did so in a way which characterised those relationships as benefits to capital, as an aspect of the production process.

Typical of this approach is a statement by Dalla Costa to the effect that ‘the passive sexual receptivity of women creates the compulsively tidy housewife and can make a monotonous assembly line therapeutic’. (Dalla Costa and James, 1972:43) Such an approach is incapable of accounting for female sexual ‘passivity’ in terms of male domination, as a means of maintaining the phallogocratic assertion of sexuality as a male prerogative, a ‘benefit’ to men, or at least to men whose sense of self and reality is shored up by their possession of that crucial bit of anatomy. But it also does not account for the way female sexual ‘passivity’, or more accurately, sexuality as a male prerogative, benefits capital. Unless we see massive and towering accumulations of capital as a manifestation of patriarchal competition between men, as contests to prove who has the biggest.

Nonetheless, despite its failure, the problems involved in the domestic labour debate continue to be reproduced in a slightly modified form in the more recent socialist feminist enterprise of attempting to account for the interrelationship of the ‘dual systems’ of capitalism and patriarchy. This later debate retains a distinction between the ‘ideological’ and the ‘material’. However, given that the latter appears to be identical with the former, in line with Althusser’s injunction that ‘Ideology has a material existence’, (Althusser, 1971: 165) it is not at all clear what kind of distinction is being made. It retains, too, the emphasis on ‘labour’, in the form of the ‘sexual (or gender) division of labour’, although of a different kind from the ‘productive labour’ typically exercised by adult male workers.

As Nancy Hartsock points out, (Hartsock, 1987:165–6) even women’s ‘subsistence activity’, i.e. housework and the ‘double day’, is not comparable with men’s, much less the ‘work’ women do in the reproduction of other human beings. Women work more than men do, says Hartsock, in that they work longer hours. They are more likely to produce ‘use values’, i.e. goods and services which are consumed immediately rather than exchanged in the market. A woman’s work is more grounded in everyday existence than is a man’s, because ‘her immersion in the world of use—in concrete, many-qualified, changing material processes—

is more complete than his'. But beyond women's work for subsistence there is another form of activity engaged in by women, i.e. mothering, which has no counterpart in the public world of male work. As Hartsock puts it, 'One does not (cannot) produce another human being in anything like the way one produces an object such as a chair'. She goes on to say:

Helping another to develop, the gradual relinquishing of control, the experience of the human limits of one's action—all these are important features of women's activity as mothers... The activity involved is far more complex than the instrumental working with others to transform objects (p. 166).

But it is more than just 'more complex'. It is a different order of activity altogether. Mothering is so different from work in the public sphere, that it can continue to be called 'labour' in the Marxist sense (leaving aside that other meaning of the term, i.e. childbirth), or even 'work', only at the price of continuing to subordinate it to a Marxist epistemology, and by so doing, to miss the main point of the feminist problematic, i.e. male domination. Not that Hartsock misses the main point entirely, but she includes it as an interesting insight at the end of her paper, as an 'avenue for future work' (p. 176), rather than starting with it.

The contributors to the *Women and Revolution* volume, (Sargent, ed., 1981) however, by arguing for the 'sexual (or gender) division of labour' as the 'material base' of women's oppression under capitalist patriarchy', do miss the main point. (See also: Eisenstein, ed., 1979; Kuhn and Wolpe, eds., 1978; Weinbaum, 1978) In the lead essay in the volume, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', Heidi Hartmann says that 'a materialist analysis demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure'. (Hartmann, 1981:3) The problem with 'most Marxist analyses of women's position', as she quite rightly says, including feminist analyses like the domestic labour debate, is that they 'take as their question the relationship of women to the economic system, rather than that of women to men' (ibid.). She suggests instead that 'the material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labor power', a control which is maintained by 'excluding women from access to some essential productive resources (in capitalist societies, for example, jobs that pay living wages) and by restricting women's sexuality' (p. 15).

But this use of the term 'labour power' will not do, not because Hartmann's descriptions of women's situation in relation to men are wrong (although they *are* limited in that they portray one manifestation of male domination as its cause), but because the term 'labour power' cannot be used in this way. Marx regarded it as 'the sole commodity [the worker] has to sell' (Marx, 1976[1867]:1017), 'and thereby to gain the means of subsistence necessary for his own preservation or continued reproduction' (p. 324). '[I]n order to create value', said Marx, 'labour must be expended in a useful manner' (p. 300). Hartmann seems to be suggesting that women's 'labour power' is exploited, at least in part, by *not* being used, by 'exclusion'. What, then, is its value to anyone at all, women or men?

Secondly, sexuality cannot be defined as 'labour power' since it is not usually sold in exchange for the means of subsistence. Even prostitution, and payment for the use of women's bodies in advertising and pornography, stretches the concept of 'labour power' a bit far. Certainly, sexuality which produces other human beings cannot be called 'labour power', since children are not commodities sold in the market place for more than they cost to

produce. Even if we regard the rearing of children as ‘a crucial task in perpetuating patriarchy as a system’, as Hartmann suggested (p. 15), we are still not justified in defining it as an expenditure of ‘labour power’, since the term only makes sense within the Marxist critique of the capitalist exploitation of the working class.

Moreover, Hartmann retains the dichotomous, either/or distinction between the ‘psychic’ and the ‘social and economic’, and hence the reductionist appeal to the economy as the privileged level of ‘reality’ (even if the forces and relations of capitalist production do not themselves appear in her account). She stays too close to her Marxist roots. The central emphasis she places on ‘labour power’, inappropriate though her use of the term is, still has economistic undertones, even if the ‘economy’ has expanded to include oppressive relations between women and men. In so doing, she fails to give a coherent account either of women’s situation under capitalism or of male domination.

In the same volume, Iris Young criticises what she regards as socialist feminism’s tendency to posit ‘dual systems theories’ to account for the situation of women under the regime of ‘capitalist patriarchy’: ‘Feminist marxism cannot be content with a mere “wedding” of two theories, marxism and feminism, reflecting two systems, capitalism and patriarchy’. (Young, 1981:44) She argues that ‘we need a theory of relations of production and the social relations which derive from and reinforce those relations which takes gender relations and the situation of women as *core* elements’ (p. 50—her emphasis). Her own proposed attempt to avoid the prevalent socialist feminist tendency to fall into the trap of ‘dual systems’ theories was to assert that:

Capitalism does not merely use or adapt to gender hierarchy... From the beginning it was *founded on* gender hierarchy which defined men as primary and women as secondary. The specific forms of the oppression of women which exist under capitalism are essential to its nature (p. 61—her emphasis).

(But if that is so, one wonders why Marx did not mention it). Young’s solution to the ‘dual systems’ problem involved placing the ‘gender division of labour’ at the centre of a theory of social relations, ‘by elevating the category of *division of labor* to a position as fundamental as, if not more fundamental than, that of class’ (ibid.—her emphasis). But to place the division of labour, ‘gender’ or otherwise, at the centre of the debate is to say nothing at all about domination or exploitation. The problem is not that women and men do different jobs, but that the work men do is valued, while the activities of women are not. Since it is the ‘gender’ division of labour itself which needs to be explained, it cannot serve as the explanation.

Also in the same volume, Sandra Harding argues that appeals to ‘the economy’ as the ‘material base’ of society cannot capture the totality of social relations. (Indeed, I would argue that it is Marxism’s very claim to do just that which constitutes the problem). She attempts to resolve the dilemma by positing an alternative ‘materiality’ to the traditional Marxist one. This alternative does indeed avoid the residual economism lurking within Hartmann’s proposed solution. But it does so at the expense of Marxism, the remnants of which, if remnants they are, are so exiguous as to be unrecognisable. “‘Material base’”, said Harding, ‘has been restricted to economic relations in marxist theory...but I think we...need to understand the “material base” in a different and less reductionist way’ (Harding,

1981:137). She suggested that ‘family life is structured by a lot more materially based social relations than merely economic ones’, since it is within the family that ‘biological animals are turned into social persons’, ‘the species is produced and reproduced’, and ‘different kinds of persons’ are produced (p. 143, 144).

I must say that I agree with her entirely. Surely no more than a moment’s reflection (preferably of the self) is necessary to demonstrate that the ‘production’ of human beings, biologically and socially, is absolutely prior to the production of goods and services. Those (adult male) workers who alone are summoned to participate in the class struggle, do not arrive on the historical scene full grown. ‘Men’ are not born, they are made during the ‘long forced march’ of infancy and childhood, the first step in which is the immediate recognition (by others) of their maleness.

Harding was not concerned with the biological aspect of reproduction, because it is, she said, ‘an event of short duration...relatively uninfluenced by social variables’. (I disagree with her about that—the process of sexual intercourse, conception, gestation and birth is very much influenced by social variables, namely its continued control by men at women’s expense). Rather, her concern was with ‘the psychological birth of a person...the kinds of persons infants become [which] are greatly influenced by the particular social relations the infant experiences as it is transformed, and transforms itself, from a biological infant into a social person’ (p. 147).

Following on from the work of Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax, Harding discusses in particular, ‘two striking features’ of the social/psychological production of human beings. The first is the fact that ‘that first “other” from which [we all] separate is always a woman’. She goes on to say:

The initial, horrible discoveries that humans are imperfect, that they have wills of their own, that they frustrate our projects—this discovery has been made about a woman, about the person on whom we were dependent for survival, about the person from whom we were having difficulty distinguishing and separating ourselves; and these discoveries were made before we had learned to deal with life rationally (p. 151).

The second striking feature is the ‘patriarchal’ or (as I would prefer to say) phallogocentric devaluation of women: ‘the person from whom we first individuate ourselves both devalues herself and is perceived as devalued’ (p. 152). This has different consequences for the differently sexed products. Harding has more to say about the male product because, as she says, ‘we are focussing on the natures of the humans who design and control patriarchy and capital’ (p. 153). The male psyche is established and maintained through rigid dualisms springing from the primal distinction ‘between highly-valued self and devalued others’ (ibid). It is excessively rationalistic, since the irrational, emotional, affective self is tainted by its connection with the (female) one who was the whole world when that was all there was. It is driven by a ‘need to dominate’, to maintain the hierarchical distinction between (male=‘human’) self and other. It is competitive, egocentric and distanced, qualities which are valued in the market place where profit is the only concern. And it is misogynistic.

As I have already said, I am in agreement with Harding’s account, at least as far as it goes. She says too little about the consequences for women, and she does not mention the tenuous basis upon which the massive edifice of ‘capitalist patriarchy’ is built, i.e. possession of that

prized anatomical appendage. But despite what would at first sight appear to be her impeccable Althusserian credentials in attributing a 'materiality' to social relations themselves, she has in fact left Marxism far behind. As Rosalind Coward once tentatively suggested, a definition of the conditions of existence which failed to give priority to the economic 'might no longer look like marxism'. (Coward, 1978:94) As indeed it does not. (Interestingly, Harding makes the same point about Hartsock's argument as I have made about Harding's own. Harding says that 'some readers will think that she [Hartsock] transforms the Marxist framework so deeply that it is not clearly Marxist at all'). (Harding, ed., 1987:157) Why, then, do those feminists who designate themselves 'socialist' or 'Marxist' continue to cling to it?

It would appear that Marxism has a reputation among some academic feminists as a powerful weapon of political analysis. Hartsock says: The power of the Marxian critique of class domination stands as an implicit suggestion that feminists should consider the advantages of adopting a historical materialist approach to understanding phallogocratic domination'. (Hartsock, 1987:157–8) She wants to

adopt... Marx's method...his distinction between appearance and essence, circulation and production, abstract and concrete, and use these distinctions between dual levels of reality to work out the theoretical forms appropriate to each level when viewed not from the standpoint of the proletariat but from a specifically feminist standpoint...[because] the ruling gender and class have material interests in deception (pp. 158, 159).

But feminism already uses such a method, and always has done, without any need to appeal to 'historical materialism', bowdlerised by the elimination of the proletariat or not. There are numerous examples of the feminist method of exposing the self-interestedness of male supremacist ideology. Any feminist text can provide examples, but the following will do as reminders. There is Shulamith Firestone's and Ti-Grace Atkinson's exposure of the deception involved in 'romantic love', (Firestone, 1970; Atkinson, 1974) Adrienne Rich's exposure of the compulsory nature of heterosexuality, (Rich, 1980) and there is the work of Marilyn Frye (Frye, 1983). Marxism does not have a monopoly on insight into the self-justificatory nature of apologias for oppressive conditions.

Zillah Eisenstein, too, appeals to the power of the Marxist critique. She says: 'Marxist analysis provides the tools for understanding all power relations; there is nothing about the dialectical and historical method that limits it to understanding class relations'. (Eisenstein, ed., 1979:7) But to continue to appeal to Marxism, in however attenuated a form, lays traps for the unwary which Eisenstein herself has certainly not managed to avoid. The chief of those traps is the privileging of the economy as the prime mover of all social oppression. In Eisenstein's account, too, the 'economy' has expanded to include 'women's work': 'there are basically two kinds of work in capitalist society—wage labor and domestic labor' (p. 31). But the main enemy remains capitalism, not male domination.

Logically, biology *could* function as a 'material base' for social relations. 'We can attempt', said Firestone, 'to develop a materialist view of history based on sex itself...the *biological family*—the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant'. (Firestone, 1970:5, 8—her emphasis) The British revolutionary feminists argued, in 1977, that The material basis of our oppression comes from the biological fact that there are two sexes...[in particular] the

female reproductive function...and all the other material and psychological aspects developed thereafter'. (*Scarlet Women Five*, n.d., pp. 8, 9) I suspect, however, that this insistence on 'biology' on the part of the revolutionary feminists was no more than a reaction to the Marxist insistence on the economy as the 'real material base' of social relations. In other words, the revolutionary feminists accepted the Marxist insistence that there *must be* a 'material base' to social relations somewhere outside those relations and determinant of them, while disagreeing that 'the economy' was it. Or, as their antagonists, 'a group of socialist feminist women', put it (rather unfairly, I thought): 'there [is no] necessity to look for a "material base" of oppression in biology as a yah-boo-sucks reply to the left (we've got our own material base, so there!)' (Page et al., 1977:23)

It *could* be argued that it is self-evident that the production of new human beings is ontologically prior to the production of material goods by adult (male) workers. The problem with the 'biological reproduction' thesis is not that biology does not qualify as a 'material base', but that 'biological' explanations for social relations are as reductionist as 'economic' ones. Attempting to reduce moral and political issues to 'biology' is no very great improvement on attempts to reduce them to 'the economy', except that it places the female rather than the male at the centre of the debate, hence its appeal to many feminists. But the problem is the concept of 'material base' itself, whatever is located there. While it is important to be able to distinguish between ideas and practices which serve dominant interests—'ideology'—and what is actually going on, this is not necessarily achieved by setting up a dichotomous hierarchy between two levels of 'reality'. In Jeannie Martin's telling phrase, this merely places us in the absurd position of having to adjudicate between 'the real and the really Real'. (Martin, 1988; and personal conversations).

The appeal to 'science', after Althusser, adds another dimension to the socialist feminist account. The Althusserian intervention modified the starkness of the economism plaguing Marxism, a necessary modification given the problems inherent in that account, in particular the undoubted failure of the '(male) working class' to develop an adequate class consciousness in line with their class situation. Althusser referred to ideology as 'a new reality', and said that 'ideology has a material existence', or, as Barrett and McIntosh put it: 'ideology is not simply a superstructural manifestation of economic contradictions, but is a material, lived relation which has its own determining powers'. (Barrett and McIntosh, 1979:101) Althusser went on:

While discussing the ideological State apparatuses and their practices, I said that each of them was the realization of an ideology (the unity of these different regional ideologies—religious, ethical, legal, aesthetic, etc. [he also mentioned the family]—being assured by their subjection to the ruling ideology). I now return to this thesis: an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material. (Althusser, 1971—'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses': 133, 165, 166)

He also said that:

Marx conceived the structure of every society as constituted by "levels" or "instances" articulated by a specific determination: the *infrastructure*, or economic base (the "unity" of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the *superstructure*, which itself contains two "levels" or "instances": the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.)...there is a "relative autonomy" of the superstructure with respect to the base; ...there is a "reciprocal action" of the superstructure on the base.

This schema of Althusser's allowed a certain latitude to creep into the task of identifying the links between the 'base' and the 'super-structure'. It became possible to analyse any particular institution of society in its own terms without worrying overmuch about the goodness-of-fit of that institutional form with its economic underpinning, and still remain a good Marxist.

Althusser also had lots of good things to say about psychoanalysis. He regarded it as a 'science' (at least as it was reinterpreted by Lacan), whose object of investigation was 'the unconscious and its effects' which were laid down during 'the long forced march which makes mammiferous larvae into human children, *masculine* or *feminine subjects*'. (Althusser, 1971—'Freud and Lacan': 207, 206— emphasis in the original) It would seem on this account that Althusser opened up a space within Marxism for questions of central concern for feminism—sexuality, biological reproduction, the family, the inculcation of sex differences. But, for Althusser, the economy, 'the productive forces and the relations of production', remained the primary determinant of the 'social formation' 'in the last instance': 'the floors of the superstructure are not determinant in the last instance, but...are determined by the effectivity of the base; ...if they are determinant in their own (as yet undefined) ways, this is true only insofar as they are determined by the base'. And again: 'a theory of ideologies depends in the last resort on the history of social formations, and thus of the modes of production combined in social formations, and of the class struggles which develop in them'. ('Ideology and ISAs': 135, 159). He did not give us any account of what psychoanalysis and its 'object' might look like 'in the last instance', i.e. he did not draw out the links, if any, between the 'object' of psychoanalysis and the 'forces and relations of production'; nor did he tell us how the 'object' of psychoanalysis might contribute to, or retard, 'class struggles'. (And neither did Juliet Mitchell in her detailed exposition of the Althusserian schema). (Mitchell, 1974) And he was as blind as any traditional Marxist to the oppression of women.

I do not know what Althusser meant by 'science'. He regarded Marxism as a 'science': 'a new science: the science of history'. (Althusser, 1971:15; and passim throughout his work) Marxism was the third 'great "continent"' of 'science' to be opened up, the first being Mathematics which was developed by the Greeks, the second being Physics which was developed by Galileo. Psychoanalysis promised to be yet another 'new continent, one which we are only just beginning to explore' (p. 39). 'Science' was 'objective' knowledge, but not in the sense that it was disinterested. On the contrary, the 'science' of Marxism was identical with the interests of the proletariat: 'it demands the maximum attention to the resources, new forms and *inventions* of the class struggle of the proletariat and of the oppressed peoples of the world' (p. 9–10). And it was antagonistic to ruling class interests and 'all the mystifications of *ideological* "knowledge"' (p. 11—emphasis in the original). Moreover, 'In principle, true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the enemies of the people' (p. 21). 'Science', in Althusser's terms, was 'objective' in the sense that 'it can claim an object *of its own*' (p. 202— emphasis in the original), and in the sense that that 'object' was 'material': 'materialism is quite simply the strict attitude of the scientist to the

reality of his [sic] object which allows him [ho hum] to grasp what Engels called “nature just as it exists without any foreign admixture” (p. 40).

I am not quite sure what all that amounts to—what does it mean, for example, to call the unconscious ‘material’? And how is it ‘nature’, miscegenated or otherwise? But one of the primary conventional meanings of the term ‘science’ is ‘disinterested knowledge’, a connotation which Althusser did not entirely eschew. Given the tenacity of the connection between ‘science’ and disinterestedness, its continued use within a feminist context can only do a disservice to feminism, especially as the ‘science’ which is appealed to is never feminism itself, but some higher ‘truth’ to which feminism is subordinated, and which sets the standards within which feminism must fit if it is to count as ‘knowledge’.

Juliet Mitchell’s work is an example of the tyranny of ‘science’. She criticises Shulamith Firestone for referring to Freud’s ideas as ‘metaphors’, and adds that ‘For me the value of psychoanalysis is as a science; for Firestone it is “...poetic rather than scientific; (Freud’s) ideas are more valuable as metaphors than as literal truths”’. (Mitchell, 1971:164n) Here Mitchell gives epistemological priority to ‘science’. She does not define what she means by ‘science’, although from a few tangential remarks it would appear that it involves systematic and ‘objective knowledge’ (as opposed to idiosyncratic and subjective experience), and stands in contrast to ‘faith’ and ‘belief’. (Mitchell, 1974:6) But while I would agree that psychoanalysis gives us a systematised account of women’s oppression, and provides us with concepts (but *not* terminology—vide the invidious ‘penis envy’) to deal with it as a social phenomenon rather than an individual failing, to call it ‘science’ is to give it an intractable reality which cannot (or must not) be the case if feminism is to have any purpose.

There is a sense in which I prefer Firestone’s designation of psychoanalysis as ‘metaphorical’ to Mitchell’s insistence on its ‘scientific’ status, although I would rather describe it as a systematic representation of phallogocratic reality, i.e. as a symbolic system. By agreeing with Firestone that psychoanalysis is a ‘metaphor’, I do not intend to cast doubts on its ‘truth’ (although I do reject its literalness). It is, unfortunately, still the ‘truth’ of a phallogocentric world. But for strategic reasons I would not call it ‘scientific’. Despite the importance nowadays of indeterminacy in that doyen of the sciences, physics, ‘science’ still carries with it connotations of epistemological imperialism. To put it another way: once a science explains a certain aspect of reality to us, it brooks no opposition. Although science must be open-ended, capable of modification, extension, even trans-formation, outright contradictions must be shown to be false, trivial, meaningless or irrelevant if they are not to threaten the very existence of the science itself. ‘Science’ has an ideological status as ‘the only truth’. If we dignify psychoanalysis with the status of ‘science’, where does that leave feminism in its opposition to the world which psychoanalysis has exposed for us?

It is her untheorised and unquestioning commitment to ‘science’, I suspect, which lies behind Mitchell’s refusal to recognise male domination. To identify feminism as the struggle against male supremacy is to acknowledge explicitly (even blatantly, militantly and stridently) that feminism is imbued with vested interests, is committed to the interests of women when these are in conflict with the interest in the maintenance of male domination. In a paper written in 1974, she asserted: ‘All feminist accounts that I have read or encountered misrepresent [sic] patriarchal society as one embodying the power of men in general; in fact

it is quite specifically the importance of the *father* that *patriarchy* signifies' (her emphasis). She then cited Freud's 1925 paper, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', as 'a key to the understanding of the oppression of women under patriarchy'. (Mitchell, 1984:232) But Freud's argument in this paper was not about the power of the *father* in the little girl's development towards femininity, but the power of the *phallus*. The little boy is threatened by the power of the father—he will 'lose' his penis if he does not renounce all claims of affection and identification towards his mother. But the little girl is not threatened. She cannot be, because she has already discovered her 'loss' through her own observations. It is only *after* her 'momentous discovery' (as Freud termed it), *after* she has come 'to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect' (again in Freud's words), and *after* she turns against her mother, that her father becomes important. In other words (Freud's again), the feminine Oedipus complex, the girl's relation to her father, is a 'secondary formation'. It is not the female's relation to the father which is the bedrock upon which her situation within 'patriarchy' is founded, but her relation to the phallus.

Mitchell reiterates her argument against what she regards as the inappropriate feminist emphasis on male domination rather than 'the law of the father' in the concluding chapters of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (p. 390–406). But her own argument demonstrates that 'patriarchy' is an affair between *men*, between fathers and sons, and between brothers, and that 'a woman's place' is to be slotted into already existent relations between men. Women are subordinate, not only to fathers, but to brothers, sons, uncles (in kinship societies), and men in general, as well. In the sense that 'patriarchy' refers to hierarchical relations between men, it is irrelevant to women, although it is not, of course, irrelevant in the effect on women's lives of the power struggles for ascendancy among men. The problem for women is phallogocentricity, men's arrogation to themselves of the totality of social relations and the only 'human' status and agency.

Moreover, even Mitchell's insistence on the 'scientific' status of psychoanalysis did not save her from a residual 'economism'. In the concluding chapter of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, she argued that 'the ideological mode of patriarchy' and 'the economic mode of capitalism' were 'autonomous'. Although they were 'interdependent' and 'interpenetrating', 'one cannot be reduced to the other nor can the same laws be found to govern one as govern the other. (In other words, they are 'relatively autonomous'? Interestingly, although her arguments in this chapter obviously owe a debt to Althusser, her book contains no reference to him or his work. Was his Word so 'right' that it needed no citation?) But, when it comes to the crunch (or the revolution, or whatever it is that constitutes 'the last instance'), 'the same capitalist conditions of labour (the mass of people working together) create the conditions of change in both spheres', said Mitchell. Although she went on to qualify that statement—'but because of their completely different origins, the change will come about in different ways'—the economy, and the class relations arising from that, remained the primary locus of historical change. (Mitchell, 1974:412) But perhaps this is a mere quibble. Mitchell did not allow her residual economism (if such it was) to force her into making economic reductionist links between 'patriarchy' and the capitalist mode of production.

Another writer in the socialist feminist tradition who appeals to 'science' is Rosalind

Coward. (Coward and Ellis, 1977; Coward, 1978; Barrett and Coward, 1982; Coward, 1983; Coward, 1984) Coward's work contains no residual economism, not surprisingly given that it has been one of her main theoretical attempts to devise a materialist account of social relations which explicitly avoids any appeal to the economy, even 'in the last instance'. She has also expressed reservations about the relevance to the situation of women, of the Marxist privileging of the level of the economic: The insistence on antagonism between *economic* agents as the prime motor for a socialist transition and the definition of socialism as the collective possession of the means of production, in no way presupposes the abolition of discrimination based on the sexual division'. (Coward, 1978:85—her emphasis) And, I might add, the failure of that insistence to 'presuppose', much less address, the abolition of sex 'discrimination' rests precisely on its privileging of the 'economic', to which the situation of women bears but a tenuous relationship, at least the way it is defined within Marxism in terms of ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. Moreover, despite her determination to save socialism for the feminist cause (or is it the other way around?)—'a society which does not abolish oppression based on sexual division will not be a socialist society' (p. 95—her emphasis)—she is quite clear that the Marxist insistence on the primacy of the economic militates against addressing 'women's oppression in its specificity' (ibid.).

Coward's most explicit appeal to 'science' is to be found in the book she wrote with John Ellis, *Language and Materialism*. The science appealed to in this text is 'the study of language' which, the authors tell us at the beginning of the book, 'has opened the route to an understanding of mankind [sic], social history and the laws of how a society functions'. (Coward and Ellis, 1977:1) This study, based on the disciplines of semiology, psychoanalysis and Marxism, has, according to the authors, provided us with 'a "materialist theory of signification"', and 'a new object of knowledge...the scientific knowledge of the subject' (ibid., pp. 155, 154). This book is not, strictly speaking a feminist text at all, since the theoretical endeavour outlined bears only an accidental relationship to feminism. It is a more elevated (universal?) enterprise—nothing less than a contribution to 'twentieth-century intellectual development' across the board (ibid., p. 1). Admittedly, feminism was not found wanting within the terms of this 'higher' rationality. It would seem to have been a major contributor to the debate: 'the women's movement could be said to have become the political avant garde [in relation to Marxism] since 1968, because the specificity of its problems—the sexual and familial construction of women [and men too?—has raised in a political arena precisely the problems which the developments of semiology have encountered' (ibid., p. 10). But its influence must have occurred behind the scenes, since it does not appear in this present account as one of the developments of the twentieth-century intellect.

Moreover, the unexamined appeal to 'intellectual developments' sounds to me suspiciously like the idealism which appears in these pages as the main enemy. Whose interests do these 'developments' serve? Whose is the 'intellect'? And why, at a stage in Western European history when women are asserting a subjectivity of our own, are we obliged to engage in 'a complete undermining of the notion of a unified and consistent subject' (p. 7)? Unless, of course, it can be demonstrated that such an enterprise serves feminist purposes, a task which is not undertaken by Coward and Ellis.

Coward's later book, *Patriarchal Precedents*, contains no appeal to 'science'. And yet despite her assertion that 'the informed gaze' she brings to debates within the social sciences, psychoanalysis and Marxism is that of feminism, feminism does not in fact appear centre stage in her text. She sets up a dichotomy between 'essentialism' and 'culturism', between theories of sexuality which argue or assume that sex, sexual relations, sexual identity, sexual differences, are 'natural', and those which explain them in terms of other social determinations, e.g. the economy or specific cultures. She quite rightly argues that the debates she is criticising fall on one or other side of the dichotomy. But although she asserts that feminism transcends the dichotomy, she does not tell us how. 'Feminism has revealed the black holes in theories of sexuality', she says (p. 3), and: 'Feminism has been right to recognise that women are subordinated as a sex, but there is no natural sexual identity of women' (p. 286). But the arguments she uses to demonstrate the limitations of the particular debates around sexual relations she addresses, are not feminist ones, but Lacan's or Foucault's or simply the contradictions within the debates themselves. So although 'science' is no longer the epitome of intellectual rigour (twentieth century or otherwise), neither, it would appear, is feminism, or at least not without help.

In her more recent book, *Female Desire*, her feminist gaze needs no outside help in delineating hegemonic representations of femininity. But the book is misnamed. It contains no account of the ways in which feminists have challenged those representations she depicts. In particular, it contains no account of separatism, lesbianism or radical celibacy. As it stands, the book gives us no way of escape, and hence cannot claim to depict 'female desire' or 'women's sexuality today'. Whether this 'black hole' in her account is due to a continuing, if unacknowledged, conviction of the 'higher truth' of 'science' or some other discourse apart from feminism, I do not know.

Having said all the above, I must also say that, for most socialist feminists, their socialist commitment relies less on economic materialism (however ambivalently modified), or 'science', than it does on a concentration of attention on what Carol Johnson has called 'the so-called traditional [Marxist] areas of the state and the economy'. (Johnson, 1987a) This is particularly the case, she argues, in a period of economic recession, in the face of cutbacks and withdrawals of funding for women's services, dwindling state commitment to the limited reforms already achieved, financial restraints on the public sector of the economy and policies which pander to private profitability, and pressures to keep down or cut wages, all of which have severe repercussions on women's lives. She also points out (rather more debatably) that such a focus of attention does not debar socialist feminism from addressing 'questions of culture and power that traditional socialist feminism neglected'.

But although socialist feminism has launched a stringent critique of the male Left on this latter point, and many socialist feminists have turned to psychoanalysis in order to theorise these very issues (although not without opposition from other socialist feminists—see: Wilson, 1987; Barrett, 1980:54–62), yet the result so far has been either a distortion of Marxism beyond recognition, or a distortion of the aims of feminism. And although socialist feminism has always had an awareness of the importance to women of the extra-economic dimensions of issues such as the family, sexuality, personal life, consciousness, etc., as well

as an awareness of the inappropriateness of applying to the situation of women a Marxist economic analysis in terms of relationship to the means of production, yet there are times when it evinces a lingering reluctance to relinquish a conviction that, somehow, the economic has priority. This conviction is manifested in the kinds of issues with which socialist feminism primarily concerns itself—employment, trade unions, social welfare, the monitoring and challenging of the capitalist state and economy in its effects on the lives of women. These tasks comprise a vitally important aspect of the feminist project of ‘building a more just, equitable and caring society’. (Johnson, 1987b) But it is only one approach to employ, one way of looking at the consequences for women of the way the world is currently structured, and by itself it is inadequate because it fails to account for certain crucial dimensions of women’s existence. It is those other dimensions which radical feminism is much better equipped to deal with, since it starts from the question of male domination and is not hamstrung by the need to appeal to a different problematic.

socialist feminism and sexuality I: two early accounts

SEXUALITY HAS NOT BEEN a major concern of socialist feminism, not surprisingly given socialist feminism's preoccupation with 'material conditions' and its positioning of sexuality in the realm of the 'ideological'. While socialist feminists have often expressed dissatisfaction at socialist feminism's scant treatment of sexuality, it is possible to read through one socialist feminist text after another without finding any mention of sexuality apart from isolated references (Mitchell and Oakley, eds., 1976; Mitchell and Oakley, eds., 1986; Kuhn and Wolpe, eds., 1978; Weinbaum, 1978; Eisenstein, ed., 1979—except for Linda Gordon's article; Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, 1979; Sargent, ed., 1981; Burton, 1985—who is explicit about her exclusion of sexuality from the scope of her book; Phillips, 1987).

Although the earlier socialist feminist texts devoted considerable attention to sexuality, they tended to treat it as an historical phenomenon, a valid enough enterprise in itself, but one which has the effect of distancing the issue. To locate sexuality in an historical past is to place it in a time other than our own, and to portray it in a form which is no longer relevant, unless the connections between then and now are explicitly drawn. Those connections were not often made.

Juliet Mitchell approached sexuality in this way in her book, *Woman's Estate* (Mitchell, 1971) She did make some attempt to connect history to the present. But given that she defined the present in terms of capitalism, rather than of male domination, she missed the main point about the phallic nature of sexuality and its oppressive implications for women. In her first section on 'Sexuality', (p. 110–3) she opened with a brief critique of socialist writings, including those of Marx himself, for their failure to deal with the question. She went on to say that this gap had been filled by 'liberal ideologues' like Wayland Young (who wrote *Eros Denied*). Mitchell criticised Young's unfavourable comparison between 'western civilization', which he saw as 'uniquely repressive sexually', and 'oriental and ancient societies', which he regarded as allowing more sexual freedom than today. She pointed out that, although these societies were 'much less puritanical than western societies' (at least in the case of male sexuality, a qualification Mitchell did not add), they were marked by 'a form of polygamous exploitation [which was] an expression simply of masculine domination'. From that point of view, the advent of monogamy and puritanism was an improvement in the situation of women, she said, since it established at least 'formal, juridical equality' for women. At the present time, however, because that 'formal parity' continues to mask 'real exploitation and inequality', sexual freedom offers the possibility for 'both sexes to transcend the limits of present sexual institutions'. But she did not tell us how this might be so. If the easing of sexual constraints continues to take place under conditions of male domination, even if those conditions take a different and less extreme form than within 'oriental and ancient societies', how can that be liberating for women? Although Mitchell did make some attempt to link her brief historical overview to present day concerns, the history was irrelevant because it was not a history of male domination, but of 'sexuality' (sex

unspecified).

Mitchell took up the issue of sexual ‘liberation’ again in her second section on ‘Sexuality’ (p. 140–3). She was not unambivalent about the liberating potential for women of sexual ‘freedom’. She discussed the ‘sexual revolution’ (a phrase she placed within quotation marks), and analysed the contradiction between the sense of freedom which comes along with the unconstrained acting out of sexual desire (sex unspecified), and the oppressiveness for women of being treated as readily available sex objects. But again she missed the main point. The ‘alienation’ which women felt who were caught up in that contradiction was the result of ‘consumer society’, not of male sexual domination. The rest of this section was concerned with a discussion of housework. What this had to do with sexuality, she did not say.

In her third section, (p. 147–9) she again discussed the contradiction between sexual liberation and the sexual exploitation of women. But again, that exploitation was the result, not of phallic domination, but of the ‘consumption-and-fun ethos’ of late capitalism. She suggested that the resolution of the contradiction lay in refusing to ‘fetishize’ sexuality. Sexuality was ‘fetishized’, she argued, when it was isolated as the sole defining characteristic of women’s oppression. Instead, she argued, it was necessary to consider ‘the *whole* of women’s situation’ (her emphasis). This ‘whole’ consisted of ‘four elements’, which she identified as production, reproduction, socialisation, and lastly, sexuality. These elements formed ‘a structure of specific inter-relations’, a structure which ‘in the final instance is determined by the economy’.

And there we have it—the problem is named in true Marxist (or rather, Althusserian) fashion as ‘the economy (in the last instance)’. ‘Sexuality’ cannot be changed in the interests of women’s liberation unless ‘the economy’ is changed too. And ‘the economy’, ‘final instance’ notwithstanding, has priority. In Mitchell’s account, the struggle for women’s liberation will be identical with the class struggle against the capitalist mode of production, once women have entered the work force on equal terms with men, and as long as ‘the other three elements’ are taken into consideration. But the impediments to women’s equality of entry into the world of work are not set up only by the capitalist ruling class, but by working class men too. It is in the interests of all men, in so far as they are committed to their male prerogatives, and not just of ruling class men, to deprive women of a living wage. Moreover, even those women who have succeeded in ‘a man’s world’, who earn a living wage or more, are not immune to sexual attack, to rape, sexual harassment, sexual objectification, trivialisation, lack of recognition, marital violence. By missing the point about the nature of the main enemy, by identifying capitalism rather than male supremacy, Mitchell had very little to say in this book about the relevance of ‘sexuality’ to women.

She succeeded no better in her later book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Although she did not make the explicit appeal to ‘the economy’ of the earlier book (apart from a brief argument at the end —see previous chapter), and hence did not attribute female sexual oppression to capitalism, she continued to miss the point about phallocentricity, a bizarre omission given that the object of her investigation was the work of Freud. In doing so, she reproduced it, and her text remained embedded in the phallocentricity of its origins.

I agree with Mitchell’s criticism of the early feminist dismissal of Freud as that nasty

patriarch who said such terrible things about women. As Mitchell said: ‘psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but an analysis *of* one’. I would prefer to say that psychoanalysis can be *read* as an analysis of ‘patriarchal society’ rather than as a recommendation. Too often, psychoanalysis has functioned as a reinforcement of the phallographic conditions it analyses, without any awareness of the implications for women. I agree with Mitchell that, ‘if we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect [psychoanalysis]’. (Mitchell, 1974:xv) But Mitchell’s text does not challenge women’s oppression because she refused to name its origins in male supremacy. (See previous chapter)

She retained the priority Freud gave to the male, even to the extent of using the male pronoun when the discussion was in general terms, when, for example, she was discussing the ‘polymorphous perverse’ sexuality of childhood or of the as yet sexually undifferentiated baby. She also frequently used the term ‘mankind’. And while she gave us a lucid and illuminating account of the situating of the female within the male supremacist social order (although she called it ‘patriarchal’ and attributed it to ‘the law of the father’), she offered us no way of escape. True, her purpose was not to show us a way out of the ‘patriarchal’ morass, but to demonstrate psychoanalysis’ relevance to the feminist critique. In that task she has, to a certain extent, succeeded. But not only does she offer us no way out, she offers us not even a suggestion of the possibility of it. On Mitchell’s account, the sexed subjectivity which is ‘woman’, whether expressed in the passivity of ‘normal’ femininity, in the neurosis of hysteria, or in the ‘masculine protest’ of a male-identified ‘female homosexuality’, is all we are allowed.

At this point, it is important to point out the crucial ambiguity contained within the term ‘sex’. It refers both to the two sexes, female and male, and to erotic desire and activity. Mitchell’s text is addressed to the former meaning, to the question of the social constitution of the two kinds of sexed subjects, female and male. She does not address herself to questions of the nature, origins, meaning and purpose of sexual desire, although her text does have implications for this latter task. Hence, this text is not the place to look for a feminist account of an autonomous female sexuality. Because it follows Freud so closely, Mitchell’s account allows no possibility of sexual autonomy for women. Because in the Freudian account the penis is *the* sexual organ—the vagina is merely its receptacle and the clitoris is irrelevant in adult women, a childish self-indulgence— adult female sexuality is nothing but a drive for second-hand acquisition of the valued organ and hence is utterly dependent on the male for satisfaction. It is for this reason that Freud was so insistent that ‘normal’ femininity involved a shift of erotogeneity from the childhood pleasure zone of the clitoris to the adulthood of the vagina. Women who failed to make that transition missed out on sexual pleasure—they were ‘frigid’—because their anatomy could not respond to the promptings of the ‘real’ sexual organ. On this account, female sexuality is derivative, vicarious, subservient, burdened by the desire for phallic completion. I do not think that it was Mitchell’s intention to leave us at such an impasse. But her failure to draw out the implications for female sexuality of the situation she so ably delineated, means that it does not offer us any help in reducing the phallus to more manageable proportions as just another bit of anatomy.

Lesbianism is hardly mentioned in Juliet Mitchell's work. In *Woman's Estate* there is one oblique reference to what might be 'homosexuality'. In a discussion about alternatives to the family she mentions 'Couples—of the same or of different sexes—living together or not living together' (p. 151). But this example has not the slightest influence on the dominating role of heterosexuality within the text. In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* there are three references to lesbianism: in a discussion of Freud's case study, 'A Case of Female Homosexuality' (p. 69); in a discussion of 'the various alternatives [suggested by Freud] to the tortuous path to womanhood itself (p. 119); and in a quotation from Stefan Zweig concerning the protest of the youth in Vienna and Berlin during the 1920s and 1930s against "'the traditional and normal expressions of love'" (p. 140).

But not only do these references not make any inroads at all into the heterosexual hegemony, they reinforce it. In the first example, that of the young 'homosexual' woman, Mitchell quotes Freud to the effect that "'she changed into a man"...[when] she turned a way from men as love-objects' (ibid. See also: Freud, 1920:384). As Freud also put it: 'She had thus not only chosen a feminine love-object, but had also developed a masculine attitude towards that object' (p. 380). For Freud, this was evidenced by her overvaluation of the object of her adoration, by choosing a woman "'of bad repute" sexually', and by reacting with fantasies of rescue to the information that her 'adored one' was 'a *cocotte*...[a woman who] lived simply by giving her bodily favours' (p. 387–8). It is true that, as Mitchell pointed out (in a footnote), Freud confined this attribution of 'masculinity' to her sexual behaviour alone. He did not define the young woman as 'masculine' in other ways, despite 'her acuteness of comprehension and her lucid objectivity'. Although Freud said that such 'intellectual attributes also could be connected with masculinity', to attribute such traits solely to the male sex was, in Freud's view, 'conventional rather than scientific' (p. 379). It is also true that Freud found the designations 'masculine' and 'feminine' unhelpful in his account of sexual differences (although that did not prevent him using them when it suited his purpose). Nonetheless, by using this quotation as she did, with its implications unexamined, Mitchell leaves us with the impression that she is perfectly comfortable with the idea that lesbians are 'masculine', that only heterosexual women are 'real' women. Her other two references to lesbianism leave us with the same impression. If lesbianism is an 'alternative' to 'womanhood', or a decadent revolt against 'normality', then it is not something any 'real' woman would find herself doing.

Sheila Rowbotham's writings confine 'sexuality' solely to history. Given that her first two volumes, (Rowbotham, 1972; Rowbotham, 1973a) are histories of women's resistance to male supremacy, she can hardly be criticised on these grounds. *Women, Resistance and Revolution* contains two lengthy discussions of attempts in Soviet Russia and Communist China to revolutionise the family and sexual relations between the sexes, and in the process discusses such issues as 'free love', non-marital (hetero-)sexuality, contraception, abortion, even female orgasm and 'homosexuality'. (Rowbotham, 1972:151–8, 189–90, 192–3).

Hidden from History promises more in the way of discussion about sexuality, if only because the words 'sexuality', 'sexual liberation' and 'sexual self-determination' appear in the titles of chapters. Under these headings she gives us a critique of the limitations of Marx's

and Engels' accounts of the family, as well as those of socialist theorists of the 1880s and 1890s. She discusses the debates during the 1920s and 1930s about women's double burden of paid work and domestic labour, and about whether socialists should fight for a better deal for women working in the home or for the social provision of domestic services. There is also a short discussion of the difficulties facing the sexual radicals of that period who attempted to argue in favour of sexual pleasure. She also gives us a history of attempts early this century to provide birth-control information to working-class women, of struggles within socialism to defend women's right to contraception and abortion against the anti-Malthusian logic of male comrades. She concludes with a discussion of the vital importance for women of the separation of sexual activity from procreation if women were to have any opportunity for (hetero-)sexual pleasure free from the 'terror of undesired pregnancy' (Rowbotham, 1973a:158).

Although these accounts are interesting in their own right, they remain confined to particular historical and cultural periods. Rowbotham makes no attempt to relate these struggles to the concerns of the present-day women's liberation movement. This is not intended as a criticism. There is no reason why she should. Her task was one of presenting a history, not of making possibly inappropriate extrapolations. But although it is important to know where we come from, to provide a sense of continuity with the past, debates around women's sexuality (and possibly women's sexuality itself) have changed. If these histories have any relevance to present day concerns, apart from their own intrinsic interest, the connections are not spelled out.

In another volume, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, (Rowbotham, 1973b) Rowbotham does deal with issues raised by contemporary feminism. But the treatment of female sexuality remains sketchy, even evasive. The first time it is discussed, at the end of a section called 'The Nature of Silence' (p. 36–7), it occurs within the context of an argument Rowbotham has with 'revolutionary men', who define politics in terms of 'the external world' of 'strikes, mass meetings, demonstrations', and who ignore or trivialise the political importance for women of 'the internal areas' of consciousness, experience and sensation. Her example of the latter is sexuality, which she sees as 'a matter of anatomy and physiology', although, she says, we are also more than our biology. The inclusion of the level of experience and sensation within the category of the political is important for women, she argues, because 'our consciousness as women is inseparable from our relation to the encounters of our anatomy'. She includes childbirth here, but then goes on to describe 'anatomy' in terms of a (hetero-)sexual encounter: 'after all, a man enters us through our vagina'.

I find this argument confusing. On the one hand, Rowbotham is perfectly correct in her analysis of men's political priorities. On the other hand, however, it is not only *female* anatomy which is engaged in the (hetero-)sexual encounter—it is not in fact 'a man' who enters a vagina, but his penis alone. If it is the involvement of female anatomy in (hetero-)sexual activity which renders it so politically significant for women, why is it not equally significant for the men whose anatomies are involved too? It is not, of course. Rowbotham is right when she says it is not. But she does not ask why. And treating it solely as a question of female 'anatomy' (whatever else it might be remains unexplored) begs the question of why

personal life, including sexuality, is so important for women, and why men can convince themselves of its lack of importance for them.

Rowbotham goes on to argue that an understanding of women's sexuality plays a crucial part in the development of 'a revolutionary female consciousness', in contrast to the derisive attitude men display towards women's 'preoccupation with the orgasm'. She also stresses the need for women to get together 'to rediscover our whole selves'. It is only a conscious relationship to other women', she said, 'which will encourage us to trust our own isolated, atomized and fragmented sensations'. And she is right, as far as she goes. But I am puzzled by her use of the term 'conscious'. I suppose she means 'deliberately chosen'. But my immediate response to the term was to ask: What about *unconscious* relationships, relationships which are immediate, spontaneous, unthought-out, whether they be joyful, desirous, loving and playful, or fraught with conflict, suspicion and pain? Where is the agony and the ecstasy in deliberateness? And how can we learn from each other with only the tiny tip of our rational selves exposed? Or trust and be trusted if we never run the risk of betrayal? Rowbotham's account is missing something, and clearly that something missing in her talk of relationships among women is lesbianism.

The next time sexuality is mentioned is in a section called 'The Politics of the Irrational' (p. 44–6). In this section Rowbotham argues for a politics which takes account of female experience. She criticises the limitations of 'a political class consciousness', learned from men, which does not deal with 'the relationship between dreams, fantasy, visions, orgasm, love and the revolution'. She discusses orgasms briefly, and says that even something so 'particular' as the individual woman's experience of orgasm has implications for 'the general way things are'. She does not tell us what connections she herself has made between orgasms 'with the men we are with', and politics. She uses the example of her relationship to mascara to illustrate her own difficulties in trying to interpret experience as 'a "serious" political matter'. She talks about her need to wear it whenever she appeared publicly, its importance to her sense of her own desirability to men, and to her sense of being an adult female. She acknowledges the part the women's movement played in giving her the insights to understand this part of herself. But she does not tell us what these insights were, except for a reference to 'artificially created femininity'.

I would have preferred a more explicit connection made between the wearing of mascara and female sexuality (not to mention female orgasms and politics). There is a connection, but Rowbotham's text does not make it. She said that the wearing of mascara is (or was) an essential component of her desire to be desired by men, but she does not develop this insight. What her account reveals is the peculiar activity-in-passivity of femininity, which on the one hand requires of a woman the passivity of being the desired and not the desiring one, while on the other, it allows her the activity of decorating the object of male desire—her own body—so as to increase her chances of recognition. (At least she can do *something!*). The process is irrational (as Rowbotham herself acknowledges); whether it works or not is irrelevant. The connection is a signifying one, not a causal one, and no amount of failure to achieve the desired objective will impinge upon it. It is by manipulations at this level of the symbolic and the unconscious that the companies which produce and advertise the stuff wax fat and prosperous.

Rowbotham also mentions sexuality in the context of the family (p. 53–66). But to the extent that it is discussed at any length, it is male sexuality that is being dealt with. True, it is a critical account of male sexuality, of the way men typically perceive their sexuality in terms of ownership, competitiveness and domination. And it was perhaps inevitable that Rowbotham should have focused her attention exclusively on male sexuality, since her argument concerned the way in which family relations mirrored the (male) world of production, work and money. That restriction of attention does not mean that her account is of no relevance to the question of female sexuality. But it does mean that the connection between familial arrangements and female sexuality remained unexamined.

Her final discussion of sexuality occurs at the end of her chapter, 'Imperialism and Everyday Life' (P. 109–15). (This section was reproduced in Jaggar and Struhl, eds., 1978:314–7, as the second of their socialist feminist readings on sexuality). This time her main (although not sole) emphasis is on female sexuality. She starts the discussion by talking about the cosmetics industry, and by so doing, returns to the issues raised by her discussion of mascara. But she does not refer to the previous discussion, and neither does she make the link between cosmetics and female sexuality any more explicit, although again, the link is there: 'Acting on the assumption that women regard themselves through men's eyes as objects of pleasure', she says, 'advertising and the media project a haunting and unreal image of womanhood'. But she does not take up the implications of that assumption, of why it works, of what that says about female sexuality, of how to combat it. After all, the image it conveys cannot be entirely 'unreal', profits depend on its 'reality' in some form or another. And if it 'haunts' women, it is not uninfluential either. But Rowbotham discusses none of these issues, and I was left feeling that, at best, nothing at all had been said about female sexuality. At worst, it was co-extensive with the fetishised femininity flogged by Helena Rubenstein and her ilk.

She goes on to criticise the advertising industry which purveys a male-defined norm of clearly differentiated sex roles, while 'bi-zarrely' seeming to incorporate the expression of women's dissatisfaction voiced by women's liberation. However, she blames the ease of that co-optation on the demands and activities of 'a section of middle-class women [who] manage to alter their position through agitation'. It might be assumed that this means that the demands of 'working-class' women would be less easy to corrupt. But her subsequent argument throws some doubt on this. She talks about the ability of film and television images to expose 'our subterranean selves', to make public what before was 'private and personal'. Presumably there is no class bias or privilege in this process, and the market's ability to co-opt anything in the interests of profit expansion is limitless. No particular group of women is so privileged as to be immune from the distortions and machinations of the advertising ideologues. We are all fair game.

Her final argument concerns the enormous burden that sexual love (sex unspecified) must bear because, along with the family, it is the repository of every human need unrealised in 'the wasteland' of 'advanced capitalism'. Nonetheless, she is optimistic about the revolutionary potential of 'a conscious commitment to sexual alternatives' (sex, again, unspecified). She acknowledges that 'much of the talk of permissive society and sexual liberation means merely permission to consume', that even non-procreative sex can become

fashionable and sell commodities. But as long as that sexuality is not confined to 'a small elite group', and does not reproduce capitalist relations of domination, it is potentially subversive, she argues, 'a threat to commodity production'. In particular, the availability of safe forms of contraception and abortion, although developed by 'bourgeois technology' and compatible with the continuation of capitalism, has laid the foundation for 'a great explosion in the possibility of female [heterosexual] pleasure'. Once again I found these arguments unsatisfactory, and for the same reason Juliet Mitchell's arguments were. The villain is once again the rampant consumerism of late capitalism, and not male domination. Rowbotham does not consider that the burden of unrealisable desires carried by sexuality might have different consequences for women than for men. And her examples of non-procreative, exhibitionistic sex-for-pleasure sound suspiciously gay male-identified: 'It parades itself dancing in the streets, becomes gleefully transvestite, many coloured, confuses sexual roles, makes love every day'.

And again there is no mention of lesbianism. On at least two occasions she does mention 'love/sexual relationships between men and women, or men and men, or women and women' (pp. 59, 110). But the references are tokenistic gestures, informed by no more than a faint awareness that there are sexual combinations other than those between 'men and women' (note, not 'women and men'). On the second occasion, it is obvious that she is not really thinking about lesbianism at all. She lists this presumably exhaustive combination of sexes and sexualities in the context of the above-mentioned discussion about advertising, and the way it exposes to public view the most intimate and private of human relationships. But to my knowledge the advertising industry has never used images of lesbianism to aid its 'sexual sell'. And I very much doubt that it ever will. As women, and as women unattached to male earning power, lesbians are not a profitable target for an industry geared to extracting the maximum amount possible from those fortunate enough to own, or have access to, the wherewithal to engage in conspicuous consumption. Moreover, to recognise the existence of lesbianism would be to cast doubt on the universal relevance of the phallogocentric icons which legitimate male ownership and control of money. Not surprisingly, the advertising industry's approach to lesbianism has been, and no doubt will continue to be, stony silence.

Early socialist feminist texts like these displayed more clearly than many of the later texts the conviction that Marxism was the way forward to the revolution. It was a Marxism 'with extras', and a Marxist commitment explicitly critical of the male Left. It was also a Marxism with a new handmaiden, feminism. Only as an ancillary to Marxism could feminism be defined as politics.

*socialist feminism and sexuality II: 'essentialism' the
'sex/gender' distinction, and sexual 'difference'.¹*

SOCIALIST FEMINISM SEEMS to have achieved a certain hegemony within feminist debates around sexuality, at least as far as the published accounts go. This does not mean that there is a strict socialist feminist 'line' on questions of sexuality—that is very far from being the case. What socialist feminists say about sexuality is often far too tentative (and equivocal) for there to be any 'correct line', unless one counts the determination to avoid 'moralism' as a 'correctness' of a sort. Nor is there any obvious adherence to Marxist (or socialist) first principles, or even to areas of earlier socialist feminist concern. (*Feminist Review*, 1987:5) Nonetheless, it is the libertarian propensity of socialist feminism which has set the terms and conditions of the sexuality 'debate' in the published texts.²

The arguments emanating from the socialist feminist position proceed partly by means of the aforementioned campaign against 'cultural' feminism, and partly by means of a kind of libertarian pluralism (an ironic position for socialist feminists, given their continuing if ambivalent commitment to Marxism). This latter consists not so much of an outright defence of any and every form of sexual practice, but rather of a refusal to take a strong and unequivocal stance against (or, for that matter, for) controversial sexual practices, most pertinently on the issues of pornography and lesbian sadomasochism. This libertarian approach to sexuality condemns as 'moralistic' and 'judgemental' any feminist position which does take a stance against these sexual practices. It insists on sexual 'pleasure' as the sole criterion of sexual activity, and defines 'liberation' as the abolition of constraints, prohibitions and prescriptions.

I am calling this libertarian consensus socialist feminist because it is to be found mainly in the writings of those who identify as such. Not all of the writers who espouse it would necessarily identify themselves as socialist. Neither do all socialist feminists espouse this form of sexual libertarianism. Nonetheless, it is a position which has certain affinities with socialist feminism, given socialist feminism's tendency to avoid giving political primacy to male domination. It does not comprise the whole of what feminism has had to say about sexuality. Indeed, as Gayle Rubin said, in one of the few statements where I agree with her, 'feminist thought about sex is profoundly polarised', (Rubin, 1984:303) although whether the oppositions line up in quite the way Rubin says they do is debatable. The polarisation as I see it is between libertarianism on the one hand, and, on the other, the radical feminist critique of pornography and male sexual violence, combined with the working out of forms of sexual desire and behaviour which are compatible with female needs and interests, and which challenge and refuse to collude with phallic desire.

What all socialist feminists are agreed upon is that sexuality is socially constructed. This is supposedly what marks socialist feminism off from what the editors of *Feminist Review* referred to as 'the essentialism of some feminist theories of women's "natural" sexuality'. (*Feminist Review*, 1987:14) These authors do not define 'essentialism'. Neither do most of

the other socialist feminist writers who claim to be able to identify its occurrence in writings of which they disapprove. However, there are some definitions available. Gayle Rubin defines it (with glaring though unintended irony) as ‘the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions...[is] eternally unchanging, a social, and transhistorical ...[and] a property of individuals’. (Rubin, 1984:275) This definition of Rubin’s is ironic, given her staunch defence in this very paper of forms of sexual desire which are presented as nothing but ‘a property of individuals’, which appear to originate entirely outside social life, and to exist in an asocial limbo until they are subjected to prohibition and moral disapproval.

Carol Vance gives two definitions:

a belief that human behavior is “natural”, predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subject to change

and

the notion that human behaviors which show some similarity in form are the same, an expression of an underlying human drive or tendency...assumed to share an underlying essence and meaning.

(Vance, 1987:14)

She does not provide us with any examples of the former type of essentialism. The latter type lurks threateningly behind the attempt to write ‘gay and lesbian’ history.³

Usually, the meaning of the term ‘essentialism’ must be deduced from the contexts within which it appears. In the context of the Introduction to the *Feminist Review* volume, it is set up in opposition to ‘social construction’. So ‘essentialist’ theories of sexuality are those which deny or take no account of the thesis that sexuality is socially constructed. The editors of *Feminist Review* do not specify which theories are, in their opinion, guilty of ‘essentialism’. Doubtless, it is once again those ‘cultural’ feminists who are at fault with their theories which supposedly appeal to ‘biology’ rather than ‘society’ for explanations of the origins of sexual desire, activity, identity, and difference. But ‘cultural’ feminist writings are not only perfectly compatible with the social construction thesis, they clearly use it as their theoretical foundation. Hence, a commitment to the thesis that sexuality is socially constructed is not a socialist feminist monopoly. As Rosalind Coward pointed out: ‘It is rare, not to say impossible, to find a feminism which attributes women’s subordinate position to some natural, god-given and therefore unchangeable sexual role. Instead, the commitment to exploring the ways of being a woman is to understanding these as constructions in order that they may be changed’. (Coward, 1983:2–3)

‘Essentialist’ is also regarded as synonymous with ‘ahistorical’. In the case of those who stand accused of ‘ahistorical’ theorising on the grounds of their ‘biologism’ (whether or not they are in fact guilty of such a solecism), I have taken this to mean that ‘essentialism’ refers to accounts which assert or imply that ‘history’ (or ‘society’) is motivated, determined, structured, or caused by something outside, other than, or beyond, the domain of the ‘social’/‘historical’, in this case by ‘biology’. Once again, however, although there are some feminists who have argued a ‘biological’ causality (e.g. Shulamith Firestone), those who are usually tarred with the ‘ahistorical’ brush are in fact quite unsullied. Moreover, in the sense

of ‘outside history’ (and leaving aside the issue of ‘biology’), feminism has always had a tendency to ‘essentialism’ to the extent that it has defined ‘society’ (and ‘history’) as male supremacist or ‘patriarchal’ (and not without good reason), and endeavoured to establish alternative modes of existence for women outside the domain of the male norm.

Often, the epithets ‘essentialist’ and ‘ahistorical’ appear to be a euphemism for ‘racist’. (See [chapter seven](#)). They are applied to feminist work, like Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, which exposes instances of women’s oppression in cultures other than ‘our own’ (i.e. Western European in culture and origin). The implication is that Daly (for example) finds women’s oppression to be everywhere ‘the same’, and ‘the same’, moreover, as that of Western Europe and its white Anglo dominated former colonies. Oddly enough, the designation ‘ahistorical’ is not applied to ‘cross cultural studies’ such as those cited by Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society*. Is it because ‘cross cultural studies’ tend on the whole to insist on other peoples’ ‘differences’ from us, an argument that I find potentially more offensive than one which asserts a common cause? Or is it because Mary Daly is so savagely critical of practices which occur in cultures other than our own, practices like *suttee*, footbinding, genital mutilation? But then she is equally critical of practices in her own culture. As for the question of why the accusers should need a euphemism, perhaps that can be explained in terms of a moral dilemma. On the one hand, ‘we’ (i.e. those of us who are white Anglo citizens of imperialist nations) ought not to criticise cultures less economically and technologically privileged than our own. On the other hand, no one who has any respect for human dignity could possibly justify such horrific practices as those delineated by Mary Daly (and Susan Brownmiller and Kathleen Barry). Perhaps it is time feminists stopped using such vague terms as ‘ahistorical’ and ‘essentialist’ unless we are clear about what is meant and what is not meant by the term. (For my own use of the term ‘essentialist’, see [chapter six](#)).

Since socialist feminism is not entirely innocent of the ‘essentialist’ lapse, its claims to having a monopoly on the social construction thesis are dubious to say the least. For the problem of ‘essentialism’ is nowhere more pressing than it is in the ‘sex/gender’ distinction, a terminological demarcation which seems to have struck a chord with socialist feminists, and has become standard practice within most feminist texts. Moira Gatens points out that it is those who are most strongly committed to the sex/gender distinction, whom she identifies as ‘Marxists, (usually male) homosexual groups, and feminists of equality’ (Gatens, 1983:144), who are most eager to accuse feminists committed to a politics of difference of ‘essentialism’ (and its synonyms). Her paper, she says, is an attempt ‘to quell, once and for all, the tired (and tiring, if not tiresome) charges of essentialism and biologism so often levelled at theories of sexual difference’ (p. 145).

Ironically, the distinction was set up to avoid the problem of ‘essentialism’. It was intended to counter those traditional arguments which appealed to some ‘natural essence’ of femaleness (and maleness) as a justification for women’s subordination. Kate Millett argued, somewhat tentatively, that:

as the psycho-social distinctions made between the two sex groups which are said to justify their present political relationship are not the clear, specific, measurable and neutral ones of the physical sciences, but are instead of an entirely different character—vague, amorphous, often even quasi-religious in phrasing—it must be admitted that many of the generally

understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological, bases. (Millett, 1970:28)

Ann Oakley characterised the distinction thus:

“Sex” is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. “Gender” however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into “masculine” and “feminine”.

(Oakley, 1972; 16)

Gayle Rubin said of it:

a “sex/gender system” is a set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed needs are satisfied.

(Rubin, 1975:159)

Michèle Barrett regarded it as ‘crucial for feminist thought’, ‘an important step in the understanding of women’s position’, and ‘one of the early triumphs of feminist cross-cultural work’, an accolade she bestows on Ann Oakley’s book, *Sex, Gender and Society*. (Barrett, 1980:43, 13) She defined it as

the distinction between the physical characteristics of males and females and the personality and behavioural characteristics deemed “masculine” and “feminine” in specific cultural and historical situations.

(Barrett, 1980:43)

The distinction did not originate with feminism, as Moira Gatens points out, but was suggested by Robert Stoller as a handy way of referring to the phenomenon of transsexuality. (Both Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society*, and Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, make explicit reference to Stoller’s work). But feminists leapt on the distinction because it seemed to promise the perfect riposte to arguments that the situation of women was determined by ‘biological’ or ‘natural’ causes. The distinction was originally made in order to challenge the conventional opinion that sex differences were ‘natural’ and hence immutable, an unacceptable premise if feminism’s purpose was to transform relations between the sexes. If biological sex was ‘constant’ (barring the intervention of ‘technology’), at least ‘gender’ was ‘variable’, according to Oakley. The task, then, said Oakley, was ‘to disentangle “sex” from “gender”’, although not, oddly enough, with the aim of distinguishing what could be changed from what could not. The purpose of the disentanglement was (in Oakley’s words) to combat ‘prejudice’, to ‘replace dogmatism with insight’ (p. 17). If it could be demonstrated that ‘biology’ and ‘society’ were distinct, that ‘social roles’ did not follow inevitably from ‘biological facts’, then ‘patriarchy’ would lose one of its chief justifications for keeping women down.

But despite its wide use and acceptance, it tends to fall into the very trap it was set up to avoid. If the ‘gender’ half of the dichotomy is intended to point to the social construction aspect of whatever it is which gives rise to sexual differentiation, activity, desire, identity, then the ‘sex’ half must refer to something other than the ‘social’, that ‘biology’ which may or may not give us certain knowledge about ourselves if only we can crack the code (or it would stop giving us the wrong answers). By continuing to ask questions which contain both

sides of the dichotomy, devotees of the 'sex/gender' distinction continue to allow for the possibility of the influence of 'biology' on 'society', even if the questions remain unresolved or are allowed to lapse without further comment.

For example, among the questions posed by Carole Vance as examples of 'a host of questions' asked during one hundred years of feminism, are the following:

- Are male and female sexual natures essentially different, or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions?
 - Has women's sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men's?
 - Does the source of sexual danger to women lie in an intrinsically aggressive or violent male nature, or in the patriarchal conditions that socialize male sexuality to aggression and female sexuality to compliance and submission?
- (Vance, ed., 1984:2)

Vance herself does not attempt to resolve these questions. But why does she ask them, if 'biology' is not still behind it all, waiting for some future date, although not yet, when all shall be revealed by 'further research'? Why is it not possible to argue *both* that female and male sexualities are different, or rather (to put it less essentialistically) that women and men have different interests, purposes, desires and needs in relation to sexuality, *and* that those differences are engendered by specific historical conditions, without positing any essential genesis or causality at all? Why is it not possible to argue that women's sexuality is different from men's, without being committed to the 'repression hypothesis'? And why would any feminist postulate an 'intrinsically aggressive and violent male nature', when it is feminism's aim to transform relations between the sexes, or at least leave open the possibility that the domination inherent in phallic sexuality can be abolished? And finally, why are these spurious dichotomies set up if there is any genuine motivation to deal seriously with questions of sexuality and sexual difference?

The 'sex/gender' distinction is a restatement of the old 'nature/ nurture', 'body/mind' dichotomy. (Lloyd, 1988)⁴ It separates 'biology' out from 'society', and relegates it to an outer realm where it still lurks, unmediated, unsubdued, and presumably, unknown. But despite the separation, there are still 'connections' and 'influences', the nature of which is never spelled out. Take, for example, the following statement by Michele Barrett: 'Although it is important for feminist analysis to locate the question of biological difference in an account of male-female relations, the slide into biological reductionism is an extremely dangerous one'. (Barrett, 1980:13) While I am not entirely sure what the first half of this sentence means, I think it means that any theory of 'male-female relations' must take 'biological difference' into account.⁵ But Barrett does not tell us how to do that without getting caught on the slippery slope into 'biological reductionism'.

Neither does she tell us what taking 'biological difference' into account might involve if we are not already doing that whenever the issue of 'male-female relations' is under discussion. If 'sex' is already present in 'gender', and not something which can be inadvertently left out and forgotten, there is no need for us to be continually glancing back over our collective epistemological shoulder wondering apprehensively what 'biology' is going to come up with next. As Catharine MacKinnon argued, the difference *is* the dominance. It is not the case, at least for feminist purposes, that sex differences rest on a 'biological' bedrock which provides the justification for an overlay of male supremacy. Male

domination just is the meaning, purpose and reality of differences between the sexes, and, as McKinnon puts it, 'Gender might not even code as difference, might not mean distinction epistemologically, were it not for its consequences for social power'. (MacKinnon, 1987b:40).

For what *are* these bodies apart from the meanings they have for us, apart from our lived experiences of them, apart from our knowledges of them? If the term 'gender' denotes a level variously identified as the 'social', 'cultural' or 'historical', what is this 'sex' which sits somewhere outside? How do we know it, speak about it, experience it? If bodies are always 'situated' (Gatens, 1983:150),⁶ as feminism has often been at pains to argue, then it is at best pointless to posit a domain of 'biology' beyond and other than the situations within which we live them or deny them, know them or are kept in ignorance. At worst, it is to concede too much to the 'natural' differences argument: it is to say that there *is* this thing called 'biology' which is beyond our awareness, outside our control, other than our experience and activity. To reserve an epistemological space for 'sex/biology' is indeed reductionist in that it accepts the possibility that the dimension of the political, the moral or the experiential might at some future date be accounted for by biological facts as yet undiscovered.

To argue for dispensing with the 'sex/gender' distinction within feminist theory is not at all the same thing as arguing that bodies are not relevant. Bodies, especially female bodies, have an intransigence which is potentially disruptive of any ideas we might have about them. But biology and bodies have meaning and political relevance only to the extent that they are already situated within discourse (or culture, or society, or language). Indeed, it is a characteristic of phallogocentric thought that the female body is typically elided from discourse, as well as being bespoken in ways which do grave damage to women's physical and psychical integrity. To give just two examples of the practice of elision:

—The use of the terms 'birth' and 'abortion' in male supremacist discourse precludes any acknowledgement of the participation of the bodies of women in these processes. 'Persons', usually male, are 'born' without any apparent female presence; and fetuses swim in amniotic sacs unattached to any living individual.

—Anti-discrimination legislation, both here and in the US, specifically excludes pregnant women from the ambit of sex discrimination law, on the grounds that no comparable situation exists for men. The relevant wording of the NSW Act is: 'A person discriminates against another person on the grounds of his [sic] sex if...he [sic] treats him [sic] less favourably than in the same circumstances, or in circumstances which are not materially different, he treats or would treat a person of a different sex'. Since men do not experience any 'circumstances' similar to pregnancy, no comparison can be made and hence no judgement of whether or not discrimination has occurred. As one US judge put it (I am quoting from memory): 'She was not discriminated against because she was a woman, but because she was a pregnant person'.

Hence, we do need to appeal to our bodies as part of the process of asserting a right to human dignity and recognition. However, that does not necessitate any appeal to 'biology'. Rather, it involves the creation of a discourse different and separate from 'the malestream', combined with a sustained critique of phallogocentricity.

For myself, I tend to avoid using the word 'gender', as far as is possible when it appears

to have received a feminist imprimatur. I prefer the word 'sex', just because of its inclusiveness, ambiguities and ramifications. To separate out 'sex' from 'gender', and to focus on the latter while relegating the former to neutral territory, is both to leave open a space for 'biology' within a discourse which is moral and political, and to ignore large areas of women's experience.⁷

But 'essentialism/biologism' is not the main problem with the 'sex/gender' distinction. After all, no one these days is seriously arguing that sexuality is biologically determined (no one, that is, apart from sociobiologists, new or old apologists for the right, romantic novelists, and the media). Certainly feminists on the whole are not. (But see: Firestone, 1972; and the British revolutionary feminists, 1977) Appeals to 'biology' emanate neither from 'cultural' feminists despite their reputation, thoroughly undeserved as it turns out, nor from socialist feminists, despite their adherence to the 'sex/gender' distinction and their reluctance to concede that 'biology' may not have anything to say about political questions. The main problem with the distinction is that it serves the purpose of denying and neutralising differences between the sexes, (Gatens, 1983) and as a consequence, denying and neutralising the central problematic of feminism, i.e. male supremacy.

Kate Millett's embracing of the distinction was quite transparent. It contained no hidden motives, it was merely a neat solution to an old dilemma. But its use by some other feminists serves another purpose, to deny sex 'differences' altogether, or rather, to deny them any real importance. Because they are 'social' in origin, they are only 'superficial'. To change them should not be threatening to anyone committed to the status quo because nothing of any great importance would be changed. The covert aim behind the denial is to avoid the really difficult questions about male domination.

I have identified at least three ploys for neutralising the importance of sex differences. All accord epistemological primacy to 'biology', i.e. all appeal, either overtly or covertly, to 'biology' as the source of truth about differences between the sexes. The first of these ploys is exemplified by Ann Oakley's argument to the effect that at some 'essential' level beyond the 'merely apparent' level of the social, women and men are really alike. In other words, the differences are not really there because 'biology' says so.

What Oakley was concerned to argue away was not primarily the idea that sex differences are 'natural', but the idea that they exist at all in any but the most trivial and superficial way. When she thinks she can call on 'biology' to support her belief that there are 'really' no differences between the sexes, she does so. She cites the work of Kinsey and of Masters and Johnson to demonstrate that there is 'a physiological identity of sexual reaction in male and female which is somehow lost or distorted by conditioning' (Oakley, 1972:103). Because it is the differences which constitute the problem, 'biology' here offers the solution, if we can only get rid of that 'conditioning' which has made male and female reactions so different. On the other hand, when the 'biology' of the respective sexes appears to be inescapably different, we need 'conditioning' to modify the differences, although obviously not the same kind of 'conditioning' as the current sort which exacerbates them. In her discussion of puberty, she says that, for the male, it is 'an overtly sexual event' because it is 'localised in the genitals by the start of seminal emissions', while for the female sexuality is 'latent' because menstruation 'has a reproductive rather than a sexual significance' (p. 107). The

solution here is to change the ‘conditioning’, but not abolish it altogether, since that would presumably give free rein to the play of the differentiating ‘biological’ forces.

But it is at best premature to assert that the sexes are really alike, given the hegemonic tendency for male interests to present themselves as the norm, and hence as the standard against which both ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ are measured. It makes more political sense to investigate the nature and consequences of the differences between the sexes as they manifest in the here and now, rather than postulating some neutral essence behind the differentiated appearance as a solution to ‘the problem of sex differences’. As Moira Gatens argued: ‘There is no [sex] neutral body’ (from a feminist standpoint, I would add),

there are at least two kinds of bodies: the male body and the female body... Gender is not the issue, sexual difference is. The very same behaviours (whether they be masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand, and the female subject on the other. Identical social ‘training’, attitudes or, if you will, conditioning, acquire different significances when applied to male and female subjects. (pp. 155, 148)

The second of the above-mentioned ploys to neutralise sex differences is rather more subtle and devious, and the appeal to ‘biology’ is covert rather than directly stated. The argument is never spelled out, but it seems to proceed something like this: All statements about sex differences must necessarily appeal to ‘biology’ because *only* ‘biology’ can give us the hard facts about sex differences. But (the argument continues), since sex differences are not determined by biology, feminist statements about sex differences are false and there are really no differences between the sexes. In other words, the differences are not really there because only ‘biology’ can tell us whether they are or not and ‘biology’ is irrelevant. This ploy is typical of the campaign against ‘cultural’ feminism. The authors accused of ‘biological reductionism’ are perceived to be insisting on the importance and reality of sex ‘differences’, although they are actually addressing the nature and extent of male sexual domination. Since the critics do not want to recognise the existence of sex ‘differences’, and hence the reality of male domination, they pluck ‘biology’ out of the vapours of their own imaginings and use it as a weapon to demolish the imaginary opposition.

Typical of this approach are the assertions of Alice Echols: ‘[There is a] growing tendency among some cultural feminists to invoke biological explanations of gender differences’. (Echols, 1983:64) She acknowledges that ‘not all cultural feminists are enthusiastic supporters of biologically based explanations of gender’ (p. 65), but then proceeds to reject what she regards as the ‘cultural’ feminist account of sexual differences between the sexes nonetheless. Although her rejection must be inferred from her pejorative language rather than from any explicit argument, it does seem as though she objects strongly to ‘cultural’ feminists’ supposed habit of defining female and male sexuality as ‘polar opposites’. She does not tell us why she objects to this habit, nor does she tell us what is wrong with it. Presumably one is expected to find its wrongness self-evident. I have assumed that there is a link between her implied disagreement with the ‘polarisation’ thesis, and her earlier stated disagreement with ‘biological explanations of gender differences’. But since ‘cultural’ feminists do not in fact appeal to ‘biological explanations’ for anything, it cannot be the appeal to ‘biology’ which is the main ground of her complaint. Rather, Echols is objecting to any statements to the effect that there *are* sexual differences between the sexes, and

differences which are, moreover, oppressive to women. ‘Biology’ is dragged in as a red-herring, as a signal to elicit a knee-jerk response on the part of her readers to reject the arguments of ‘cultural’ feminists.

As evidence of the ‘polarisation’ thesis she quotes Robin Morgan:

“Every woman here knows in her gut the vast differences between her sexuality and that of any patriarchally trained male’s—gay or straight...that the emphasis on genital sexuality, objectification, promiscuity, emotional noninvolvement, and coarse invulnerability was the male style, and that we, as women, placed greater trust in love, sensuality, humor, tenderness, commitment.”

(Morgan, 1977:181)

Echols comments: ‘Morgan assumes that somehow women’s sexuality is not “patriarchally trained”’. (Echols, 1983:71)

But Morgan ‘assumes’ no such thing, as is obvious from her subsequent discussion. She goes on to criticise the behaviour of those women who react against ‘the patriarchally enforced role of noxious femininity’ by taking on

the patriarch’s own style, to get drunk and swaggering just like one of the boys, to write of tits and ass as if a sister were no more than a collection of chicken parts, to spit at the lifetime commitment of other lesbian couples, and refer to them contemptuously as ‘monogs’ (Morgan, 1977:182).

Obviously Morgan does not regard ‘patriarchal training’ as confined to the male sex alone. Perhaps the distinction she is making is between men who act in accordance with their ‘patriarchal’ heritage, and those who do not. It is true that Robin Morgan has a view of female sexuality as being very different from what she calls ‘the male style’. But she does not appeal to ‘biology’ as evidence for the ‘difference’, but to what ‘every woman here knows’. (The quote was taken from the text of a talk she gave). Perhaps Echols defines Morgan’s reference to ‘her gut’ as ‘biology’.

It is not clear whether Echols sees the supposed ‘cultural’ feminist account of sexuality as factually incorrect, or whether her objection is that it is morally reprehensible to define sexuality in a ‘polarised’ way. In the case of female sexuality, it would appear that ‘cultural’ feminists are morally at fault rather than empirically wrong, in supposedly arguing that sexual repression is a good thing for women. In other words, Echols believes that ‘cultural’ feminists *ought not* to see female sexuality in the way Echols says they do. Echols herself believes that women are ‘sexually repressed’. She says that ‘traditional sexual morality’ marked by ‘women’s conditioning to subordinate and repress sexual drive’ (pp. 76, 72) is the very problem which needs to be overcome. So she is obviously not accusing ‘cultural’ feminists of committing an error of fact when she interprets them as saying that women are ‘repressed’. Rather she is saying that they should not place a positive valuation on sexual ‘repression’ for women. Since the authors she quotes do not in fact do so, the force of her homily is sadly misdirected.

As one example of the ‘evidence’ for ‘cultural’ feminists’ supposedly favourable attitude towards sexual repression for women, she quotes Ethel Person to the effect that ““many women have the capacity to abstain from sex without negative psychological consequences”” (p. 71–2). This is yet another example of the habit of critics of ‘cultural’ feminism of quoting out of context. The context is a discussion about the relative importance of genital sexuality

in the development of the 'gender' identity of men and of women. To quote Person more fully (and accurately):

There is a wealth of clinical evidence to suggest that, in this culture, genital sexual activity is a prominent feature in the maintenance of masculine gender while it is a variable feature in feminine gender. Thus, an impotent man always feels that his masculinity, and not just his sexuality, is threatened...In contrast, whether or not a woman is orgasmic has few implications for personality organisation...gender identity and self-worth can be consolidated by other means...while women may suffer the consequences of sexual inhibition, sexual expression is not critical to personality development. Many women...[etc.]

(Person, 1980:50)

Person is *not* arguing that sexual repression is a good thing for women. She explicitly acknowledges that sexual inhibition can have adverse consequences for women. It is a gross distortion of her argument to suggest, as Echols does, that Person is advocating female 'anorgasmia or abstention' as an adaptive response to sexually oppressive social conditions such as might prevail if the right-wing moralists had their way and 'the Human Life Amendment and Family Protection Act become law' (Echols, 1983:72). Person does express grave doubts about the liberating potential for women of 'sexual liberation'. She says:

In this culture there may be a basic contradiction between sexual liberation and personal liberation (or autonomy) for women insofar as sexuality as constructed expresses dependent or masochistic trends... If one is not an advocate of libido theory, one must take seriously the alternate proposition that sexuality as experienced is not as autonomous, independent, or natural as one subjectively feels it to be. The sexuality so often liberated is a product of sexist conditioning rather than the true individual core that sexuality is so often assumed to be. From a feminist point of view, sexual liberation can be a conservative force in society, insofar as it enshrines the status quo as bedrock.

(Person, 1980:60)

But to voice doubts about the benefits for women of a sexual 'liberation' modelled after typical, familiar and unchanged patterns of male behaviour, is not at all the same thing as arguing in favour of repression. Unless, of course, one believes that men are already sexually liberated and all women have to do is follow suit, a thesis which I find untenable, but which Echols evidently does not.

Echols' critique of 'cultural' feminism's depiction of male sexuality is also inaccurate. 'Men's sadistic fantasies', she said, 'are...seen as confirmation of their fundamentally murderous nature... For cultural feminists, male sexuality is not only compulsive, but, as Dworkin described it, "the stuff of murder, not love"'. (Echols, 1983: 71). But, again, this is a quotation taken out of context. In her paper, 'Why So-Called Radical Men Need and Love Pornography', (Dworkin, 1977) from which this quotation is taken, Dworkin couches her argument in allegorical terms. She likens the Viet Nam war to the biblical stories of Abraham and Isaac, and Noah and his son, Ham, who committed the vile abomination of seeing his father naked and whose descendants were condemned to eternal slavery. (Although Dworkin does not mention it, this story of Ham was used as a biblical justification for enslaving African Negroes, who were said to be 'the sons of Ham'). The young men of the New Left did not rebel against male power as such, was Dworkin's argument, simply against the way it was wielded by old men:

The rebel sons...wanted to wield penises, not guns, as emblems of manhood...They did not argue against the power of the phallus; they argued for pleasure as the purest use to which it could be put...The fathers...know that male desire is the stuff of murder, not love.

To take Dworkin's statement out of its allegorical context, and treat it as though it were a literal descriptive account of the 'empirical facts' about male sexuality, as Echols did, is to seriously misperceive the nature of the argument. Dworkin was not arguing about 'facts', but about myth and meaning, about the patriarchal articulation of power struggles between men. It is not possible to counter the force of myth by citing 'facts', since myth is either impervious to 'the facts' or has already constructed them to fit. Myth can only be challenged by exposing its grounding in the relations of power it serves to uphold. That is the task which Dworkin was engaged upon. Neither was Dworkin arguing that men have no choice in this matter of 'love and murder'. She says:

The sons, dispossessed, did have a choice: to bond with the fathers to crush the women or to ally themselves with the women against the tyranny of all phallic power, including their own.

The sons, faithful to the penis, bonded with the fathers who had tried to kill them. (p. 153)

In the case of male sexuality, Echols seems to be arguing, not so much against 'cultural' feminists' evaluative stance, but against their 'facts'. Echols is convinced that male sexuality is not in fact like 'cultural' feminism says it is, or rather, it is not like what Echols says 'cultural' feminism says it is. However, once again her disagreement must be inferred from her emotive language rather than from any direct statement. (There is nothing wrong with emotive language per se. It is a problem only when it masquerades as plain speaking and clear argument).

She disagrees with what she regards as 'cultural' feminism's insistence that 'for men, sexuality and violence are inextricably linked' (p. 71). But then nobody says it is, or at least not in the absolutist way Echols seems to think they do.⁸ Feminists organised against pornography and violence against women do argue that sexual violence is a typically male phenomenon which answers to something deeply incised into the male psyche. This is not an argument about 'all men', neither does it imply that men have no choice in the matter. As Catharine MaKinnon, another 'cultural' feminist (so-called), said: 'Men who do not rape have nothing wrong with their hormones. Men who are made sick by pornography and do not eroticize their revulsion are not underevolved'. (MaKinnon, 1987:41) But that sexual violence answers to something in the male psyche is a not unreasonable assertion given the prevalence of sexual violence against women and its socially condoned portrayal in the multi-billion dollar porn industry. But anti-pornography feminists do not argue that male sexuality and violence are 'inextricable'. In fact, many anti-pornography activists explicitly argue exactly the opposite. Gloria Steinem, for example, argues for the need to 'untangle the lethal confusion of sex with violence'. (Lederer, ed., 1980:38) And most of the contributors to the *Take Back the Night* volume distinguish between 'destructive, sexist sexual behavior and healthy non-sexist sexual behavior', as Diana Russell put it (p. 218). The problem identified by anti-pornography campaigners is not that male sexuality and violence are inextricable in any absolute, universal, never-to-be-transcended sense, but that the pornographic imagination which portrays them as such is so pervasive and dominant and so staunchly defended by the upholders of 'free speech'.

Those writers attacked by Echols do not in fact appeal to ‘biology’ to explain sex ‘differences’. But somebody must, because Echols mentions it. I suggest it is Echols herself (among others) who sees ‘biology’ looming whenever what she perceives as sex ‘differences’ are under discussion. It is the *critics* of sexual ‘difference’ who commit the biologistic fallacy, and not those who supposedly argue for it. That fallacy has a purpose. ‘Biology’ functions as a diversionary tactic to direct attention away from the real issue. The authors berated under the label ‘cultural’ feminists are not so much concerned with sex ‘differences’, but rather with various manifestations of male sexual domination. And it is the latter the critics do not want to recognise.

The third of the above mentioned ploys to evade acknowledging the reality of male domination is more recent. It consists of an appeal to the multiplicity of bodily conformations and sexualities presented to us by concrete physicality—hermaphrodites, transsexuals, ‘freaks’, Siamese twins, etc.—as evidence that the grand dichotomy of sex is but one distinction among many, and a ‘socially constructed’ one at that. (Grosz, 1988) In other words, ‘biology’ shows that there are so many differences that no one difference is any more important than any other.

But acknowledging that sex is a social construction does not commit one to the corollary that it is therefore superficial, artificial and trivial. The latter follows from the former only if we accept that there is a level of reality which is *more* ‘real’ than the level of the social. Given that feminism is a politics (and not, say, a natural science), it seems entirely appropriate that it focus its ontological attention on the level on which that politics happens (usually referred to as ‘patriarchy’). The feminist problematic is not an empirical one. The question of whether the sexes are ‘different’ (or ‘the same’) in any concrete or physicalist sense is not relevant to the feminist project which is concerned with questions of power, power-as-domination and power-as-capability, with questions of meaning and value, and with questions of morality, of what ought or ought not to be the case, of what needs to be struggled against and what struggled for.

To the extent that the ‘sex/gender’ distinction functions to deny the importance, relevance, or even existence, of sex differences— because ‘biology’ ‘proves’ we are all alike, or because only ‘biology’ *can* ‘prove’ whether or not we are different and ‘biology’ is irrelevant, or because ‘biology’ ‘proves’ we are all so different that no one difference makes any difference—it is a profoundly depoliticising practice because it allows for a domain of ‘reality’ which is beyond politics but which structures and limits what can be done. Even to maintain the debate on the level of ‘sex differences’ is depoliticising, because the feminist problematic is not concerned with mere ‘differences’, but with hierarchical polarities of domination/subordination. The feminist concern is not with whether the sexes are ‘the same’ or ‘different’, because such a concern says nothing about male supremacy. To say that women and men are ‘different’ (or ‘the same’) makes no inroads into the phallogocentric reality which loads the ‘differences’ hierarchically, which tolerates ‘sameness’ only as long as it is male,⁹ and which retains the male as the ‘human’ norm. As Catharine MacKinnon put it:

construing gender as a difference, termed simply the gender difference, obscures and legitimizes the way gender is imposed by force. It hides that force behind a static description of gender as a biological or social or mythic or semantic partition, engraved or inscribed or inculcated by god, nature, society (agents unspecified), the unconscious, or the cosmos. The idea of

gender difference helps keep the reality of male dominance in place.
(MacKinnon, 1987:3)

I would like to see feminism dispense with the word ‘gender’ (a vain hope, I suspect, given that it appears to have become thoroughly embedded within feminist discourse), in favour of the old, easily recognisable, ordinary English term, ‘sex’. Referring to ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’ gives the impression that we are talking about something new, something esoteric, something of little relevance or importance to ordinary ‘people’ (quote-unquote). What we are really addressing, however, is the problem of ‘sex’ as everybody knows and experiences it. Because the feminist critique is directed towards exposing the oppressiveness at the heart of the mundane, we should call it by the everyday name with all its ambiguities and ramifications—‘sex’ as desire and activity, pleasurable, confusing, burdensome, or liberating, and ‘sex’ as the source of and justification for the invidious and hierarchical distinction between two categories of individuals.

'moralism' and sexual pluralism

THAT THE SEXUALITY DEBATE is a moral one has been correctly perceived by Gayle Rubin and other libertarian apologists for sexual behaviours which have traditionally been regarded as 'immoral'. Where the libertarians are wrong, however, is in their insistence that feminists against pornography have found common cause with the right-wing moralists. As Sheila Jeffreys points out, 'it is not easy to find evidence of present-day feminists being allied with moralistic right-wing movements'. (Jeffreys, 1990:269–70) And in fact the libertarians present no such evidence. Instead, as Jeffreys also points out, they draw a parallel between current feminist campaigns against pornography and male sexual violence, and nineteenth-century feminist 'social purity' campaigns, and accuse both of being 'prudish', 'anti-sex' and 'moralistic'. While there *is* a link between nineteenth-century campaigns and those of the present-day, that link is not a shared 'puritan' dislike of 'sex', but the continuity of male sexual violence. Males still use the penis as a weapon, and still treat females as objects in its service. That the work of exposing the rapacity of the penis had all to be done again during the 'second wave' of feminism, with no knowledge of the battles waged by nineteenth-century foresisters, is an indictment of the work of historians. (See Jeffreys, 1985)

Where the libertarians are also mistaken is in their insistence that sexuality *ought not* to be a question of morality, although given that that insistence is itself a moral injunction, they have obviously not succeeded in banishing moral judgement. The feminist moral commitment, however, is an entirely different thing from right-wing appeals to 'community standards', 'obscenity', and the sanctity of 'the family'. Feminist morality asks what is and what is not in the interests of the human status of women, one aspect of that human status being security from violation of one's bodily integrity. Feminist morality also condemns male degradation of the female, however it is encoded, expressed, or socially condoned.

Rubin's paper, 'Thinking Sex', is one of the most blatant defences of the sexual libertarian position.¹ Her commitment to 'sexual pluralism' is explicit (Rubin, 1984:283, 309). Her purpose in this paper is to condemn what she calls 'the hierarchical valuation of sex acts'. She wants to argue instead for the concept of 'benign sexual variation' (p. 278). In the process she mounts an impassioned defence of those individuals she describes as the 'more exotically sexed', the 'erotically unconventional', 'sex perverts', and 'erotic dissidents'.

The sexual value hierarchy in 'modern Western societies', says Rubin, consists of 'marital, reproductive heterosexuals' as the most highly approved sexual individuals, who appear 'alone at the top of the erotic pyramid'. Slightly below them are 'unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples', with 'most other heterosexuals' following close behind. Masturbation is still somewhat frowned upon, as is evidenced by 'the idea that [it] is an inferior substitute for partnered encounters'. A little further down, and 'verging on respectability', are 'stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples', while 'bar dykes and promiscuous gay men' are close to the bottom of the scale. Occupying the very depths are such 'despised sexual castes' as 'transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models'. Right at the bottom of the scale of value, and

‘lowliest of all’, she says, are ‘those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries’, i.e. paedophiles (p. 279). Feminism, too, has a sexual value hierarchy, a ‘demonology’, according to Rubin, or at least that part of feminism which Rubin calls ‘the anti-pornography movement’ does. In Rubin’s view, it looks much the same as the traditional one, with the difference that ‘monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term, intimate relationships and which does not involve playing with polarized roles’ is now the most highly valued sexual practice, having ‘replaced married, procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy’ (p. 301).

This companionate grouping by Rubin of the denizens of the sexual ‘lower depths’ covers a motley and ill-assorted crew. It conceals very real and highly pertinent differences, and begs the question of where they come from, of how sexual desire comes to be constituted in these particular ways. Her anti-‘moralism’ stance is supposed to obviate the need for asking such questions. Since there is nothing ‘wrong’ with them in her view, there is nothing to explain. But questions about sex and power are not evaded so easily.

Her transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists and paedophiles (she prefers the euphemistic phrase ‘those who engage in cross-generational activities’) are all men, whose sexual behaviour is motivated by what they experience as their own intrinsic desire, while prostitutes and porn models are women who provide the occasions for the exercise of male desire. There are some female-to-constructed-male transsexuals (to use Janice Raymond’s term), but they are outnumbered by the male-to-constructed-females. Raymond estimates that for every woman who wants to be surgically ‘transformed’ into the opposite sex, there are four men. But, she said, information is very hard to get. (Raymond, 1979:xxi–xxv) Transvestism is an exclusively male phenomenon. The usual explanation for this is that it is more socially acceptable for women to wear men’s clothes than it is for men to wear feminine apparel, although that begs the question of why social unacceptability should be a prerequisite for this form of (male) erotic desire. Raymond suggests that only men are transvestites or ‘female impersonators’ because ‘only what is non-normative, abnormal, subnormal, and deviant can be mimicked’, i.e. femininity. Raymond goes on to say, citing a conversation with Mary Daly: ‘it is very difficult to imitate the norm. Who ever heard of a *white* minstrel show?’ (p. xxvi)

Fetishism, if Freud was right, is a metaphor for phallocentricity. It expresses a direct equivalence between fetish and penis, a displacement of desire from penis to fetish motivated by fear of castration. Freud explained fetishism as a neurotic attempt on the part of the fetishist to disavow the mother’s ‘lack’ of a penis, and by extension the awful possibility that he might lose his own, by substituting the fetishistic object for that ‘missing’ organ. Freud expressed the fear thus: ‘if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ’. (Freud, 1927:352) (Dear old Sigmund! He was such an unashamed phallomaniac, if I may be excused the neologism).

One does not have to accept Freud’s explanation for anything. But in this case he had at least part of the answer to the question of the meaning of fetishism, that part which identified the fetish with the penis, and acknowledged the male obsession with that organ (not that Freud would have put it in quite those terms) and the fear of ‘losing’ it. But he could not see

the disavowal of the humanity of women involved in fetishism, and the consequent self-dehumanisation the fetishist engages in. (The term 'disavowal' means the simultaneous denial and recognition of something that is so nonetheless). The idea that women were 'castrated' caused Freud no pain or anxiety. He felt no need to question his own depiction of female 'humanity', because penis-possession was so unarguably the badge of 'human' status in his view (and not in his view alone, since he was only the mouthpiece of a phallogocentric social order). But women remain intransigently human, despite the best efforts of the phallogocrats. It is the contradiction between women's evident humanity, and their equally evident 'lack' of the 'appropriate' symbol, which the fetishist attempts to resolve by eroticising a symbolic back-up, which assuages his anxiety at the possibility of losing 'himself' in the importunate humanity of another. The fetishist avoids entanglement in a human relationship by directing his erotic desire towards a thing. But this ploy does not enable him to escape the consequences of his own acquiescence in male supremacy. Since a thing cannot recognise him as a human individual, his own humanity is not reflected back to him, and he becomes a thing too (if Hegel is right about what is required for a truly human consciousness of self). In that sense, fetishism is a relationship between things which disavows (acknowledges while it denies) its origins in the prior male supremacist relationships which give rise to it, starting with a male child and his phallogocentric destiny in relation to his mother. Far from being the poor put-upon chap innocently satisfying his sexual needs, as depicted by Rubin, the fetishist is already constituted within phallogocentric, misogynist, and dehumanised relations of power.

Rubin's paedophiles are all men too. They are also homosexual— she sometimes refers to them as 'boy lovers' (Rubin, 1984:272–3). She is therefore not leaping to the defence of men who molest little girls. At least, I don't think she is, although her unqualified rejection of 'age of consent' laws, on the grounds that they are 'the primary mechanism for insuring the separation of sexual generations', and that they 'make no distinction between the most brutal rape and the most gentle romance' (p. 290), gives rise to some doubt on this point. It is possible that her moral cut-off point for acceptable sexual activity is the consent, actual, not statutory, of all parties to the activity, but she does not state this limitation explicitly. That criterion would presumably exclude from acceptability sexual activity between adult, or near adult, males and small girls. But what about slightly bigger girls, pubescent and pre-pubescent, the 'Lolitas' whose lessons in femininity have been learned well enough to respond to males' projected fantasies (if we are to believe Vladimir Nabokov on this point)? And what about small, and not so small, boys, whose 'consent' is gained through bribery, who want the money or the sweets, etc, and who put up with the sex in order to gain some other advantage? And what about relations of power between adults and children, the ways in which adults' greater prestige, status, privilege, knowledge and experience can override the needs and desires, fears, doubts and protests of children? And what about the social management of 'consent', the possibility that 'consent' can be manipulated to serve ruling interests?

Rubin raises none of these questions. She has no discussion of what might constitute 'consent' in the context of what she so nicely labels 'eroticism' which 'transgresses generational boundaries'. The suspicion arises that this omission is deliberate. The examples she gives of 'cross-generational' sex are fairly innocuous: 'a nude snapshot of a 17-year-old

lover' (p. 272), 'men who love underaged youth' (p. 273), 'a 20-year-old convicted of sexual contact with a 17-year-old' (p. 290). Perhaps the real questions of sex 'across generations' are too hard to answer. Perhaps such activities are simply indefensible.

One can agree that the moral panic merchants, the gutter press, and the asinine lumbering legal apparatus love nothing better than a juicy homosexual paedophile to sink their teeth into. The main function of that scapegoating is to distract attention and divert energy and resources away from the more real problem of the rape and sexual assault of women and girls. One can agree, too, that sexual activities between men and boys are far less violent and coercive than the behaviour women and girls are subjected to. (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 1982: paras. 3.100–104) One can even agree that boys are often more active and self-motivated in their sexual encounters with adult men than are girls, although that cannot be merely assumed or simply asserted. But to concede all that is not to agree that, therefore, sex between men and boys is just another 'benign sexual variation'. The problem of the eroticisation of relationships of domination/subordination remains, whether it is the boy who finds the adult's status erotic, the adult who finds erotic the boy's weakness, fragility, vulnerability, ignorance and inexperience, or whether the adult engages in a false reversal of the actual power relation by placing himself at the boy's mercy.

As for the women, the prostitutes and other 'sex workers' whom Rubin lumped in with the above examples of male desire, they fall into a different category altogether, since the sexual activity they engage in does not spring from their own desire, but is a service provided by women (and sometimes young males) for men. Prostitution and other forms of commercial sex exist to bolster male potency, to provide men with opportunities to exercise the organ which 'proves' they are 'men', and to act out the disordered forms of male sexuality generated within a male supremacist social order.

Moreover, it is simply not the case, even during the nineteenth century, that prostitutes were condemned by feminism. What feminism has condemned has been the institutions of prostitution and pornography, with their mythic portrayal of rampaging male sexuality, and 'good' and 'bad' women, and the coercion of women involved in the male supremacist need to maintain belief in the power of the phallus. But feminism had always defended the prostitutes themselves, even during the nineteenth century. That was the very point of all the nineteenth-century campaigns against prostitution, from the calls for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s onwards.

Some feminists have recently argued that these campaigns encroached on the prostitutes' right to 'choose' the 'profession'. The term 'voluntary prostitution' was even used on one occasion. (Walkowitz, 1983:46. See also: Dubois and Gordon, 1983:84; Walkowitz, 1980; Walkowitz, 1983:51. This later paper is a slightly expanded version of the earlier one). The purpose behind arguments like these was to avoid calling prostitutes 'victims', by insisting that these women had some choice about servicing male sexuality. But to argue in this way is to trivialise both the coerciveness of the lack of adequate economic alternatives for women, and the horror of a male sexuality which preyed on the women and children discarded by an inhumane social and economic system. A 'choice' between respectable financial destitution and morally degrading financial security (at least in the short term) is no human choice at all.

These authors do not deny outright the connection between prostitution and women's lack

of alternative adequate financial resources, although Walkowitz comes very close when she says: ‘Mid-Victorian feminists treated prostitution as the result of the artificial constraints placed on women’s social and economic activity’, the implication being that to treat prostitution in this way is incorrect, or at least insufficient. There is, after all, nothing ‘artificial’ about destitution. She modifies the statement by saying, ‘inadequate wages and restrictions of women’s industrial employment forced some [sic] women onto the streets’ (p. 45). Whether this means that not all women who became prostitutes did so for economic reasons, or that not all women who were economically ‘constrained’ became prostitutes, it is not an adequate argument against the fact of women’s victimisation. Nineteenth-century women forced onto the streets or into brothels *were* victims. It is no slur on their humanity to say so, but a criticism of the humaneness of a social order which gave priority to the satisfying of male sexual desire at the expense of women’s bodies and lives. All Walkowitz’s examples refer to working-class women who engaged in prostitution to earn money in addition to the starvation wages they earned in ‘respectable’ employment, and to keep themselves alive during times of unemployment. Since this account differs not at all from the contemporary nineteenth-century feminist account, it is difficult to see why Walkowitz disagrees with that earlier account.

Trivialisation is also evident in the tendency to regard the nineteenth-century feminists’ concern with prostitution as a ‘metaphor’ or ‘symbol’, i.e. not real, an ‘exaggeration’ resulting from their own ‘repressive’ attitudes towards sexuality. Snitow et al. refer to ‘the two metaphors of prostitution and female illness’, and give the opinion that ‘it is tempting to dismiss these [nineteenth-century] analyses for their anti-sexual character’. (Snitow, Stansell and Thompson, 1983: Introduction, p. 14) In the context of a discussion of W.T. Stead’s series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885, ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, where he exposed the practice of buying young girls for sexual purposes, Walkowitz quotes approvingly from the above paper of Gayle Rubin, to the effect that: “‘Since sexuality in western cultures is so mystified...the wars over it are often fought at oblique angles, aimed at phony targets, conducted with misplaced passions, and are highly, intensely, symbolic’”. (Walkowitz, 1983:49; Rubin, 1984:297) Presumably this characterisation of Stead’s crusade as ‘symbolic’ (not to mention ‘oblique’, ‘phony’ and ‘misplaced’) refers to the fact that ‘most’ of the ‘child prostitutes’ (Walkowitz admits there were ‘some’) were not ‘victims of false entrapment’. Rather, they were ‘on the streets because their other choices were so limited’. How that fact ameliorated the situation of Victorian working-class women and girls, Walkowitz does not say. Neither does she mention that, in one respect at least, Stead’s campaign was far from ‘symbolic’, at least in any sense which implies its unreality—he did in fact manage to buy a thirteen-year-old virgin for five pounds. He did so, not to use the girl sexually, but to provide proof of the ease with which such things could be done.

These attacks on nineteenth-century campaigns around issues of sexuality are connected with similar libertarian attacks on present day feminist campaigns. Walkowitz states this connection explicitly. Her purpose in writing the above essays was to ‘outline some of the historical precedents for the current feminist attack on commercial sex, as represented by the Women Against Pornography campaign’. (Walkowitz, 1983:43) This campaign, she asserts, is ‘old-fashioned’. Alice Echols, too, asserts that ‘cultural’ feminists have a view of

sexuality which 'bears a striking similarity to that articulated by activists a century earlier... many of whom were active in the temperance movement [which presumably just goes to show what wowsers they were] [and] held conservative views on marriage, the family, and sexuality'. (Echols, 1983: p. 69) This view of nineteenth-century feminists as sexual conservatives is the prevailing one among socialist feminist historians. (See also: Rowbotham, 1977)

Sheila Jeffreys, however, has recently presented an alternative interpretation of those early feminist campaigns against male sexual rapacity. (Jeffreys, 1985) While she would agree that the arguments put forward by today's anti-pornography feminists are in substantial agreement with much of what was said by feminists during the 'first wave', she disagrees strongly with the depiction of nineteenth-century feminists as 'anti-sex'. She is highly critical of those historians, feminists among them, who present the early feminists as 'prudes and puritans'. On the contrary, she argues, many of them had a clear perception of the effects on women's lives of the unfettered exercise of male sexuality, and of the social conditions which delivered women and girls into men's hands. That their work has been trivialised, derided and buried, has meant that it has all had to be done again.

Central to the libertarian stance is the unqualified espousal of the cause of sexual liberation. The epithets 'conservative' and 'anti-sex' are directed towards any feminist position which attempts to question the benefits for women of sexual liberation, which means in effect any position which attempts to account for sexuality in terms of relations of power. (Lesbian sadomasochism is not one such position, despite its endeavour to monopolise the concept of 'power'. Because it validates and reinforces relationships of domination/subordination, it does not regard them as problematic). As a result, it is libertarian feminism which is conservative in its implications, because it rules out of court *a priori* any questioning of the sexual status quo.

Most sexual libertarian feminists are committed to saving feminism for sexual liberation. The scathing dismissal of 'cultural' feminism is part of this rescue operation. As Alice Echols put it, 'cultural' feminism argues that 'sexual freedom and feminism stand in mutual opposition'. (Echols, 1983:70) (In typical fashion, her evidence for this proceeds by way of a series of misrepresentations and putative self-evident assertions). Even Gayle Rubin, who seems to be prepared to abandon feminism if it cannot be made to fit in with sexual liberation, says that 'sexual liberation has been and continues to be a feminist goal'. (Rubin, 1984:302) But in the light of what she sees as feminism's continuing adherence to a sexual 'value hierarchy', Rubin expresses some doubt about feminism's fitness to elucidate the nature of sexuality. She makes a distinction between 'lust' and 'gender', and argues that women are not experts on the subject of 'lust' because of their exclusion from 'the modern sexual system'. Feminism was devised, she says, 'to detect and analyze genderbased hierarchies'. Although there is some 'overlap' between sexuality and gender, 'they are not the same thing', she insists, 'and they form the basis of two distinct areas of social practice'. While the feminist 'critique of gender hierarchy' has some relevance for 'a radical theory of sex', the latter requires 'an autonomous theory and politics'. In Rubin's view,

as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes irrelevant and often misleading. Feminist thought simply lacks angles of vision which can encompass the social organization of sexuality. The criteria of

relevance in feminist thought do not allow it to see or assess critical power relations in the area of sexuality. (Rubin, 1984:307–9)

But the vexed relationship between power and sexuality cannot be reduced to a question of ‘moralism’, however the ‘value hierarchy’ is arranged. Although questions of morality are important to any theory of sexuality, those questions are not resolved by the simplistic device of locating the source of power in the hands of the ‘moralisers’. It is not the case that power is exercised solely, or even mainly, through fiat and prohibition (and as a student of Foucault, Rubin should know that). Neither is it the case that the practice and proclamation of ‘disreputable’ sexual activities leads automatically (or at all) to liberation, sexual or otherwise.

Rubin is committed to this simplistic notion of ‘power’. The ‘critical power relations’ which she says feminism is incompetent to assess, consist solely of legislative and normative proscriptions and prescriptions which consign sexual ‘minorities’ to perdition. This concept of ‘power’ defines those same sexual ‘minorities’ as existing prior to their entanglement in relations of power—they are not subjected to ‘power’ until they identify themselves, and are identified, by means of their ‘unacceptable’ sexual proclivities. That begs the question of how those sexual desires were constituted in the first place. It is this question which feminism is far more competent to address than is any naive libertarian stance. Despite Rubin’s designation of her list of sexualities as ‘benign’, and her conviction that ‘sex is fundamentally okay until proven bad’ (English, Hollibaugh and Rubin, 1984:63) no sexual desire is ‘innocent’ in the sense that it is beyond questioning, debate, or implication in relations of power.

Rubin is obviously acquainted with arguments like the above, since she makes an attempt to defend herself and other members of the ‘sexual lower orders’ against what she refers to as ‘an accusation that sexual dissidents have not paid close enough attention to the meaning, sources, or historical construction of their sexuality’. She dismisses this ‘accusation’ on the grounds that it ‘appears to function in much the same way that the question of etiology has functioned in discussions of homosexuality’. It is a ‘search for a cause’, she says, with the aim of ensuring that ‘these “problematic” eroticisms would simply not occur’. She also says that this ‘accusation’ asserts or implies that ‘homosexuality, sadomasochism, prostitution, or boy-love are...mysterious and problematic in some way that more respectable sexualities are not’. (Rubin, 1984:304)

But her argument misses the point (as it must if she is to continue undeterred in her defence of ‘sexual radicals’). In the first place, ‘respectable’ sexualities are *not* unproblematic within the terms of the feminist debate. The concept of historical construction has been well and truly applied to heterosexuality. Indeed, it was devised within that very context. I would agree with Rubin that, within feminism, lesbianism ‘has replaced married, procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy’ (p. 301), and for that reason has tended to receive less scrutiny than heterosexuality. It has not escaped altogether, but it has tended to present itself as ‘outside (patriarchal) history’, for the good (although not entirely sufficient) reason that it privileges and affirms the desirability of women for women, and refuses immediate implication in phallic desire (although mediated forms remain pressing, as is evident from the recent upsurge of lesbian sadomasochism).

In the second place, the demand to focus attention on the meaning, purpose and social situating of different varieties of sexual desire does not come from a concern with their existence or abolition, but with their practitioners' claims that they are radical and liberating. It is those claims which are rendered questionable by situating sexual desire within an historical context. It is because of Rubin's insistence on the radical nature of 'disreputable' sexual behaviours that she cannot afford to ask questions about their origins. She may find that, far from being new, they are merely the same old, tired phallogentric clichés, and if she wants to maintain her radical persona, she may have to question the 'innocence' of whatever it is that she does.

The male supremacist roots of her own position are neatly (although presumably inadvertently) exposed by Rubin herself. She makes a distinction between what she sees as two opposing tendencies within feminist debates on sexuality. One of those tendencies, she says, regards 'sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege'. It 'resonates with conservative, antisexual discourse', and is identified by Rubin with 'the anti-pornography movement'. That she has here confounded sex with pornography is not likely to cause Rubin any disquiet since she regards pornography as sex, only sex, and nothing but sex, pure and unsullied. The other tendency, which meets with her wholehearted approval, is critical of 'the restrictions imposed on women's sexual behavior and...the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active'. And then she says: 'This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men' (p. 301), thus demonstrating that that supposedly 'anti-sexual' feminist tendency just might be right about the inherent male privilege.

But feminism has never unequivocally accepted the idea that female sexuality should take on characteristics typical of male sexuality. Many feminists have always been wary of unqualified acceptance of sexual libertarianism, especially those who have had concrete and unhappy experiences of its effects. Moreover, to assert that women ought to adopt male sexual patterns assumes, firstly, that women would want a sexuality that is like male sexuality, and secondly, that men are sexually liberated, or at least on the right track. Rubin is arguing that sexuality is the domain of men, and that if women want to participate, they had better get their act together and be more like men. She argues just that later in the paper:

Women have to some extent been excluded from the modern sexual system. It is no accident that pornography and the perversions have been considered part of the male domain. In the sex industry, women have been excluded from most production and consumption, and allowed to participate primarily as workers. In order to participate in the "perversions", women have had to overcome serious limitations on their social mobility, their economic resources, and their sexual freedoms (pp. 307-8).

On the evidence of statements like these, Rubin has disqualified herself from speaking from a feminist perspective (not that that stops her). I would agree with her point that the libertarian position is antithetical to feminism (although she puts it the other way around). But by clinging so adamantly and uncritically to sexual libertarianism, she has missed the point about 'the social organisation of sexuality', and the significance of her own insight into the male supremacist nature of 'modern sexuality'. If, as she herself argues, that 'social organisation' requires that 'sexuality' be a male prerogative, with women's participation dependent on their taking on male roles, values and attributes, then feminism is the *only*

‘angle of vision’ from which to challenge that hegemony.

These recent feminist debates do very little towards providing us with a feminist sexual ethics of responsibility towards ourselves and each other, and of challenging phallocratic reality, not least because of the embargo on taking an overt moral stance. It is frequently argued, or tangentially implied, that sex and morality are incompatible, that morality (or ‘moralism’) is the cause of female sexual ‘repression’ (a problematic term since the arrival on the scene of Michel Foucault), and that the only goal of sexual activity is pleasure (itself a moral stance, since it defines pleasure as the highest good). There *is* a sexual morality purveyed in these libertarian writings, disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding. It is one of ‘live and let live’, a cosy pluralism (or it would be cosy if those irritating ‘moralisers’ would just stop complaining about other people’s sexual activities) which defines itself as non-moralistic because it insists on the worthwhileness of any and every form of sexual behaviour as long as it is pleasurable and everyone ‘consents’. But while it is a laudable feminist aim to refrain from telling others what they should or should not do, that is not quite the point. To criticise a particular sexual practice is not necessarily to assert that those who engage in it stop doing so. None of us has the power to enforce any such prohibition; and the demand to refrain from criticism because it might offend someone, or ‘make’ her feel guilty, is a demand for an end to personal politics. It is also itself a moral prohibition.

By defining morality as a form of social control externally imposed on the ‘freely desiring’ individual, the libertarian position has rendered itself incapable of examining questions of morality. It cannot, for example, consider the limitations of transgression. Transgression alone is seen as the ultimate liberation. But transgressing conventional mores and violating taboos does not place us outside the moral order where they originate. It merely reverses the values, a reversal which is already present anyway. As Mary Daly has reminded us: ‘Much of traditional morality in our society appears to be the product of reactions on the part of men—perhaps guilty reactions—to the behavioral excesses of the stereotypic male’. (Daly, 1973:100) Conventional sexual taboos are not directed against activities which are categorically different from the norm, but against excessive and too explicit manifestations of it. Gayle Rubin’s ‘sexual lower orders’ are conventionally disreputable, not because they challenge marriage, the family and procreation, but because they expose the seamy underside of phallic supremacy. To champion them does not challenge male supremacy because they are already institutionalised under present conditions. Neither does the insertion of women into places previously reserved for men. Phallocratic reality is as capable of co-opting token female ‘perverts’ as it is of coopting token women in other areas of the hitherto all-male domain.

By insisting that it is only ‘the other’ who makes moral judgements, whether the other is represented by the law, traditional morality, or ‘moralistic’ anti-pornography feminists, the libertarian absolves herself of responsibility for her own moral stance, and blinds herself to her own moral imperatives. To deny that one is taking a moral stance is bad faith. It does not abolish moral judgements. It merely masks those that are being made, and drives them underground where their coerciveness increases in direct proportion to the strength of the denial. To demand that lesbian sadomasochism or pornography be placed beyond criticism is itself a moralistic imposition because it seeks to silence disagreement. The opposition

between feminists who are outspoken in their condemnation of phallogocratic modes of sexual activity on the one side, and the libertarian apologists for 'benign sexual variation' on the other, is not an opposition between 'moralisers' and those who make no moral judgements at all. It is a division between two mutually antagonistic moralities, each of which regards the other as immoral. Indeed, it is the libertarian position which is the moralistic one, in the sense that it attempts to impose its own moral viewpoint on others by means of dismissive name-calling, trivialisation and misinterpretation. Their opponents are at least trying to situate lesbian sadomasochism, pornography, etc., within a political analysis.

That some feminists should have adopted a pluralistic approach to sexuality is not surprising given the historical silence on what might constitute female sexuality. To insist that we 'try everything' and rule nothing out of court beforehand, is an understandable reaction to the phallogocentric construction of 'human' sexuality as a prerogative of the male. The problem is that the devising of a 'plurality' of sexual practices is seen as an end in itself, as a voluntaristic 'stepping outside' of 'patriarchy'. There is no questioning of particular sexual practices, no enquiry into their nature and origins, no attempt to situate them within a social context. The only criteria demanded of them is that they transgress the bounds of traditional femininity, and that they be 'pleasurable'. The possibility that that transgression may involve no more than embracing traditional *masculinity* is never raised by sexual libertarians, or rather, it is never raised as a problem. Women's embracing of conventional male sexual attitudes and behaviours is regarded as the *solution* to the problem of female sexual 'repression'.

pornography

I MUST CONFESS at the outset that I do not understand the objections raised by libertarians against the feminist campaign against pornography. I do not understand how anyone *can* defend pornography or the sadomasochistic desire which is its *raison d'être*, much less anyone who identifies herself as a feminist. I do not understand the specific objections raised: that the campaign against pornography makes feminism into a 'single issue' movement; that arguments against pornography are 'reactionary' and 'anti-sex'; that pornography consists only of images and representations and is therefore not 'real'; that it has no influence on men's behaviour; and that it is not violent. And I do not understand the bizarre reversals which take place in this 'anti-anti-pornography' discourse (for it is not always a simple matter of defending pornography, but rather of attacking those who attack it), where pain is 'pleasure', coercion is 'consent', and violence and humiliation are 'liberating'.

Not all those who express doubts and misgivings about the wisdom of campaigns against pornography are unequivocally in favour of it. But there are some who call themselves feminists who are staunch in its defence. 'I am convinced', says Paula Webster,

that pornography, even in its present form, contains important messages for women...it does not tie women's sexuality to reproduction or to a domesticated couple or exclusively to men. It is true that this depiction is created by men, but perhaps it can encourage us to think of what our own images and imaginings might be like... Specifically, what we might take *from* male pornography is a vision of the mutability of sexual experience and a variety of directions for sexual experimentation. Whatever its limitations, pornography does demystify a number of sexual practices that have been taboo for women. (Webster, 1981:50—her emphasis)

On one point at least, I agree with Webster—pornography *does* have an important message for women, and that is its naked and unashamed exposure of a male desire structured around an obsessive preoccupation with the penis and the degradation of women, and by extension around relationships of domination and humiliation whatever the sex of the participants. As Susan Griffin put it:

If all the literature of pornography were to be represented by one performance...[it] would have to be the moments (which are inevitable in the pornographic oeuvre) in which most usually a woman, sometimes a man, often a child, is abducted by force, verbally abused, bound hand and foot and gagged, often tortured, often hung, his or her body suspended, wounded, and then murdered...in the pornographic demimonde, cruelty is treated like a rare and precious delight, a hidden voice whose commission will yield some undreamed of glory. (Griffin, 1981:46–7)

To have the pornographic imagination blatantly exposed, to break the taboo against knowing what a large proportion of the male population thinks of women, is a revelation for many women. It explains the genesis of so much of their everyday experiences of humiliation at the hands of men, of the bizarre and hitherto incomprehensible behaviour to which they have been subjected. (Andrea Dworkin made this point in a talk she gave in London in June, 1986). But, of course, that is not the message Webster is talking about. *Her* argument is that

women can get pleasure out of pornography just like men do. Like Rubin, she perceives sexual liberation for women in terms of what men do, or rather in terms of what the men who consume pornography do or would like to do.

The problem with this argument is not so much its recommendation that women emulate men, although that is problem enough in itself. A far greater problem is its insistence that acquiescence in violence, humiliation and degradation is liberating. It is on this point that my ability to understand founders completely. How can an unqualified enthusiasm for oppression lead to liberation? Of course, Webster insists that pornography is not oppressive. It is mere 'sexual imagery', 'uncontaminated desire', 'consensual sex' in 'an exotic, erotic, and forbidden land', a 'subversive', 'challenging', 'non-moralistic view of sexual practice'. She acknowledges a connection between power and sexuality: 'Power relations play an important role in our actual sexual lives. Can we really expect the realm of fantasy to be free of the residues of that power struggle?' (Webster, 1981:50) But she does not see this as a problem. Liberation is a simple matter of embracing our desires, either in fantasy or in actuality, even if, especially if, that desire involves some variety of domination. There is to be no questioning of desire—to do so is 'dogmatism, moralizing, and censorial mystifying' (p. 48). To struggle *against* a desire to humiliate or be humiliated, to recognise and refuse a need to dominate or be dominated, is to be unliberated, 'brainwashed' Webster calls it, because one is struggling against one's own 'nature' and not doing what one wants to do. That is the crux of the sexual libertarian argument—the unexamined premise that 'liberation' is doing what you want to do without constraint, and not doing what you do not want to do.

True, the libertarian argument, if pushed, does put a limit on doing what you want, at least in theory. That limit is purportedly the consent of the other to whom you are doing it. But given the lamentable track record of the libertarians in clarifying the meaning of the concept of 'consent'—its defence of paedophilia, for example - this criterion of limitation is shaky, to say the least. Webster, for example, objects strongly to feminist anti-pornography activists interpreting a 'photo of a young girl about to have [sic] anal intercourse' as "the violent rape of a child" who could be 'brutally injured'. In Webster's view this was not the only interpretation possible. Such an interpretation, she said, 'indicated certain biases about pain and pleasure and preferred positions' (p. 48). This is a typical example of agent deletion on Webster's part. It functions as an evasive tactic to avoid dealing with such concrete questions as whose is the pain and whose the 'pleasure', and who it is who 'prefers' this 'position'. If this statement of hers means what I think it does—that a girl child would experience the pain as 'pleasure', that anal intercourse with (presumably) an adult man is her 'preference', and that she 'consented' to the procedure—then Webster's sense of what is 'consensual' is laughable, or it would be if it weren't so grievous.

Anyway, she goes on to say, it was only a picture, it didn't really happen: 'a mere representation', she said, 'was spoken of as a reality—as an actual event recorded by some Candid Camera'. But something happened, or there wouldn't be a photo of it. And even if the 'representation' was a drawing or some kind of simulation, e.g. the girl was not really as young as she appeared, something is meant to happen in response to it—the exacerbation of a male desire which feeds off the anal penetration of small girls. But, Webster would presumably protest, they are not meant to actually *do* it (although many of them do,

frequently)—‘pornography [is] a safety valve for the aggressive sexuality of men’, she opines (p. 49). If they see it depicted or read about it, they won’t do it. (I forbear from drawing out of her analysis the implication that, even if they did, it wouldn’t matter).

But hear Susan Griffin on the argument that if men read about it or see it depicted, they won’t do it. She calls it the ‘catharsis’ argument:

Catharsis, it is grimly implied, is the true role of pornography. There would be *more* rape, I hear the threat under the reasoning tone, were there not pornography... Be grateful, I hear them telling us, look what we sacrifice to you, our true nature, our redemption. But the imperative to violence in us (as blind as a cave fish) must be fed something, some tidbit, or else even we, with our good intentions, will be able to do nothing against it. And so pornography in the light of these protestations becomes almost an act of mercy. For just as it prevents terrible actual violence, we are told, it is a kindness to those men who wage war against their own natures, a sop to their mighty urges... [But] catharsis is not an end in itself. That deep experiencing of old, sometimes long buried emotions bears a fruit, and the fruit is knowledge. If there were really to be a catharsis experienced regarding sexual violence towards women, the need for that violence would disappear or if it reappeared, be only a shadow of itself and renamed, linked to its source, its origin.

(Griffin, 1980:141, 143, 146—her emphasis)

Another staunch defender of pornography is Gayle Rubin. She contemptuously rejects arguments which, in her view, exclude it from ‘the charmed circle’ of ‘good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality’, and relegate it to the ‘the outer limits’ of ‘bad, unnatural, abnormal, damned sexuality’ (along with the rest of the sexual ‘demonology’). (Rubin, 1984:281, fig. 1) She is particularly concerned to defend sadomasochists against attack by ‘feminist anti-pornography ideology’. This ‘ideology’ unjustifiably (in Rubin’s eyes) portrays sadomasochists as violent. It presents ‘a highly selective sample of S/M imagery’ in order to shock, asserts that ‘S/M porn’ leads to rape and other sex crimes, and altogether ‘scapegoats an unpopular sexual minority and its reading material for social problems they do not create’ (p. 298).

It is interesting that Rubin here couches her argument in the form of a defence of individuals. Her beloved ‘sadomasochists’, whom she refers to as ‘defenseless’, a ‘community of harmless perverts’ (p. 299), appear to have arisen fully formed from nowhere—they are a ‘ready-made target population’ at the mercy of ‘a moral witch hunt’ (ibid.). But such an argument is yet another evasion of ticklish questions about the origin, meaning and purpose of sadomasochistic desire. ‘Sadomasochists’, is the implication, just happen to be like that; that is simply the form their desire takes; it is merely what they want to do; the only problem is that others will not leave them in peace to get on with doing their own thing.

But the feminist critique of pornography is not a campaign against individuals. It is a critique of a certain form of desire. Susan Griffin argues, for example, that it is the ‘sadomasochistic ordeal’ which lies at the heart of the pornographic fantasy. (Griffin, 1981:46–69) This ordeal has a number of aspects. Its essence is humiliation, a ‘predilection [which] is most typified by an experience of degradation, a degradation of the self or of another’ (p. 47). This degradation proceeds by way of objectification, whereby ‘a being with a will’ is treated like a thing, like ‘mere matter’ which ‘itself is despised’: The moment at which flesh, the material aspect of human nature, is revealed is humiliating to a mind which defines the body as degraded’ (pp. 47–8). It proceeds, too, through a rigid opposition between vulnerability and invulnerability (p. 48), and through fear, the active violence and threat of violence which frightens, and the paralysis and helplessness which result from

submission to that fear (pp. 48– 9). The purpose of the sadomasochistic ritual is denial and projection: ‘the male and female characters who play out the roles of sadist and masochist in pornography are simply representations of one mind, and of a mind that has been shaped as “male” in this society’ (p. 52). The sadist is mind pitted against his own feeling and bodily existence which are projected onto an other. The sadist remains cold, invulnerable, unloving, and detached, while the other must be made to suffer for its too, too solid flesh and ‘its capacity to feel, to cry, to love itself, to suffer grief, desire, shame, or mortification of the spirit’ (p. 55). But because it is part of the sadist’s own self which is punished, the punishment is never ‘successful’, and the rite must be rehearsed obsessively: ‘feeling must be murdered over and over again in pornography. Always in new ways. For in truth, feeling comes to life again, over and over...feeling keeps urging its presence into his consciousness. He does not seem to be able to exist without it. And yet he wishes to destroy it’ (p. 57).

Because the sadist and the masochist are one, ‘one being who feels and would not feel’, one being split into two ritual actors, each needs the other. The sadist needs the masochist because ‘feeling must make an appearance in order that he may murder it’; and the masochist needs the sadist because he needs to feel yet is terrified of the intensity: ‘at the heart of his own feeling, his rage and his suffering, and all that lies buried within him...he looks with grati-tude at the one who holds the whip, and...regards this torture as that which saves him’ (p. 58). Griffin links this denial and hatred of the ‘feminine’, the vulnerable, feeling part of the self, a denial which is so nakedly exposed within the pornographic imagination, to the denial of the female within a male supremacist culture itself, initially rage against the mother and infant helplessness, and later against all women for the ‘power’ they wield over men because of men’s own desire for them: ‘so pornography does not end with the porno-graphic fantasy, but returns to our lives’ (67).

Griffin’s account is not a moral homily directed against the nasty behaviour of misguided individuals, as Rubin appears to think. What particular individuals do in the face of her critique is not her concern. Ignoring it, or misinterpreting it, will not make the problems go away, although it is obviously the option Rubin prefers to adopt.

Most critics of the anti-pornography campaign and ‘cultural’ feminism, however, are prepared to concede that the campaign does have some point. Ellen Willis, one of the fiercer critics, does acknowledge that ‘porn is an obvious target [for feminist criticism] insofar as it contributes to larger patterns of oppression’. (Willis, 1979a:82) Lynne Segal also concedes that ‘pornography does typically encapsulate all that is most distressing and depressing in the portrayal of women’s bodies in our culture: women become sexual commodities, usable, disposable, endlessly available for the titillation of men’. (Segal, 1987:106) And Rosalind Coward, who expresses ‘unease’ at the political implications of ‘some current feminist campaigns against pornography’, says: ‘It is unlikely that any feminist would condone the form in which pornography is consumed, or the culture which surrounds it and to which it contributes’. (Coward, 1987:307) So the feminist debate surrounding pornography does not line up symmetrically pro- and anti-. Rather, it lines up with, on the one hand, anti-pornography campaigners and other feminists who reject pornography outright, and on the other, various critics, whose purpose is not to defend pornography as such (with, perhaps, the exception of Paula Webster and Gayle Rubin), but who have misgivings about the aims,

methods, consequences, or theoretical/political basis of the anti-pornography campaign. The question is: Are those misgivings justified?

With the proviso that I may have misunderstood the objections to the feminist anti-pornography campaign, I would answer that question with a flat ‘no’. One of the objections which has me bemused is the claim that anti-pornography campaigns turn feminism into a ‘single-issue’ movement. Ellen Willis: ‘anti-porn activists are man-aging to rationalize as feminism a single-issue movement divorced from any larger political context’ (Willis, 1979a:83); Lynne Segal: ‘The particular emphasis on the dangers of pornography...could be used...to provide a single focus on which some feminists hoped all women could unite’ (Segal, 1987:66); Rosalind Coward: ‘aggressive male sexuality has been specified as the main political problem confronting feminism... All...questions are seen through the lens of the one issue of male sexuality... Is [pornography] important enough to be consuming all our political energy as feminists?’ (Coward, 1987:308, 347). Rosemary Pringle: ‘[there are] those of us...who say that porn is *not* our primary concern... While no feminist would deny the need to organise against male violence in our culture, it is not clear that attacking porn should be our central strategy’. (Pringle, 1981:3—her emphasis)

What is puzzling me is that feminism has always mobilised political energy around single issues—abortion, child care, domestic violence, equal pay, rape, etc.—yet never before has the epithet ‘single-issue’ been levelled. Perhaps I am missing something. My sense of being out of the mainstream intensified when I read a review by Alison Thorne of the book, *Home Girls*, in an issue of *Lesbian Network*, where the words ‘single issue’ and ‘multi issue’ recurred over and over again like a litany. ‘Multi issue’ was obviously good, and was characteristic of the book under review; ‘single issue’ was as obviously bad—‘the suicidal strategy of “single-issuism”’ was mentioned at one point. But as no examples of this particular ‘ism’ were given, I remained none the wiser about what it might entail. (Thorne, 1987:27–8, 32) Yes, I suppose pornography is a single issue, although why that should be a significant statement I do not know. Neither do I know why a focusing on the issue of pornography on the part of some feminists should, as Rosalind Coward asserted, make it ‘virtually impossible to formulate strategy either at a local or national level for confronting issues such as wages, work conditions, or for changes in various social policies’ (Coward, 1987:308). Why can’t we have a division of labour? Or have I said something wrong?

Not every woman is capable of facing pornography full on. I know I am not. I could not put myself through what Andrea Dworkin put herself through during the research and writing of her book on pornography. In an article included at the end of the Women’s Press edition of her book, she tells us something of what she endured:

In writing my new book, I experienced the most intense isolation I have known as a writer... I spent eight months studying the Marquis de Sade. I spent eight months dreaming Sadean dreams. Let the men joke: these were not “erotic” dreams; dreams of torture are dreams of hate... The reading itself made me physically sick. I became nauseous—if I were male, I might dare to say full of fear and trembling and sick unto death... I nearly collapsed from fatigue, physical fatigue because I hated to sleep; physical fatigue because I was often physically sick from the material; mental fatigue because I took on the whole male intellectual tradition that has lionized de Sade; but also moral fatigue, the fatigue that comes from confronting the very worst sexual aspirations of men...the fatigue engendered by sexual cruelty.

(Dworkin, 1981:302, 303)

Perhaps it is this that the critics' cry of 'single issue!' disavows, that it acknowledges at the same time as it denies it. Behind the 'single issue' accusation, perhaps there lies an unwanted recognition that the pornographic imagination is the male supremacist vision writ large, unashamed and undisguised, and that, unless it is challenged and vanquished, it represents our future as well as the omnipresent threat within our present. Andrea Dworkin has already done more than her fair share. As she said, she did it for all of us, and I for one accept her gift with gratitude and love:

I decided that I wanted women to see what I saw...it was the only choice that enables me to triumph over my subject by showing it, remaking it, turning it into something we can define and use rather than letting it remain something that defines and uses us...in facing the nightmare, I want another generation of women to be able to reclaim the dreams of freedom that pornography has taken from me (p. 304).

Another objection raised by the critics is that the feminist anti-pornography campaign is reactionary. According to Gayle Rubin, 'feminist rhetoric' against pornography is no different in kind, intention, quality or consequences, from the pronouncements of Pope John Paul II or the right-wing. The reactionary right, Rubin says, 'has already adopted elements of feminist anti-porn rhetoric' although she gives us no examples to substantiate that claim. She does not say that the Pope has co-opted feminist rhetoric, although she says that he 'sound[s] like' Julia Penelope, whom Rubin characterises as a lesbian feminist polemicist'. Rubin presents us with two quotations, one from an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1980 reporting the Pope's views on sexuality, the other from an article by Julia Penelope, which Rubin regards as at least similar, if not identical, in tone and content. The Pope said: 'considering anyone in a lustful way makes that person a sexual object rather than a human being worthy of dignity'. And Penelope said: 'we do not need anything that labels itself purely sexual', and 'fantasy, as an aspect of sexuality, may be a phallogentric "need" from which we are not yet free'. (Rubin, 1984:298-9, 317n62)

But there are crucial differences between these two statements. The Pope, not surprisingly, displayed no awareness of the different effects of sexual objectification on women and on men, nor of the fact that sexual objectification is an overwhelmingly male tendency through which women are subjected to the dictates of phallic desire. The Pope's statement was a pronouncement from on high which laid down the law to others about what they may or may not feel, and is backed up by the weighty apparatus of the church. Penelope's 'we' refers to herself and any woman who agrees with her, and is backed up by no apparatus of power at all. Moreover, her point that fantasy participates in phallogentric relations of power, rather than being the private activity of the isolated individual, as Rubin would prefer to see it, is well taken (although not by Rubin).

Alice Echols, too, sees anti-pornography feminists as a conservative force. They serve right-wing ends, in her opinion, by 'manipulating women's traditional sexual conservatism ...advocat[ing] a return to a female sexual standard...[and] accommodat[ing] feminism with capitalism and sexual repression', although she does not tell us how they do this. (Echols, 1983:69) And in Ellen Willis' view, 'the anti-porn campaign is respectable' because 'it gets approving press and cooperation from the New York City government'. She does not go so far as to say outright that the campaign is reactionary. But she does say that 'it has begun to

attract women whose perspective on other matters is in no way feminist'. As evidence, she quotes a statement which appeared in a newspaper article purporting to be the words of 'a participant in WAP's [Women Against Pornography] march on Times Square': "'I'm anti-abortion'", this woman was reported to have said, "'but this is something I can get into'". (Willis, 1979a:88) But this is an example of guilt by association. Willis adduces no evidence that the organisers of the march were aware of this woman's views or her presence, or even that she existed at all other than in the (approving?) reporter's imagination. It is a typical media ploy to undermine and weaken the feminist message with such snide interpolations. And I cannot see how this little bit of reportage can be interpreted as 'approving' of WAP's aims.

Rosalind Coward warns against the danger of 'join[ing] forces with right-wing, law and order, clean up the smut league', and insists that 'there is no way we can avoid this...if we concentrate on pornography'. The reason she gives for excluding pornography from the list of feminist questions is that 'the political terrain surrounding pornography is already carved up with hard and fast positions: are you for intervention in sex or are you against it? This should not be a feminist question'. (Coward, 1987:323) I must admit to yet another bout of befuddlement in response to this statement. In the first place, I do not understand why the existence of prior 'hard and fast positions' should preclude feminist concern with pornography. Feminism has challenged a multitude of 'hard and fast positions'. Why is pornography any different? In the second place, she appears to have excluded from the category of 'feminist questions' *both* intervention *and* non-intervention into sexual matters. But that surely cannot be right? On the previous page, she criticised the argument that 'women value sex only as part of a meaningful relationship', on the grounds that it 'pre-empt[ed] any proper consideration of sexuality...[and] any analysis of where our attractions and needs come from' (p. 322). Obviously feminism *must* intervene if we are to consider and analyse. Perhaps it is the *type* of intervention she is objecting to. A 'pre-emptive' intervention which has already decided what type of sexuality is appropriate for women, and what is inappropriate, is out, and open-mindedness is in. But where does open-mindedness end, and pusillanimity begin? None of us can lay down the law for each other, but equivocation solves nothing. Better an outright confrontation with no meeting point. At least we know then where we stand.

However that may be, Coward is convinced of the need to 'distinguish our position from a right-wing prescriptive morality', and equally convinced that a critique of pornography cannot do that. Elizabeth Wilson, too, is convinced that 'feminists—and socialists— have so far failed to find a "third way" that avoids the devil of reactionary repressiveness and hatred of sex on the one hand and the deep blue sea of liberal permissiveness on the other'. (Wilson, 1983: 135–6) But neither writer appears to have read Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence*, or at least it did not appear in their bibliographies. Wilson had not read the *Take Back the Night* anthology either. This less than rigorous survey of the feminist anti-pornography literature invalidates such bald assertions as the above. But then Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography* appeared in both bibliographies. And if Dworkin did not convince them of the dire importance of pornography, I suppose Griffin wouldn't either.

Feminists opposed to pornography have always carefully distinguished their own

arguments from conservative moral panics and campaigns against ‘vice’ and ‘obscenity’, as well as from the liberal view that pornography is just an innocuous variation on the human sexual continuum. As Laura Lederer put it in her introduction to

Take Back the Night:

Until recently there have been only two sides to the pornography issue: the conservative approach, which argues that pornography is immoral because it exposes the human body; and the liberal approach, which presents pornography as just one more aspect of our ever-expanding human sexuality. This book presents a third and feminist perspective: That pornography is the ideology of a culture which promotes and condones rape, woman-battering, and other crimes of violence against women. (Lederer, ed., 1980:19–20)

And Diana Russell wrote in the same volume:

we have observed that the anti-pornography forces have almost always been conservative, homophobic, antisex, and pro the traditional family. They have equated nudity and explicit sex with pornography. They are often against abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the Women’s Liberation Movement. We have been so put off by the politics of these people, that our knee-jerk response is that we must be for whatever they are *against*.

But we don’t have to ally ourselves with them. We haven’t yet. And we won’t! The women amongst them can relate to our focus on the abuse of women by pornography better than we can relate to the “sin” approach. They can come to us if they can accept the rest of our politics too. (Op.cit., p. 301)

As well as these explicit disclaimers, the feminist arguments against pornography are so obviously different from right-wing moralism, that it is difficult to understand how any feminist can fail to see it. Feminists are women defending women’s interests, while the right appeals to an unlocated ‘community’ defined in terms of who is excluded from participating, homogenised and sanitised by the exclusion of unacceptable ‘others’. Feminists are critical of the hierarchical distinction between the sexes, while the right alternately glorifies it and denies it. To assert that the feminist stance against pornography is ‘reactionary’, or even ‘conservative’, is a strange position for any feminist to adopt, especially given that even pornography’s defenders are not entirely certain of its inoffensiveness.

Ellen Willis attempts to solve the dilemma by making a distinction between good porn and bad porn: ‘Insofar as pornography glorifies male supremacy and sexual alienation, it is deeply reactionary. But in rejecting sexual repression and hypocrisy—which have inflicted even more damage on women than on men—it expresses a radical impulse’ (Willis, 1979a: 85). And yet, she refuses to allow anti-pornography feminists to make a similar distinction. She accuses them of ‘ignor[ing] qualitative distinctions’ (p. 83), while at the same time dismissing the distinction they do make between erotica and pornography. This distinction is intended to underline the point that feminism is not against explicit depictions of sexual activity as such (unlike the moralistic right-wing), but against representations which eroticise force, degradation and violence. As Helen E. Longino put it:

Pornography is not just the explicit representation or description of sexual behavior, not even the explicit representation or description of sexual behavior which is degrading and/or abusive to women. Rather, it is material that explicitly represents or describes degrading and abusive sexual behavior so as to endorse and/or recommend the behavior as described. (Lederer, ed., 1980:44. See also: pp. 27, 37, 42, 207, 249, 253)

While not denying that there may be all kinds of practical difficulties in the way of making

the distinction in specific cases, it is not true that no ‘qualitative’ distinctions are made by feminists campaigning against pornography, between their own position and those of both the right-wing moralisers and the libertarians. That does not mean that the question is settled once and for all. There will probably always be room for disagreement and uncertainties. But that the distinction cannot be framed so as to reach universal agreement does not mean that it cannot be made at all.

Yet another confusing objection to the feminist anti-pornography campaign is the insistence that pornography is mere representation, that it is not a very important target of feminist concern because it is not actual behaviour. Not all arguments about pornography and representation are as crass as Paula Webster’s assertion to the effect that pictures don’t matter because they’re not ‘real’, although Deidre English comes close when she says: ‘So long as [the violent fantasies] stay within the world of pornography they are still only fantasies ...what a man sees makes little difference in his behaviour, if he can distinguish between fantasy and reality’. (Quoted in Kappeler, 1986: 60) But this distinction between ‘representation’ on the one hand, and ‘reality’ on the other, is disingenuous to say the least. Acceptance of this dichotomous logic would deprive feminism of far more than a critique of pornography. We would no longer be able to criticise depictions of females in advertising, in the media, in school textbooks, in any of the myriad of locations where female humanity is denied, distorted or excluded.

Rosalind Coward flirts with the dichotomy, but she hedges her argument with enough qualifications to make it uncertain if that is what she is really saying. ‘Pornography’, says Coward, ‘is a regime of representations of sex. By this I mean that pornography is not generally an act but representations—writings, films, photos, videos’. (Coward, 1987:310) She argues that representations, whether in language or visual images, have no intrinsic meaning. Words have no ‘fixed and constant referent’. They have ‘multiple meanings’ which change according to context, place in the sentence, emphasis, dialect. She criticises the ‘commonsense view that visual representations like film and photography show what is *really* happening, that they show reality just as it is’ (her emphasis). Meaning, she says, ‘arise[s] from *how various elements are combined*, how the picture is framed, what lighting is given, what is connoted by dress and expression’ (p. 311—her emphasis). At a later point, she says that ‘photography has a particular claim to being realistic; it claims to have been witness. What you are seeing really happened and it looked like this’. But, she says, ‘what is shown is not there, but absent...[it] is only an image’ (p. 319). However, she also argues that visual images are not ‘innocent of meaning’, and that the problem facing us is ‘the *particular regimes of meaning surrounding specific practices of representation*’ (pp. 312, 313–4—her emphasis).

Once again the argument is confused. What is ‘present’ and what is ‘absent’? Presumably ‘reality’ in the naive sense is ‘absent’ in the depictions of it. Well, yes, but why is it important to say so? What is ‘present’ are ‘representations’ and their ‘specific practices’ participating in ‘particular regimes of meaning’. Again, yes, but why is that an argument against criticising pornography and its ‘specific practices’ and ‘regimes of meaning’?

But this distinction of Coward’s between ‘reality’ and its ‘representations’ (if that *is* the distinction she is making) is not her main argument against criticising pornography. Her main

argument is that the codes which are found in pornography are not peculiar to pornography, but can be found in “sexist representations” beyond the bounds of what is conventionally designated pornographic’ (p. 314). These codes she identifies as ‘fragmentation, submission, and availability’ (p. 321), presumably of women in relation to men, but she does not say so. These codes, she says, ‘are also to be found pervading other representational practices like advertising, television programmes, photography in general and so on’. As a consequence, a feminist campaign which addresses itself exclusively to pornography is misconceived. What we need to concentrate on instead is ‘anti-sexist legislation’, because that would enable us to ‘encompass scenes of violence against women which are not specifically sexual such as terror films’. She is aware of some of the problems attendant on such a campaign, the problem of who would implement the law, and of what uses it would be put to. But, she argues, such a campaign would be a propaganda exercise. It would force us to clarify what is ‘sexist’, and (for reasons which she does not say) it would ‘insist on the necessity of socialism for feminism’. (Coward, 1987:323–4).

But to replace ‘pornographic’ with ‘sexist’ weakens the force of the feminist argument, and diminishes the magnitude of the problem. ‘Sexist’ is a far less challenging allegation than ‘pornographic’, especially as it has already been coopted to mean no more than ‘discriminatory’ and is easily used against feminist enterprises which ‘discriminate against’ men. It is too feeble an appellation to give to ‘scenes of violence’ against women, whether they are ‘specifically sexual’ or not.

Moreover, this argument that the male supremacist codes typical of pornography are not confined to pornography, and hence pornography is not an appropriate target for feminist action, is as peculiar as the ‘single issue’ argument, and for the same reasons. Nobody is suggesting that feminists drop everything else and concentrate the full force of feminist rage on pornography. Feminist anti-pornography campaigners themselves are only too aware of the all-pervasiveness of the culture of male domination. The first feminist anti-pornography action was directed against a billboard advertisement for the Rolling Stones, which depicted a woman bruised and bound in chains with the caption ‘I’m black and blue from the Rolling Stones and I love it’. (Lederer, 1980:15) Once again it is odd that feminists should be warned off the fight against pornography on the grounds that it is not the only male supremacist discourse around.

In a discussion of an article by Bernard Williams, chairman of the Williams *Report on Obscenity and Film Censorship* (London, 1979), called ‘Pornography and Feminism’, Susan Kappeler refers to this kind of argument as: ‘why don’t they [in this case, we] go elsewhere? ... In other words: leave pornography to us [in Coward’s argument, to them, the libertarians and the right], and go talk about sexism in culture’. (Kappeler, 1986:21) But to leave it to ‘them’ is to leave women out of the pornography debate altogether, argues Kappeler. To confine it to the realm of ‘obscenity’ is to ensure that ‘women are not an issue’. Limited in this way, debates around pornography are nothing more than ‘the preoccupation of the [male] bourgeois community with its self-image’ (p. 23).

Coward makes no reference to Kappeler’s book *The Pornography of Representation*, which was published in 1986, a year before publication of the *Feminist Review* volume within which Coward’s article was reprinted, and which included a version of one chapter

from Kappeler's book immediately after Coward's own article. Coward's article was first written in 1981, but she acknowledges 'subsequent discussions' which presumably had an influence on her arguments. Her omission of any reference to Kappeler's book is particularly striking in light of the fact that Kappeler's arguments are similar to Coward's, up to a point. Kappeler, too, is concerned to locate pornography within a critique of male supremacist culture, in particular, the 'High Culture' of art, literature and aesthetics, and to analyse the common codes shared by all forms of male self-representation. But whereas Coward defines pornography as merely one example of 'sexist representation' among many, Kappeler, like Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin, sees pornography as the paradigmatic example of male supremacist cultural self-representation. And unlike Coward, she does not fall into any ontological quagmire between 'fiction' and 'reality'. Men who produce and consume pornography, she argues, are already acting in the real world:

Viewing and self-expression are themselves actions in the world, actions performed by the culture's legitimated subjects... The ultimate symptom of this are the hundreds of thousands of men ejaculating into a bucket in their booths at the peep shows... What men are doing in the world is continuing to *see*—to see women as objects of their pleasure and their feeling of life. It is quite enough "behaviour" in my opinion. What the man is doing is watching pornography, seeing, fantasizing, and he is doing this already in the world.

(Kappeler, 1986:58, 60—her emphasis)

Neither does Kappeler suggest that pornography's seamless connection to other aspects of culture renders it an inappropriate target for feminist concern. On the contrary, a feminist withdrawal of attention from pornography would merely reinforce the male literati establishment's insistence that there is 'Art' and there is 'pornography' and never the twain do meet. She is able to expose the pornographic aspects of D.M. Thomas' novel, *The White Hotel* (the chapter included in the *Feminist Review* volume), because there is already a feminist critique of pornography to draw upon. If there weren't, she would have had to invent one, since she was not concerned with whether those aspects of the novel were pornographic in the 'usual', 'community standards', sense, with 'whether they are "obscene", whether there is "too much sex", or sex too explicit'. She was concerned to uncover 'what structure of sexuality, what sexual politics are represented and what structure of representation, what subject-object relationships, are employed' (p. 87). And what is depicted, in literary productions like *The White Hotel* as in pornography, is the male 'cultural self-representation': 'Patronising the subject position, refusing to grant subjectivity to another subject in interaction, is the fundamental egotism and the fundamental solipsism of the male culture' (p. 59–60). Pornography is the most blatant example of that male monopolisation of subjecthood, and the most telling because it centres obsessively around the penis exercising its sexual prerogatives.

If we refuse to get bogged down in oppositional distinctions between 'fiction' and 'reality', then questions about whether or not pornography 'makes' men violent become irrelevant. As Kappeler put it: 'The image is made in the image of its maker, after his likeness, and not the other way around' (p. 61). Pornography exists because men have allocated themselves covert permission to occupy the only subject statuses culturally available, while dealing with real-life women as 'objects' to be acted upon, manipulated, defined solely with reference to male utility, process and pleasure. As Kappeler says:

It is not difficult to see why women fear that the doing might extend even further [than the zone of pornography-fantasy]. It is not difficult to envisage a continuing process in the “adult business” of live peep-shows to a point where instead of a bucket some other “object” might be supplied (p. 59)

But, she goes on to say, the goal of the ‘viewer-hero’ of pornography is not “‘live sex’ with real women’. Real women are too intransigent, they *will* insist on asserting their subjectivity despite the best efforts of the pornographic mind, they do ‘have a nasty tendency to assert their own subjectivity at the most inopportune moments’. Fantasy, in the solipsistic delusions of grandeur of the pornographic imagination, is vastly preferable to ‘the (troublesome) interaction with another subject’ (ibid.). Even were it the case that men kept it to themselves (and we know that they do not), that in itself would be an effect ‘in the world’, a male preference for fantasy over interactions with living women. But they do not, of course, keep it to themselves. Pornographic scenarios are acted out constantly. The question is not whether this or that particular instance of pornography ‘caused’ this or that particular man to behave violently on this or that particular occasion. To ask the question in this way is to reduce the politics of violence against women to a series of isolated occurrences, and to leave the physical safety of women up to the ‘choice’ of men who may or may not act on what they see in their pornographic viewing.

It is simply not feasible to argue that a particular aspect of culture has no relevance for behaviour. As Susan Griffin argued, the onus of proof is on the one who disclaims any influence. If pornography has no effect on action, then it must be ‘a strange and extraordinary exception to all other imagery’, said Griffin. (Griffin, 1981:105) She went on to say

the power of images over human behavior is a property of the human mind. As Susanne Langer has written, symbols and images are the modality of thought, “the instrument of thought”... Through the image we think. Through the image we make associations of cause and co-relativity and purpose. It is through the image that we *decide*. For the image and combined images comprise in our mind the very form of the process of choice whereby feeling becomes action. (Griffin, 1981:107–8—her emphasis)

Pornography is not ‘just another’ aspect of a phallogentric culture, it is the epitome of it. It depicts what happens when the dehumanisation of women is taken seriously. We ignore it, or argue away its importance, at our peril.

pleasure and danger

RECENTLY THERE HAS DEVELOPED a tendency within feminism to discuss female sexuality in terms of 'pleasure and danger'. (See Vance, ed., 1984, a selection of papers delivered at the Scholar and Feminist IX Conference held at Barnard College, New York, in 1982. See also: *Heresies* #12—The Sex Issue, 1981; Valverde, 1985; Snitow et al., eds., 1983, especially the Introduction, and papers by Echols, Willis, and Hollibaugh and Moraga.) It is argued that feminism, and especially the anti-pornography movement, has tended to place too much emphasis on the dangerous consequences of sexuality for women, and too little on the pleasure. To focus attention only on the 'danger' is regarded as too limiting because it ignores the positive potentialities of sexuality for women. As Carol S. Vance put it in her introductory paper to the volume mentioned above:

To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.

(Vance, ed., 1984:1)

But while I agree with Vance that questions of sexuality, and in particular questions around women's sexual interests, have remained somewhat undeveloped within feminism, I cannot see that the distinction between 'pleasure' and 'danger' goes very far to wards rectifying the situation. On the contrary, it merely obfuscates the issue. It fails to address certain pressing questions which feminism has already raised, by postulating 'pleasure' as the unproblematic solution to those questions. It also evades the moral dimension of the debate by defining morality solely in terms of imposition, prohibition and constraint. Instead, I would argue, the problematic of sexuality could be more usefully elucidated by asking questions about the meaning and purpose of various forms of sexual desire, about how that desire is constituted within the context of a phallogentric social order, a context which is not always 'dangerous' but which generates 'pleasure' too. We need to ask questions about what choices and responsibilities we have, given that sexual desire is not experienced as 'chosen' in any rational, conscious, deliberate sense. And, finally, we need to be more explicit about the moral framework from which we speak, and about the relations of power we are addressing.

According to Vance, the main 'danger' women face in their expression of sexual desire is male sexual violence: 'rape, sexual harassment, incest' (p. 3), and the 'violation' threatened and often visited upon women who display 'gross and public departures from "good" woman status, such as lesbianism, promiscuity, or nontraditional heterosexuality' (p. 4). I do not know what she would include within the latter category. Prostitution, for example, could hardly be called 'non-traditional', although prostitutes are regarded as 'fair game' and 'asking for it' if they are raped, assaulted or murdered. Neither is sadomasochism new, and anyway it includes violation as an essential part of the process. Promiscuity is already covered, and she said earlier (p. 3) that 'unmarried and non-procreative heterosexuality' are

to a certain extent 'relatively respectable'. However that may be, she argues that this actual and threatened male violence has 'work[ed] its way into the heart of female desire'. Women cannot afford to be free and spontaneous in their demonstrations of sexuality, she argues, 'either in public or in private', because of the belief that 'female desire triggers male attack' (p. 3). As a consequence of the 'cultural mythology' which purveys this belief, women's sexuality is characterised by 'self-control and watchfulness...constriction, invisibility, timidity, and uncuriosity' (p. 4), and confinement to the 'safety zone' of 'traditional marriage and the nuclear family' (p. 3).

This argument of Vance's does have a certain amount of validity. There does exist a belief that women bring rape and sexual assault and harassment upon themselves, and that therefore they must be circumspect in their sexual behaviour. Women are expected to control not only expressions of their own sexual availability, but also to be moral guardians of male sexuality, if they are to avoid the punitive sanctions meted out to 'loose' women. But since it is not the display of female sexual desire which triggers male attack, but the phallogocentric construction of masculinity and male rage at their own need for women, there is nothing women can do to fend it off. Even 'good' behaviour is no protection. And neither is traditional marriage a 'safety zone'. It is not women's sexuality, but our very existence which elicits attack from males whose 'humanity' extends no further than their possession of the requisite male supremacist symbol. While the ideology of the 'pure' woman *may promise* safety, it does not honour that promise. And if it is not women's sexual behaviour which incites and exacerbates male sexual violence, I fail to see how women deciding to get more pleasure out of sex, or even talking about doing so, is going to make any difference to the violence.

Vance goes on to say that it is important to emphasise, too, that there are other sources of sexual 'danger' for women than overt male violence, and hence other reasons for the diminution or destruction of female sexual pleasure. It is important to emphasise these other sources, says Vance, because we do not want to run the risk of attributing everything to men, 'thereby inflating male power and impoverishing ourselves' (p. 5). I have never been convinced by this argument, which is one of the standard reproaches levelled against the anti-pornography movement, because it looks like a plea to soft-pedal the feminist critique.

Nonetheless, I agree that there are problems involving sexuality which are not solely, or even at all, the result of male violence. Vance mentions a 'fear of merging', a fear which arises from the way in which sexuality is experienced as an eruption of unconscious, infantile sensations and emotions, a fear of dependence, loss of control, and (although Vance does not mention it) vulnerability (p. 5). We fear the annihilation of our own separateness, and that our rampaging desire will annihilate the separateness of the other. I would suggest, however, that this fear is not peculiar to women, and that for men, whose 'human' status depends on how well they succeed in repudiating identification with and dependence on the mother/female, the fear is even stronger. But that has not meant a restriction of male genital sexual activity. On the contrary, it has typically meant the elicitation and incitement of phallic pleasure, and its divorce from any other emotional entanglement than bodily excitation.

Vance also mentions 'the fear of competition' as another aspect of 'sexual terror' for women, the competition 'for attention and for loved objects', in which our competitors are

other women, whether we are lesbian or heterosexual (p. 5). But I am not sure what is involved here. (Vance provides us with no further elucidation). Is she saying that fear of entering into competition with other women could lead to everyone retiring from the fray, thus cutting them-selves off from opportunities for 'pleasure'? But surely more is involved than mere 'pleasure'. It seems to me that competitiveness might be a problem when both (or all) of us want the same lover, when there is a single individual who is desired by more than one. But in such cases, the problem would be less that of competition between the enamoured suppliants, all of whom are equally powerless to influence the course of events, and more that of the power of the one who is in a position to choose and make decisions affecting everyone. There are numerous variations of such scenarios, but I would suggest that the problems are those of power and self-aggrandisement on the one side, and vulnerability to helplessness, loss and insecurity on the other, rather than a desire-quenching fear of competition among women.

The final female sexual anxiety mentioned by Vance is a 'profound unease about violating the bounds of traditional femininity' which in her view follows upon the 'giving up of vigilance and control'. This unease appears to involve 'the specter of separation from other women...leaving one isolated and vulnerable to attack' (p. 5). Again I am not entirely clear what is involved here, but I would have thought that separation from other women was well within the bounds of traditional femininity, for the financially dependent wife and mother, isolated within the confines of domesticity, and expected to give emotional priority to husband and children at the expense of other relationships, and for women in general to the extent that a sexual relationship with a man is the only form of intimate connection recognised. Moreover, I am not convinced that to dispense with 'vigilance and control' over how we act on our sexual desire is necessarily the path away from traditional femininity. On the contrary, abandonment to the dictates of 'true love', or even plain unadulterated lust, is already allowed for within the terms of traditional femininity, which includes not only the 'virgin', the 'mother' and the 'chaste wife', but also the 'whore', the 'good time girl' and the 'nymphomaniac'.

I agree with Vance that the problems of sexuality for women are not exclusively those of male sexual violence. Indeed, I would argue that that violence is irrelevant to female sexuality in the sense that a woman's sexual desire or behaviour has nothing to do with whether or not she is attacked, although the pervasive fear of attack, or worse, actual experience of being attacked, may have a decided influence on her sexual desire and behaviour. I agree, too, that there are other factors which can diminish female sexual desire, although I do not agree that they are 'dangerous' in the sense that there is actually something there to fear. Certainly, fear can kill desire (and love), but fear feeds itself, it does not always need outside reinforcement. And the greatest fear is of being vulnerable, to pain, loss, abandonment, dependence, helplessness. But without vulnerability, there can be no love. To the extent that the risks are minimised, so is the love, desire, and pleasure. Invulnerability blocks the joy as well as the pain.

Vance's preferred emphasis for a feminist approach to female sexuality is a concentration on 'pleasure'. The feminist approach must moderate its picture of 'unmitigated danger and unremitting victimization' (p. 5), she said, in favour of emphasising the pleasurable aspects of

sexuality for women:

Feminism must put forward a politics that resists deprivation and supports pleasure. It must understand pleasure as life-affirming, empowering, desirous of human connection and the future, and not fear it as destructive, enfeebling or corrupt. Feminism must speak to sexual pleasure as a fundamental right, which cannot be put off to a better or easier time... [At the Barnard conference] we wished to expand the analysis of pleasure, and to draw on women's energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favour of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger.

(Vance, ed., 1984:23–4, 3)

But Vance's account provides us with no hint as to how feminism might go about moderating its discourse on 'danger', except for the implication that it ought somehow to be toned down, or even dispensed with. She does not tell us how the substitution of a discourse on 'pleasure' for the supposedly now dominant one on 'danger' will enable us to continue to challenge the 'patriarchal structure', nor how a greater emphasis on pleasure will have any effect on the 'danger' (or the fear). Is she arguing that women's greater enjoyment of sex will abolish, or at least lessen, the 'danger'? Or that if women would only learn to enjoy the hitherto dangerous aspects, then the danger would vanish? (Rape? Surely not).

But then, one of the problems with Vance's account is her conflation of two different types of sexual danger for women, both of which are real, and neither of which will be abolished by a change of attitude on the part of women. There is the danger all women face of sexual assault from men. This danger has nothing to do with female sexual desire or behaviour. The danger is not motivated by females, caused by females, or elicited by them (except in terms of the pornographic imagination). It is true that, by definition, if a woman enjoys sex with a man she is not raped. But I cannot see how the problem of coercive sex will be solved, or even approached, by a greater emphasis on 'pleasure'. It is hardly likely that Vance is suggesting that women ought to enjoy the forcible imposition of sex. That is, after all, the male supremacist exoneration of rape: 'She wants it, they all do', as Andrea Dworkin worded that particular argument

The other type of danger involves the negative sanctions meted out to women who transgress the bounds of femininity—lesbians, spinsters, prostitutes, 'promiscuous' or independent women—sanctions which are not always imposed from outside, but which may be manifested by a profound ambivalence on the part of the woman herself. But to the extent that such transgressive behaviour does elicit attack, it makes no feminist sense to argue that these women change their behaviour, and no sense at all to argue that a larger input of 'pleasure' will protect them. In this sense, then, Vance's account contains no analysis of the connections between 'pleasure' and 'danger'.

Neither are they set in opposition, except, she asserts, within feminism where the danger is emphasised at the expense of any account of pleasure. For Vance, 'pleasure' and 'danger' (and 'freedom') sit on one side, while repression, restriction, deprivation and 'safety', exemplified by 'traditional marriage and the nuclear family' and 'respectable forms of unmarried and non-procreative heterosexuality', sit on the other. The implication is clear: there is no pleasure to be found in respectability. Pleasure is to be gained through the flouting of conventional canons of correct female behaviour, through the satisfying of tabooed desire.

This was, indeed, the focus of the whole of the Scholar and Feminist IX Conference on Sexuality held at Barnard College, New York, in 1982. (See the next chapter). Many of the

contributions argued explicitly against what their authors regarded as unwarranted moral constraints on, and for the liberating potential of, transgressive sexuality (Gayle Rubin's paper already discussed being but one example), while there were no contributions which questioned that emphasis. This was usually expressed through demands to be allowed to *speak* about such desires without reprisal, although at the same time that need to speak arose from a need, too, to act on desires experienced as intrinsic, autonomous, self-motivated (and pleasurable) without guilt, shame, or blame.

In her paper, 'Public Silence, Private Terror', Dorothy Allison complained: 'For all women it is the public expression of desire that is impossible, any vestige of deviation from what we are supposed to want and how we are supposed to behave'. (Allison, 1984:111). The specific desires which she wants to liberate from the domain of 'the unspeakable' include 's/m, butch/femme, fetishes, or otherwise "politically incorrect"' forms of 'sexual orientation' (p. 112). In her paper, 'The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo', Paula Webster, too, complained about feminism's reticence on sexual matters, a reticence which she said contrasted with the freedom feminism gave women to speak on other issues:

A truly radical feature of feminism has been the permission we have given each other to speak... We spoke the unspeakable; we broke the taboo on silence...[But] we devoted so little time to open and direct discussion of sexual pleasure...when it came to describing our desires, we were strangely mute. Our discussions of sex were barely audible. (Webster, 1984:385).

Webster's list of 'inaudible' (to feminists) sex acts includes 'voyeurism, bondage, s/m, fetishism, pornography, promiscuity, and intergenerational, group, interracial, public or phone sex' (p. 386). Hers is the most explicit defence of the pleasures of the forbidden. While the other contributors argue for feminist acceptance of 'unacceptable' forms of sexual activity because those activities are motivated by intrinsic needs, Webster argues in favour of transgression itself, whatever form it takes: 'For some, playing with the distance from or proximity to the forbidden is a tension-filled turn-on. Without taboo sex might not feel so delicious. Naughty feels nice, and just "bad" enough to be intensely pleasurable'. Once the taboo acts become boring—'assimilated, domesticated and drained of their charge'—because they become familiar and no longer shameful, frightening or guilt-inducing, then we can acquire a whole new set (presumably even more shameful). 'In this way', she says, 'we develop over our lifetime a varied sexual repertoire and, if we are lucky, new sources of erotic pleasure' (p. 392).

For the contributors to this volume (and to the Conference), pleasure is unproblematic, or rather, it would be if the constraints were only lifted, the boundaries overcome, the barriers thrown down. Rather than asking fearfully: 'what if there is no end to desire?' (Vance, p. 5), we should be courageously asserting our desire 'to pursue what fascinates us, ...ask for what we want, ...take risks with our sexual identities molded by the constraints of femininity' (Webster, p. 392). Rather than giving in to our shame, guilt or fear, rather than 'stand[ing] at the borders of our desires, hesitating, complaining, berating ourselves and/or our lovers for the sexual deprivation we live with and feel helpless to change' (ibid.), we should be launching ourselves proudly on a never-ending, no-holds-barred career of taboo violation. Only then, it seems, will we find sexual pleasure and freedom. But is 'any thing goes' an

adequate response to the hegemony of the missionary position?

Nowhere in this volume is there any consideration of possible problems with this libertarian ethic. For it *is* an ethic, a moral imperative to do one's own thing without let or hindrance, without having to ask permission or acknowledge constraint. It is also a moral imperative to refrain from criticism, because criticism is interpreted as judging others, or worse, trying to prevent them from doing what they want to do. There is no discussion of the question of constraints. Are there to be none? Is anything and everything permitted as long as it results, or is thought to result, in 'pleasurable' sensations, and even if, or especially if, we think it is wrong? Because the libertarian argument defines constraint as wholly bad, whether externally applied or self-motivated, it cannot deal with it except negatively. Morality is always 'moralistic' and 'judgemental', an unwarranted restriction imposed as a form of social control. There are presumably two limitations on the free flow of any and every conceivable form of sex act—consent and personal harm. But this volume contains no statement to that effect. No contribution contains a statement about the necessity for sexual behaviour to stop short of physical harm, a not insignificant omission given the implicit, and on the part of some contributors, explicit support for lesbian sadomasochism, some of the practices of which could, and sometimes do, lead to bodily injury.

In an article in the volume *Against Sadomasochism*, Marissa Jonel describes her experience of violence as the masochist half of an s/m relationship. Having gone willingly into the relationship because she thought she needed to act out her masochistic fantasies, she found the brutality all too real, and left. 'I realized...that I was tired of bruises, I was tired of aching for days after a long scene', she said. (Jonel, 1982:20) She was also convinced that s/m 'allow[ed] and encourage[d] battering in lesbian relationships', and cited a woman who counselled battered lesbians, who said that she believed there was 'a direct connection between the openness and spread of sm and the increase in abuse, hospitalization and abuse-related deaths among lesbians (three in her home town in the last two years)' (p. 19). She herself, she said, 'had friends who got involved in scenes where the sadist got out of hand, and in any violent setting, it's easy for accidents to happen' (p. 20).

But an incident involving one of the most vocal proponents of the glories and delights of lesbian s/m, can hardly be called an accident. According to Sheila Jeffreys, this woman 'occasioned some publicity in 1982 when she carved a swastika into a woman's flesh against her will'. (Jeffreys, 1986:68) 'Toby Summer' (a pseudonym) described the same incident thus: 'San Francisco's picture-perfect "lesbian" sadist...left town after allegedly carving an unwanted swastika into a workingclass dyke's body—I know the Jewish nurse who had to clean the wound'. (Summer, 1987:39–40) Texts dealing with lesbian s/m contain sections on 's/m safety' detailing how to indulge in practices like 'fisting', using dildoes and enemas, spanking and whipping, cutting, piercing and clamping, etc., without causing bodily injury (or at least nothing serious and permanent). (Samois, eds., 1982:69–79) But this woman's long years of s/m practice were obviously of no help to her self control, at least on this occasion. Or had they hardened her against respect for the bodily integrity of another? Did the constant, long term rehearsing of violence inure her to real violence, the 'playing' at torture accustom her to its reality, so that she could no longer make the distinction? *Is* there a distinction between the pretence and the actuality? Questions like these were not addressed in this

volume, and the question of whether or not our pursuit of 'pleasure' ought to stop short of physical damage remained open.

There are, of course, other kinds of damage. Again Marissa Jonel provides us with examples. There were months of entrapment with no way out, not only because of her 'lover's' obsessive guarding of her every move, but also because she doubted own ability to live without the relationship. There was her helplessness at not being able to protest against her treatment because, by identifying as a masochist, she had made a strong statement that that was what she wanted. And there was the fear which finally drove her to move to another city. (Jonel, 1982) There is also the damage done to the psyche of the sadist whose appetite for inflicting pain can escalate beyond the 'game' which the sadomasochists insist they are playing, until it can be satisfied by nothing less than another's genuine agony.

On the question of 'consent', Gayle Rubin's is the only discussion, and it does not take us very far. She acknowledges that there has been feminist criticism of the sexual libertarian position ('sexual radicals' in Rubin's terminology) on consent: 'Feminists have criticised them for ostensibly finessing questions about "the limits of consent" and "structural constraints" on consent'. She goes on to say that

Although there are deep problems with the political discourse of consent, and although there are certainly structural constraints on sexual choice, this criticism has been consistently misapplied in the sex debates. It does not take into account the very specific semantic content that consent has in sex law and sex practice. (Rubin, 1984:304)

She then proceeds to 'finesse' the issue yet again by discussing at some length the way in which the law penalises certain forms of sexual behaviour despite the consent of the participants, and by defining 'structural constraints on consent' as what people are not allowed to do.

The examples she uses of behaviour which is subject to legal penalties despite the consent of both (or all) parties are: sodomy, 'lesbian lovers who could have been prosecuted for committing oral copulation' before the passing of 'the consenting adults statute' in California in 1976, two cases of adult incest, one between a nineteen-year-old male and his forty-two-year-old mother, the other between a sister and brother, and an s/m case where a man was charged with aggravated assault because he had whipped another man who was a willing participant. She does not discuss the issue of the 'age of consent' laws. Nor does she discuss the issue of consent in relation to paedophilia. She cannot therefore be said to have dealt at all adequately with even the legal aspects of 'consent', since she has simply ignored the most contentious problems.

And by defining 'structural constraints' simply in terms of prohibition, she fails to address the feminist argument concerning the limits of the appeal to 'consent' as a justification for questionable sexual practices like sadomasochism, and hence can hardly be said to have countered it. Her argument is that

within the law, consent is a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest-status sexual behavior...in addition, economic sanctions, family pressures, erotic stigma, social discrimination, negative ideology, and the paucity of information about erotic behavior, all serve to make it difficult for people to make unconventional sexual choices...structural constraints...impede free sexual choice, but they hardly coerce anyone into being a pervert. On the contrary, they operate to coerce everyone toward normality. (p. 305-6)

But once again Rubin has reduced the issue to one of proscriptive moralising, of restrictive values—‘high status’/low status’—which constrain people in the unfettered exercise of their own personal, private, freely embraced desires. She does not ask where these desires come from. They appear to have dropped out of nowhere, or rather to have arisen fully formed from the isolated individual psyches of their bearers. And they appear to be in no relationship to the social conditions within which their bearers live until they make their presence known by being acted out.

But if we assume that the ‘perversions’ are no less socially constructed than respectable heterosexuality, a rather different picture emerges from the one Rubin presents of a small embattled band of brave souls valiantly challenging the status quo, and whose claim to monopolise the status of the ‘freely consenting individual’ rests on their unconventional sexual habits. How radical, for example, is sadomasochism when it gleefully reproduces patriarchal patterns of domination and subordination, and calls them good? Or male-to-constructed-female transsexuality, when it reinforces and validates conventional femininity to the point of physical mutilation? Or paedophilia, when it plays out in an exaggerated form the norm of a power imbalance between sexual partners? Or fetishism, when it reifies the phallus and substitutes it for another human being? Or for that matter, lesbianism, to the extent that it defines itself as sick, immature, sinful, or just another ‘private’ sexual preference? There can be no question of ‘consent’ if we evade questions about the constitution of our own desires.

The decisions we make in the light of that questioning can vary. Abandonment of any particular desire is not the only response required by the questioning. Since no choice is absolutely ‘pure’ (not even lesbianism), none is completely ‘impure’ either. Even the need to act out sadomasochistic desire between women may be the only way some women can come to terms with and overcome their feminine constitution. But it is only with the questioning of desire that there is any possibility of consent, and it is always a limited consent, constrained by conditions not of our own choosing and by the intransigence and irrationality of desire itself. And it is only the questioning which is the radical act, not the blind insistence on transgression for transgression’s sake.

Another reason why sexual libertarianism can make no claims to being radical is its reliance on the doctrine of liberal individualism, a reliance which is unstated, but which becomes evident once we ask questions about the origins of the multifarious plurality of ‘sexualities’ that the libertarians would like to see flourish unhampered by any legal, moral or social constraint. Of course, a commitment to autonomy and the possibilities for self-realisation of the individual is vital for the feminist enterprise. As Zilla Eisenstein pointed out

the idea of the independent individual...is...crucial to feminist theory... The concept of the autonomous independent self, which originates in liberal thought, appears...in the feminist demand for selfhood...the liberal conception of an individual with rights and of women’s independence from men are important contributions to feminist theory... When the ideology of liberal individualism...posits the importance of self-sovereignty and independence as a universal claim...it lays the basis for feminism.

(Eisenstein, 1981:146, 184, 154)

But the ideology of liberal individualism also contains the notion of the individual as a

discrete entity existing in its own right, unconnected either to other isolated individuals, or to any social environment prior to the exercise of freewill and rational choice. As such, it sits uncomfortably with a social critique, like feminism, which defines the individual as emerging from a social context, partaking of collective interests and a common identity. In Raymond Williams words: liberalism is a doctrine based on individualist theories of man [sic] and society and is thus in fundamental conflict not only with socialist but with most strictly social theories'. (Williams, 1983:181) The concept of the atomised individual, i.e. the individual 'as a finite being, separate and apart from society, a property unto itself, with rights of control over itself', as Eisenstein put it (p. 126), is counter-productive for a political activity engaged in exposing the commonality of oppression and the generality of relations of power. In particular, it is in flat contradiction to the feminist assertion that 'the personal is political', since it places all problems and their solutions, and by the same token all successful enterprise, within the domain of individual responsibility. In doing so, it denies the structural constraints limiting the scope of individual action (or alternatively enhancing it in the case of those favourably placed within the hierarchy). Hence, we must 'recognize the individualist nature of Western liberal societies' (Eisenstein, 1981:191) and the importance which the ideal of the autonomous individual has for feminism, while at the same time recognising that individuals do not arise out of nowhere, but are constituted within common conditions which pervade every aspect of existence, and from which none of us can claim to have escaped utterly, especially not by ignoring where we have come from.

The discourse of 'pleasure' and 'danger' does not allow for this dialectical recognition. It is too closely enmeshed in the ideology of liberal individualism to provide the basis for an adequate feminist theory and practice of female sexuality, an entanglement all the more intransigent for being unacknowledged. The unqualified emphasis on 'pleasure' leads no further than individual solutions, to the extent that it fails to address questions about the origins of sexual desire, and about forms of 'pleasure' which are oppressive or oppressing because they participate unreservedly in relationships of domination, subordination and objectification, or fails to deal adequately with questions of why women might not experience sexual pleasure. 'Repression' will not do because it entails the assumption that something is lost (or stolen) and hence that it can be found (or retrieved). And 'danger' is not the only, or even the main, problem.

The problem is phallocentricity, the male monopolisation of a terrain which is presented as 'universal'. Because in phallocratic reality 'human' sexuality is defined solely in terms of the pleasures, processes and purposes of the penis, the only 'female' sexuality permitted recognition is one which defers to that penile supremacy. It is vaginal (of course) because that is the best environment for the attainment of male orgasm. Ti-Grace Atkinson described the phallic imperative placed on 'female' sexuality thus:

The environment of the vagina is necessary for sexual intercourse. Either a woman must be forced to provide this environment or it must be in her interests to do so. It's illegal to force her: that's called rape. Therefore, it must be that she experiences the same experience that the man does because of the same activity. This will be called "vaginal orgasm" to distinguish it from the original sense of "orgasm" i.e. male orgasm. And it is pleasurable for the woman. If it is the same experience as the male orgasm, there should be no discrepancy between either the amount or conditions of the experience. Therefore, woman also has a sexual instinct.
(Atkinson, 1974:17-18)

This imperative still reigns, slightly modified in response to the publicity given to the clitoral orgasm(s) which has been neatly assimilated as an extra bit of foreplay to the main event. But the prime purpose must always be penile penetration to (male) orgasm, or 'sex' cannot be said to have happened. In the face of such a hegemonic demand, it is not surprising that 'sex' leaves many women cold. Neither is it surprising if many other women experience an avid and obsessive desire for the penis and its bearer(s), given its symbolic role as the definer of what can count as 'sexual'. Nor would it be surprising if sex, even between lesbians (where there is no penis present, either in actuality or in fantasy), carried with it the burden of power-as-domination, since that is what sexuality 'is', that is the way sexual desire is 'normally' constituted under a regime of phallogocentricity. Given that phallogocentric reality purveys its own forms of sexual 'pleasure', through the eroticisation of relationships of domination/subordination, it is counter-productive for feminism to embrace unreservedly a program of 'pleasure' as *the* liberatory sexual practice, without exploring the roots and ramifications of phallic desire as well.

As should be clear from the tenor of my arguments in this book, I do not think it advisable to address the question of 'sexuality' in isolation from the social relations of male supremacy which articulate it under present conditions. To confine the debate to the level of what we 'want', or what we 'do in bed', or how we 'do it', may be a helpful therapeutic exercise for those who feel themselves in need of it. But it does not take us very far towards understanding where we have come from or where we are going.

a barney at barnard

THE EMPHASIS OF THE BARNARD CONFERENCE, and in particular its more or less covert validation of lesbian sadomasochism, pornography and ‘butch’/‘femme’ role playing, did not go unchallenged. A group of women calling themselves ‘a coalition of radical feminists and lesbian feminists’ produced a leaflet which they handed out at the gates of Barnard College during the conference, and in which they protested against the perspectives endorsed by the conference. In part, the radical feminist leaflet read:

We...protest this conference’s promotion of one perspective on sexuality and its silencing of the views of a major portion of the feminist movement...we believe that this conference is...endorsing a tiny offshoot of the women’s movement that is part of the backlash against radical feminism.

Represented at this conference are organizations that support and produce pornography, that promote sex roles and sadomasochism, and that have joined the straight and gay pedophile organizations in lobbying for an end to laws that protect children from sexual abuse by adults. Excluded...are feminists who have developed the feminist analysis of sexual violence, who have organized a mass movement against pornography, who have fought media images that legitimize sexual violence, who believe that sadomasochism is reactionary, patriarchal sexuality, and who have worked to end the sexual abuse of children...

[The leaflet went on to discuss three organisations which the authors said promoted pornography and/or lesbian sadomasochism—No More Nice Girls, Samois and the Lesbian Sex Mafia—and to name women who were members of those groups and who were contributors to the conference.]

For all their claims of radicalism, all of the organizations and individuals listed above are advocating the same kind of patriarchal sexuality that flourishes in our culture’s mainstream, that is channelled into crimes of sexual violence against women, and that is institutionalized in pornography...

This coalition is not criticizing any women for having internalized sex roles, for having sadomasochistic fantasies, or for becoming sexually aroused by pornography. We acknowledge that all people who have been socialized in patriarchal society—feminists and nonfeminists, lesbians and heterosexuals—have internalized its sexual patterns of dominance and submission. But [the groups listed] and the butch-femme proponents are not acknowledging having internalized patriarchal messages and values. Instead, they are denying that these values are patriarchal. And even more dangerous, they are actively promoting these values through their public advocacy of pornography, sex roles, and sadomasochism and their insistence that this kind of sexuality means liberation for women.

We feel strongly that feminists must continue to analyze oppressive sexual institutions and values as we put forth a sexual politics founded on equality, creativity, and respect for female bodies and eroticism.

(*Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring, 1983, p. 180–2)

I have quoted this leaflet at some length, not only because I agree with its major points, but also because there was a concerted, although belated, effort to censor it. The editors of *Feminist Studies* were soundly castigated for printing it. Carol Vance was ‘horrified’, Ellen Willis was ‘shocked and disturbed’, and Pat Califia was, in an uncharacteristic understatement, ‘angered and saddened’. (*Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 589–602) ‘If only’, Carol Vance wrote to the editors, ‘you had notified one of us who organized the petition that you were publishing it and the leaflet’ (p. 591). (The petition was organised in support of the conference, and in response to the radical feminist leaflet’s critique. This petition was printed in the same issue of *Feminist Studies* as the leaflet, and at the end of the *Pleasure and Danger* volume, p. 451–3).

The radical feminist leaflet was described as ‘a scurrilous, untruthful, and unprincipled attack on individual women’, ‘a slimy and vicious attack on individual women’, a ‘libelous

character assassination' (Carol Vance), 'full of factual distortions and outright lies', 'libelous', 'absurd' and 'sleazy' (Ellen Willis), 'crude mudslinging', with a 'smell like day-old semen/cuntjuice' (Pat Califia in a more characteristic vein), and 'a squeal of distress from those who could no longer have their way with impunity', and 'a vile McCarthyism' (Gayle Rubin).

The editors of *Feminist Studies* were abject in their apologies. Two issues after the one in which they had printed the radical feminist leaflet, they printed their own apology along with letters of condemnation from Carol Vance, Ellen Willis, Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin, a short denial of the allegations against No More Nice Girls, and two leaflets produced by the Lesbian Sex Mafia. The editors said that they 'owe an apology to our readers in general, and to five women in particular... We were insensitive in reprinting the leaflet, and we deeply regret it...we are sorry for our lack of sensitivity in failing to imagine the dangers to which those who live on the sexual fringe, like any political fringe, are exposed'. They also said that 'in reprinting the leaflet, we appeared to give it credence', an appearance which they firmly rejected: 'We never intended to endorse its contents. Indeed, we thought we were illustrating its "misinformation", but instead, ironically, we may have granted it legitimacy through associating it with our journal'. (*Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 589).

The main objections to the radical feminist leaflet were: that it 'portrayed [the conference] as dominated by sexual nonconformists' ('Petition'); that it attacked individual women by name; that it was untruthful; and that it reduced the 'diversity' of 'a broad range of topics' to the issues of 'pornography, s/m, and butch/femme roles'. (*Feminist Studies*, *ibid.* and p. 590) But the leaflet did not criticise the conference for its 'non-conformity'. On the contrary, one of its main points was that the conference was only too conformist, that in its reinforcement and validation of pornography, lesbian sadomasochism, and hierarchical sex roles, it was only too acquiescent in 'patriarchal' modes of sexual behaviour. The complaint on the part of the women who wrote the leaflet was that the conference excluded views which opposed the valorisation of those forms of sexual practice. As it did. The conference organisers neither invited contributions from that side of the debate in the planning stages of the conference, nor rectified that omission in response to protests against the exclusion. Despite its claims to 'open up feminist dialogue about sex' ('Petition'), it did nothing of the sort. Faced with opposition, the conference organisers and their supporters screamed with rage and attempted to monopolise the debate.

As for the charge that the authors of leaflet named individual women, indeed they did. But that they thereby caused 'great harm to individual women' (*Feminist Studies*, *op.cit.*, p. 589), or that the leaflet was responsible for the subsequent months of disruption and harassment supposedly suffered by the women named (p. 591), is highly dubious for the simple reason that the leaflet contained nothing that was not already public knowledge, proudly proclaimed far and wide by the named women themselves. (There were two possible exceptions, but I will come to those later). It gave away no secrets, exposed no details of private lives. Far from identifying women who had not identified themselves, as implied by the *Feminist Studies* editors' pious assertion that 'a woman's name should be attached to a specific political-sexual stance only by self identification' (p. 589), the leaflet merely stated what was already widely known.

Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin are both self-professed sadomasochists, both are proud of it, and both are (or were) members of Samois, described (accurately) in the leaflet as an ‘organization of lesbian sadomasochists named after a house of torture in *The Story of O*’. Califia has announced her sexual predilections tirelessly, endlessly and in great detail in the gay media for years, and Gayle Rubin announced hers in her article in the Samois volume, *Coming to Power* in 1981. (Rubin, 1982:209, 210, 221)

Dorothy Allison was, as the leaflet stated, a founder of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, a group which ‘concentrated on attracting members whose primary sexual orientation was s/m, butch/femme, fetishes, or otherwise “politically incorrect”’, to use Allison’s own words in the *Pleasure and Danger* volume (and presumably also at the conference). (Allison, 1984:112) She was also a leader of the conference workshop on ‘politically incorrect sexuality’. (The *Pleasure and Danger* volume listed it as ‘Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality’). (Vance, ed., 1984:448) One could perhaps quarrel with the leaflet’s description of ‘politically incorrect sexuality’ as ‘a codeword for sadomasochistic sexuality’, since it covers a wider range of transgressive sexual practices than s/m. What the term does is point to a reversal of what its users regard as conventional moral values. ‘Politically incorrect’ means ‘good’, and ‘politically correct’ means ‘bad’ and unmentionable. I very much doubt that the above-mentioned workshop included representatives of ‘politically correct’, i.e. ‘incorrect’, sexuality as active, welcome participants.

In the case of the other two women named in the leaflet, both were members of the pro-abortion activist group, No More Nice Girls. The members of this group, according to the leaflet, ‘contend that pornography is liberating’ and that ‘feminists should simply make their own pornography’. In her reply printed in the Fall, 1983, issue of *Feminist Studies*, one of the women named said:

“No More Nice Girls” is, to quote from our own leaflet, “a group of women who came together in April 1981 to fight the right wing attack on abortion rights”. We have never taken a position on the issues of pornography and sadomasochism. However, we also stand for women’s freedom to express themselves sexually and oppose anyone—either the state or groups of feminists—who tries to restrict that freedom.

(Brett Harvey for ‘No More Nice Girls’, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 592. This is the whole text of her reply).

The other member, Ellen Willis, also stated that the group had not ‘acted upon or taken a collective position on the issue of pornography’, and that she herself was ‘in no way a defender of the por-nography industry or an apologist for sexism and misogyny in pornography’. She said that the leaflet ‘attacked’ the group because she had ‘publicly opposed the anti-pornography movement’, but that her statements about the ‘anti-porn movement’ were her own personal views and ‘not the policy of No More Nice Girls’ (op.cit., p. 593). (For Willis’ somewhat equivocal views on pornography, see [chapter twelve](#)).

And yet, in the light of some of the rather peculiar arguments No More Nice Girls marshalled in defence of abortion, it is not surprising that the authors of the leaflet should have interpreted them as being in favour of pornography, sadomasochism, or any other form of transgressive sexual behaviour. According to No More Nice Girls’ own leaflet, included in the *Pleasure and Danger* volume, and attributed to Brett Harvey, the group did not exactly disagree with the early (1970) feminist stance on abortion. This stance was characterised

thus: ‘a woman’s right to abortion must be absolute, because her very personhood depends on her ability to control her own reproductive system’, and ‘the *only* person qualified to make a decision about abortion is the woman herself’ (emphasis in the original). But they regarded this as insufficiently radical. The most such a stance could do to combat the new right’s attacks on the availability of abortion, they said, was to pose ladylike euphemisms like “choice” and “reproductive rights”...or...warnings of the dire consequences to women of a return to illegal abortions: coathangers, teenage pregnancies, pregnancies as a result of rape and incest’. The fact that ‘no one was talking about women’s right to *enjoy* sex without fear of pregnancy’ (emphasis in the original) was, it would seem, a failure of radical commitment on the part of the abortion movement. The group’s own position was that what the abortion movement needed was an approach based on the insistence that ‘abortion rights [were] the key to women’s sexual freedom’. The group’s aim was

to remind people that abortion was, after all, about sex. Our aim was not to undercut or discredit the liberal or left abortion rights organizations—we recognized that the battle must be fought on every front—but to provide another element: a bold, unequivocal demand for sexual freedom.

(Harvey, 1984:204, 205, 206)

But it is by no means self-evident that the demand for female control over abortion is a demand for ‘sexual freedom’. Even were it the case that abortion was safe, freely available, socially acceptable, and in the hands of women, it is unlikely that that eventuality would go very far towards alleviating any anxiety women might feel about becoming pregnant as the result of (hetero-)sexual activity. Abortion would remain an unpleasant procedure even under the best conditions. It is even less clear what relevance the abortion struggle has for lesbianism (which is not at all the same thing as saying that the issue of abortion is irrelevant to lesbians, who can, after all, be raped or even voluntarily experiment with heterosexuality). And it is not at all certain that the feminist abortion struggle is just another aspect of ‘sexual liberation’, as would seem to be implied by the concluding paragraph of Harvey’s article:

we are far away from...the guarantee of total sexual freedom and autonomy for women. The notions that underlie “free abortion on demand”—that women are not slaves to their reproductive systems; that women have the right to choose when, how, and with whom they wish to be sexual—these ideas...are still not truly accepted. As long as women who choose not to have children, or to live alone or with other women, or to have a variety of sexual partners—as long as such women are stigmatized as “selfish” or “narcissistic”, “irresponsible” or “perverted”, no woman is really free.

(Harvey, 1984:209)

A clue to the reasons for this tendency to subordinate the abortion struggle to ‘sexual liberation’ can be found in Ellen Willis’ paper on abortion. (Willis, 1979b) Willis included in her paper a recurring dialogue she has had with right-to-lifers where the latter argue against abortion on the grounds that women must pay for sexual pleasure: “‘If a woman chooses to have sex, she should be willing to take the consequences’”, the right-to-lifer says. As Willis said, this is a typical argument. But instead of questioning the basic premise in this assertion, that women ‘choose’ (hetero-)sex for their own pleasure, Willis accepted it without further comment, and drew from it the conclusion that ‘it would seem, then, that the nitty-gritty issue in the abortion debate is not life but sex’ (p. 94). In doing so she colluded in the right-wing’s reduction of the issue of abortion to a question merely of women’s sexual

pleasure, disagreeing only with the negative evaluation of abortion as ‘selfish’. But surely the question of whether or not a woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy enjoyed the (hetero-)sexual activity which caused it is irrelevant? Even more important is Willis’ failure to challenge the right-wing assumption that women in variably ‘choose’ to engage in (hetero-)sex, especially given the continuing prevalence of rape, women’s obligations to service men sexually, men’s emotional blackmail, and the continuing hegemony of phallic sexuality.

In the light of No More Nice Girls’ commitment to ‘sexual liberation’ as the epitome of feminist struggle, it is not surprising that the radical feminist leaflet defined the group as representative of that emphasis. And given that the group’s views and names were already publicly known through the distribution of their own leaflet, the radical feminist protesters can hardly be said to have exposed something which was not common knowledge.

But the aggrieved and vocal complaints about ‘naming names’ served a purpose, as did the accusation that the radical feminist leaflet contained ‘lies’ (all of which are too trivial to deal with in detail—the reader is referred to the relevant issues of *Feminist Studies* to check for herself—and not really inaccurate at all, much less deliberate intentions to deceive). That purpose was to distract attention from the radical feminists’ main argument that the conference supported and validated ‘patriarchal’ forms of sexual activity. Neither Carol Vance nor Ellen Willis addressed this issue. Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin did, but their replies generated more heat than light, and amounted to no more than flat denials. Califia responded to the leaflet’s statements that the groups mentioned had not only ‘internalized patriarchal messages and values’, but were also ‘denying that these values were patriarchal’, and worse, were ‘actively promoting’ them, with the following:

In other words, we won’t come to Jesus—excuse me, WAP [Women Against Pornography, whom Califia regarded as solely responsible for the leaflet]—and beg forgiveness for being tainted by our socialization in the patriarchy...WAP is apparently willing to let perverts stay in the women’s movement as long as they are searching for a cure. I spit on that invitation. I do not need to be patronized. I do not need to give my time and energy to a movement which wants to make me feel shitty about how I get off... I am no more brainwashed or poisoned by the patriarchy than you.

(*Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3:596, 597)

In other words, Califia has no intention of examining the genesis of her own desire. It simply exists, and her only obligation is to act out its dictates, to go wherever it may drive her, no matter what the consequences. Her refusal merely substantiated the leaflet’s claims.

Gayle Rubin’s response was, not surprisingly, much the same. At one point she managed to deny and admit the truth of the leaflet’s statements at one and the same time: ‘Of course Samois supported people who included dominance and submission in their sexual play’, she said, ‘but the group in no way supported a “sexual politics” of dominance and submission’. It didn’t? ‘We repeatedly condemned all social hierarchies’, she opined. By eroticising and acting out an iconography of oppression? Really? But it is futile to argue with sadomasochists. Defending the indefensible generates a paranoia which sees criticism as personal attack, and doubt and uncertainty as threats of annihilation.

As for the criticism that the radical feminist leaflet reduced the conference’s ‘diversity of thought and experience’ to ‘pornography, s/m, and butch/femme roles’ (as Carol Vance put it), that characterisation of the tenor of the conference was not in fact an inaccurate representation. Although the conference covered more than those three issues—indeed, Gayle

Rubin presented us with a veritable plethora of ‘denizens of the sexual underworld’ (her terminology)— the ‘diversity’ did not stretch to cover the views of the anti-pornography movement. Neither did it include any voices to counter the prevailing tendency at the conference to valorise transgressive sexuality, despite the fact that those voices expressed views held by ‘a major portion of the feminist movement’, as the leaflet put it. This latter assertion was substantiated by Gayle Rubin, although she expressed it in more pejorative terminology, referring to ‘the anti-porn monopoly over feminist discourse on sexuality’. She did not ask how it acquired a ‘monopoly’ if not through the agreement of the majority of feminists.

The organisers of the conference gave no explanation for their exclusion of the views of most feminists. Moreover, they acknowledged that one of the organising principles of the conference was to provide a forum for the favourable presentation of lesbian sadomasochism, pornography, and butch/femme roles in lesbian relationships. As Ellen Willis put it: ‘We did want to include discussion of these controversial subjects, and in particular to give feminists with unorthodox views a rare opportunity to be heard’. (*Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3:593) They did this by means of a commitment to the concept of ‘benign sexual variation’ and to the thesis that sex is ‘innocent till proved guilty’, both of these ideas having been suggested by Gayle Rubin. Both also cover more than lesbian sadomasochism, pornography and butch/femme roles, although it is not surprising that the leaflet singled those issues out for special mention, given their particular relevance for women’s lives. But what would qualify as ‘guilty’ or ‘malignant’ sex if sadomasochism and pornography are ‘innocent’ and ‘benign’. But then, that is not really the issue. Instead, the issue is how to devise a feminist female sexuality which does not reproduce phallogentric imperialism, but rather places women at the centre of our own sexual universe. I remain unconvinced that pandering to sadomasochistic pornographic desire, whether self-motivated or imposed, is the way to do this.

afterword

AND NOW YOU ARE FACED with one final question: What does sex mean to you?

You have to acknowledge a profound ambivalence towards sex. On the one hand, you know that it has been the source of some of the most ecstatic experiences you have ever had, as well as the occasion for learning lessons you didn't know could be learned. On the other hand, you also know that it has been the occasion for acts of such monumental stupidity that you can still shudder years later at the thought of how you could have been so silly as to have driven yourself obsessively towards a goal of such breathtaking banality and self-delusion. It has also been the source of much agony, of trust betrayed and hope destroyed, trust and hope that were not always based in illusion (and hence needed to be destroyed, and a jolly good riddance, too). There were times when your trust in yourself and your own integrity teetered sickeningly on the brink of chaos and nonsense, times when your ability to trust in the other's goodness and honesty vanished entirely, and times when your hopes for the community of women wavered dimly and died (although not permanently).

But then, you told yourself, perhaps the ecstasy and the agony are inextricable. Perhaps opening your self to the possibilities of the one makes you vulnerable to the other as well. Perhaps barricading yourself against pain, guilt and shame means defending yourself against knowledge and joy, too. And perhaps safety is boring, and risking a fall is the only way to reach the heights (or so you told yourself).

There was one thing of which you were quite certain (at least for the time being and the foreseeable future), and that was that sex could happen only with another woman. It was only a woman who could elicit in you that desire, that insistent urge towards a connection that was as crudely physical as it was spiritually rarefied, as comforting as it was exciting, as knowing and telepathic as it was exploratory and always new. It was only women who appeared to you with any clarity, who stood out from the background, whom you recognised with delight (or fear) and reached out towards (or avoided at all costs). It was only in the company of women that you came to know and value yourself, or to doubt and question yourself.

And that was the way it always had been, although you had not always known it. Or rather, you had always known it, but for a long time, roughly the first thirty-two years of your life, you had not known what you knew, or even that there was something to be known. It had been private, day-dreams, fantasies, great rushing surges of overwhelming emotion, which spread no further than the narrow boundaries (or infinite expanse) of your own isolated, peculiar self.

There were times when you thoroughly enjoyed the company of men (although individually and never en masse), and there were some few men for whom you felt a certain fondness. There was even one man, the one to whom you had been married, whose death caused you the most intense grief of your life so far. But you felt no need of men, you spent no time and energy seeking them out. Life among women was full and rich and offered everything your heart could desire and more, or so you eventually discovered

(having known it all along).

Another thing of which you were (fairly) certain was your predilection for monogamy. (Stupid word! How can a woman have a 'wife'? No, the term is 'sexual fidelity'. Start again.) You knew that you were a sexually faithful creature, and that once you had sexually committed your self to another woman you had no difficulty in resisting other attractions. Each relationship was the last, the one and only, forswearing all others to cleave only unto her (in a manner of speaking). But they all ended. Or they did until recently, when you very sensibly divested yourself of your unfortunate propensity for falling for inappropriate women, and instead fell for a woman who wasn't threatened or overwhelmed by you.

Which gives rise to an interesting paradox: How serious was your commitment to fidelity when your lesbian career was marked by a series of 'relationships' ranging in length from one night (or morning) to four years? How did a 'lifetime commitment' turn into serial monogamy? It is true that it was not you who had engineered those endings. Or rather, you were not the one who had left, who had hared off into the night (usually to the other side of the world), although you had to admit to some responsibility for the inevitability and finality of each of the many dénouements. You would keep asking questions, needing to know, demanding explanations, pleading for some clarity to wipe away the confusion. You know now that the questions were your own questions, the answers ones you could only find yourself. But you couldn't find them in isolation, sitting neatly and quietly at home, thinking. You could only find them by throwing them into the tumult of intimacy, through the strife and uproar of another's resistance to you, by testing them against another's (mis)perceptions and (lack of) recognition.

And you did find some answers, although not to the questions you originally asked. And although those answers turned out to be more questions, something had shifted, a new level had been reached. The turmoil subsided and the fear receded. You reached a kind of peace. And it was women who had taught you, who had pushed you, screaming all the way (both of you). Or rather, it was your love for women which had done so, your willingness, reluctant and fiercely resisting though it was, to allow your self to be vulnerable to others so like and unlike yourself.

notes

Chapter One: Introduction

1. As Dale Spender pointed out (Spender, 1983), the Women's Liberation Movement which appeared in the late 1960s was not really a 'second wave' of feminist activity (the 'first wave' being the Suffragette Movement of the early twentieth century). Feminism, as Spender demonstrated, has been around for much longer than that. She herself found a tradition of feminist protest as far as back as the latter half of the seventeenth century, in the work of Aphra Behn. Spender argued that even this early cut off point was arbitrary: 'Virtually any woman chosen as a "beginning" would have predecessors' (p. 33).
2. Note the absence of 'patriarchy' from this list. See chapter two.
3. I might add that this adoration of the French does not extend to the French-speaking lesbian separatists writing in Quebec, Paris and Belgium, whose work is never mentioned, as far as I know, in university courses on 'French feminism' in Australia, with the exception (sometimes) of Monique Wittig. (See Hoagland and Penelope, eds., 1988:429–500; and *Trivia*, nos. 13 & 14.)
4. Janne Ellen Swift (Reid) suggested to me, at the fourth 10/40 conference in Adelaide in April, 1990, that the reason for the gap was the ferocious animosity with which the debates around lesbianism were greeted. Lesbians were so intimidated that they preferred to remain silent.
5. In his *La Volonté de savoir* (translated as *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*), Michel Foucault argued against the 'repression hypothesis' (which he called the 'repressive hypothesis'—«l'hypothèse répressive»—but which I have changed because it is an hypothesis *about* repression, not one which is repressive) on the grounds that nothing which was talked about so incessantly, and acted upon so multifariously, could possibly be called 'repressed'. His thesis was that power resided in those discourses which defined what counts as sexual. But given that he missed the main point—that male sexuality is universalised as the 'human' norm, defined by the requirements of male domination—his thesis is of limited relevance to an account of female sexuality. Nonetheless, I agree with him that 'repression' is not the problem, because it implies that the solution is to throw off constraints. Since male sexuality is already unconstrained, to assert that 'repression' is the problem is to assert, too, that the 'solution' is for women to adopt the male pattern.

Chapter Two: Lesbianism and Phallogentricity

1. Pateman prefers to retain the term 'patriarchy', with the qualifier 'fraternal', to refer to current social relations. She does not think it is appropriate to abandon it, firstly, because that would mean that 'feminist political theory would then be without the only concept that refers specifically to the subjection of women, that singles out the form of political right that all men exercise by virtue of being men', and secondly, because the term has a long history, and 'to abandon the concept would mean the loss of a political history that is still to be charted'. (Pateman, 1988:20)
2. The term 'politically correct'/'politically incorrect' is used in North America and the UK. The equivalent Australian term is 'ideologically sound'. The original term was 'ideologically unsound', IUS for short, which we used when confessing (jokingly, of course) to trivial lapses from full feminist rectitude. Love songs were definitely IUS, as was a yearning for 'monogamy'. Make-up (feminine, not stage) was IUS, and so was a sneaking fondness for the consumption of animal flesh. As far as I know they still are.

Chapter Five: Millett and Firestone

1. I do not agree with Mitchell's subsequent argument that it is not possible to give a structured and coherent account of 'patriarchy' as a political system. It *must* be possible or what are we all doing (including Mitchell). She disagreed with the concept of 'patriarchy' on the grounds of its universalism: There can be no such thing as a *general* system', she said. Any claim to universality is 'part of the ideology by which [patriarchy] maintains itself, and hence is to be distrusted as the basis of a 'scientific investigation'. All political systems are specific, she said, because they are dependent on a specific 'mode of production'. 'Patriarchy...is not in itself a mode of production', she stated (her emphasis).

However, Mitchell also admitted that different political systems have 'common factors', and that patriarchy is 'a

perpetual feature of [a mode of production]’ and ‘an essential aspect of every economy’, even if it does not ‘dominantly determine it’. (Mitchell, 1971:83–4) Given these riders and qualifications, it seems perfectly possible to provide a coherent and structured account of these ‘common factors’, ‘perpetual features’, and ‘essential aspects’. Since I am by no means convinced of the efficacy and accuracy of the Althusserian distinction between ‘science’ (as certain truth) and ‘ideology’ (as some lesser and inferior kind of truth, verging on falsehood), I am not concerned about the question of whether or not that account would be ‘scientific’.

Chapter Six: ‘Autonomy’ or Separatism

1. Strictly speaking, what I am discussing under the heading ‘socialist feminism’ is *Marxist* feminism since it is Marxism which informs socialist feminism, not other forms of socialism such as Fourierist, Saint-Simonian, Owenite, Fabian or Utopian socialism. (For an account of the latter, see Rowbotham and Weeks, 1977). Although theories of socialism did not begin (or end) with Marx, it is the term ‘socialist’ which is most often used to designate Marxist feminism. My use of the term ‘socialist’ is merely following customary procedure.

I have included within the designation ‘socialist feminism’ two somewhat different forms of feminism. One of these covers the work of British and North American socialist feminists who explicitly identify themselves as such, authors like Lynne Segal, Elizabeth Wilson, Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell, Rosalind Coward, Michèle Barrett in Britain, and Hester Eisenstein, and Zillah Eisenstein and the authors who contributed to the volumes, *Capitalist Patriarchy* and *Women and Revolution*, from the USA. The other form of feminism is that which is to be found in the work of North American authors like Alice Echols, Gayle Rubin, and many of the contributors to the *Desire* volume, the *Pleasure and Danger* volume, and the Barnard ‘the Scholar and the Feminist IX’ conference. It is not, strictly speaking, socialist/Marxist, since it does not appeal to a Marxist problematic, attenuated or otherwise. It could more accurately be designated ‘libertarian’ since its chief appeal is to an anti-moralist pluralism as the prerequisite for sexual (and women’s) liberation. What the two forms have in common for the purposes of this book is an antagonism towards ‘cultural’ feminism; and to the extent that that antagonism can be explained theoretically, it is necessary to go back to the Marxist problematic to do so. It is for that reason that I have included both forms under the heading ‘socialist feminism’.

2. The phrase is Jeannie Martin’s. Personal conversation.
3. Penelope’s pejorative use of the term ‘humanist’ is intended, I think, as a criticism of those feminists who insist that feminism address itself to issues which affect ‘humanity as a whole’ *instead* of issues of particular relevance to women. This insistence tends to lead to the ignoring or marginalising of questions about male domination and the specificity of women’s oppression. As Penelope points out, concentration on ‘human’ problems tends to mean that ‘other issues that arise from the male subjugation of females, most significantly SEXISM and HETEROSEXISM, have been shelved as central feminist concerns’. (Penelope, 1986 II:27—her emphasis) Often, the insistence that feminism concern itself with the ‘human’ ignores the fact that ‘human’ is usually defined solely in male terms, and that to fight battles for ‘humanity’ is to fight battles for men.
4. Julia Penelope objects to ‘wimmin...choosing to raise males, choosing to nurture them, choosing them instead of choosing themselves and other wimmin’ (op. cit, p. 23). The raising of sons *is* at odds with the separatist commitment to withdrawing energy, nurturance and recognition from males. In that sense, a commitment to separatism and a commitment to raising sons is a dilemma. It is, however, a dilemma which each woman must resolve for herself. (See Arcana, 1983, for an account of the possibility of raising sons to be nonsexist and nonoppressive to women.)

Chapter Seven: In Defence of ‘Cultural’ Feminism

1. My use of quotation marks around ‘cultural’ is intended to point to the fact that it is a derogatory term which has been imposed on one group of feminists by another, not one which was chosen by the women themselves.
2. The second paper is nearly identical to the first, with the exception of minor variations in wording and a new title.
3. Echols said that the Redstockings’ account of ‘cultural’ feminism was ‘seriously marred by its paranoia and homophobia’ (ibid.). And to a certain extent I must agree with her. The article on ‘cultural’ feminism included in the Redstockings’ volume, written by a woman called Brooke, was indeed a highly debatable account, not least because it accused lesbians of a number of ideologically unsound endeavours, including the rise of ‘cultural’ feminism and ‘lifestylism’. Whether that could be called ‘homophobia’ is a moot point since Brooke herself acknowledged that she was a lesbian, just not one of those she disapproved of.

Another problem with Brooke’s account concerned her less than accurate depiction of socialist feminism which she

saw as ‘coexist[ing] very well’ with ‘cultural’ feminism. Socialist feminism, she said, saw women’s oppression manifested ‘primarily in our private lives (psychologically) via sex roles’. It defined feminism ‘as a purely lifestyle, personal, and sweet sisterhood phenomenon created to make life a little easier a way from the barricades and to help women in self-development’. ‘Socialist feminists’, she said,

see the only, or major, problem for women, as women, to be capitalism or ‘society’, not male supremacy or even sexism. They don’t really analyze the problem differently than that of the working class as a whole. Thus women should concentrate on fighting capitalism, alongside their ‘brothers’. Feminism is pushed to the side, and in the interests of all those men on the left (the real “brothers”!), it wouldn’t do to have the feminism too threatening and political. (Brooke, 1975, 1978:82)

Perhaps it was the ill-informed criticism of socialist feminism that Echols was alluding to with her accusation of ‘paranoia’. However, since Echols herself was equally ill-informed in relation to ‘cultural’ feminism, she is hardly in a position to judge.

4. I must admit to not having read the whole of Brownmiller’s book, although it has been on my shelves for years, the reason being that I have not so far felt able to cope with the helpless fury which the atrocities she depicts would arouse in me. (There are other books I own but have not read for the same reason, including *The Proceedings of the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women*, and Kathleen Barry’s *Female Sexual Slavery*. For the same reason, it was a long time before I could read Andrea Dworkin’s work, and I had to be dragged to the film, *Not a Love Story*. No one, however, could drag me to see *Scream from Silence*, which I managed to miss on at least three occasions).
5. See especially Rich’s paper in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, ‘Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, and Gynephobia’, as well as *Of Woman Born*, passim. One of the contributors to the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, was scathingly dismissive of the former. doris davenport referred to Rich’s paper as ‘a long, and long-winded article’. She said that Rich “‘intellectualised the issue’” of ‘how/ why...white feminists...perceive black wimmin as they do’, and that ‘she hid behind a quasi-historical approach that defused the subject’. ‘She got close’, said davenport, ‘but apparently also got scared, and backed off. It seems she found it hard, after all, to tell the truth and be “accountable”’. (davenport, 1980:85) The ‘truth’, apparently, is that ‘white feminists, like white boys and black boys, are threatened by us [black women]’ (ibid.). In the next paragraph, davenport tells us (white feminists) a little more ‘truth’:

Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. That is, their skin colors are unaesthetic (ugly, to some people). Their hair, stringy and straight, is unattractive. Their bodies: rather like misshapen whitish clay or dough, that somebody forgot to mold in certain areas. Furthermore, they have a strange body odor (p. 87).

One can understand the rage without subscribing to the sentiments.

Chapter Eight: Socialist Feminism II

1. Marx’s and Engels’ purpose in this argument was far narrower and more specific than the interpretation their followers have subsequently placed on it. Their purpose in writing *The German Ideology* was to challenge the hegemony of idealist German philosophy, and in particular the writings of Hegel and his conservative followers, by exposing their failure to deal with the real world:

It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings... In contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men...

(Marx and Engels, 1970[1845–6]:41, 47)

On another occasion, Marx wrote: ‘we [Engels and himself] decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience [or, probably more accurately, consciousness].

The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy'. (Marx, 1975 [1859]:427) In other words, the problem with the dominant form of German philosophy of the time was not that it was philosophy, but that it was ideological, i.e. it served the interests of the ruling class by purporting to give a universal account of the world, while excluding from consideration the misery suffered by the mass of the people. I do not think it is appropriate to transpose this quite specific criticism from its original target, German Idealism, onto feminism on the grounds that feminism does not give analytical and political priority to the level of the economic. Moreover, from a feminist standpoint, Marx's work is also ideological because it excludes from consideration the interests of women.

Chapter Ten: 'Essentialism'

1. Shortened versions of this chapter have been presented as papers at the Women In Philosophy Conference, Sydney University, May, 1988; and at the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand (SAANZ) conference, Australian National University, Canberra, December, 1988. Another version appears in *Australian Feminist Studies*, no. 10, Summer, 1989.
2. Susan G.Cole and the participants in the conference titled 'Sex Liberals and the Attack on Feminism', held in New York in April, 1987, call the adherents of this position 'sex liberals'. Cole defines 'sex liberals' as 'those who defend sexuality no matter what its content and who believe we have free choice in sex...who believe...that sexuality is the last bastion of individualism...[and] that diversity reigns in the sexual arena'. (Cole, 1989:107, 109, 110) While I agree that this approach to sexuality is embedded in the ideology of liberal individualism, I am fascinated by the irony of its appearance within socialist feminist ranks.
3. There has recently been some backtracking on essentialism. (See: Brennan, ed., 1989, especially the contribution by Rosi Braidotti; Weed, 1989). The 'Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?' conference, held in Amsterdam in December, 1987, was organised around the theme of 'essentialism' versus 'social constructionism'. (*Homosexuality*, 1989) Carol Vance's Keynote Address discussed the question of 'current problems in social construction'. While insisting on her continuing adherence to a social constructionist approach to sexuality, Vance argued that there were 'genuine and difficult issues' involved (of which she discussed three). These difficulties, she said, arose because 'some of the problems in social construction theory...originate in the meaning of this theory to members of oppressed groups in the contemporary sexual hierarchy'. (Vance, 1987:26) For the concept of 'sexual hierarchy' she referred the reader to Gayle Rubin's paper, 'Thinking Sex' in the *Pleasure and Danger* volume. (For a detailed critique of this paper, this volume and the sexuality conference where these papers were given, see the next four chapters). In this paper, Rubin mounted an impassioned defence of those she located at the bottom of the 'hierarchy of sexual values'. (Rubin, 1984:279)

Vance's reassessment of social constructionist theories of sexuality is motivated, then, by the fact that these theories cause 'problems' for the members of those lowly sexual 'castes' identified by Rubin. Vance does not say so explicitly. Her three 'difficulties' contain no mention of transsexuals, etc. But her first 'difficulty' distinguishes between two forms of social construction theory. One form she calls 'the most radical', although she hastens to assure us in a footnote that 'there is no suggestion here that the most radical forms of social construction theory are necessarily the best'. This form, she says, 'posits that even the direction [of] sexual desire itself, for example, object choice or hetero/homosexuality, is not intrinsic or inherent in the individual but is constructed'. The other form of social construction theory, she says, posits that 'the direction of desire and erotic interest are fixed, although the behavioral *form* this interest takes will be constructed by prevailing cultural frames, as will the subjective experience of the individual and the social significance attached to it by others' (pp. 18–9—her emphasis). In such a way does she save the label 'social construction' theory for Rubin's 'lower sexual orders', and rescue them from the taint of 'essentialism'. She does so, however, at the cost of rendering meaningless the distinction between 'essentialism' and 'social construction'.

This argument of Vance's is also presumably meant as an answer to the radical feminist critique (although without explicit acknowledgement) that those sexual 'minorities' defended by Rubin and other sexual libertarians, far from being a radical vanguard of sexual 'liberation', are well within dominant norms of phallic sexuality.

4. I have had it suggested to me by Beth Pengelly that the 'sex/ gender' distinction is not quite the same distinction as the 'body/ mind' one. The latter distinction overvalues 'mind' at the expense of 'body', with women confined to the domain of 'body', and 'mind' defined as a male prerogative. (Personal communication, SAANZ conference, ANU, December, 1988). I agree with this qualification, and would also point out that the feminist 'sex/gender' distinction appears to reverse the

- value hierarchy by attributing to the ‘sex/ body/biology’ side of the dichotomy a more privileged access to ‘truth’ than the ‘gender/mind/society’ side. However, the dichotomies are similar in that both postulate two separate ontological domains whose interrelationship causes problems for any theoretical attempt to include both.
5. It could also mean that the ‘question of biological difference’ must take male-female relations into account. But I do not know why she would be arguing that, since she is not concerned with giving an account of ‘biological difference’ (not being a biologist), but of socially constructed ‘gender differences’.
 6. I do not agree with Moira Gatens’ injunction in a later paper to ‘resist the temptation, noticeable in some feminist writing, to replace *one* body with *two*, *one* ethic with *two*, *one* reason with *two*’. (Gatens, 1987:10) Within the context of a critique of the spuriously neutral ‘human’ body which does not include female bodies, I feel it is important to continue to insist on the existence, worth and lineaments of that other which is ourselves. On the question of two ‘ethics’ and two ‘reasons’, I am not entirely convinced that that is what certain feminist writers are proposing. Rather, writers such as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin and Sonia Johnson, for example, are attempting to replace male supremacist *unreason* with feminist or womanly reason, male supremacist immorality with feminist morality. Whatever the problems with that enterprise (and I myself have not resolved them to my own satisfaction), it is preferable to the postulation of a disinterested and non-judgemental ‘plurality’, an enterprise which betokens nothing but a failure of political commitment.
 7. There is yet a further indication that the ‘sex/gender’ distinction is no distinction at all, and that is the number of instances where the word ‘gender’ is used in such a way that there is no possibility of social influence, and where it serves merely as a trendy replacement for the ordinary English word, ‘sex’. The following statement is a typical example. It appeared in the ‘Agenda’ column of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in an article on child adoption: ‘Prospective adoptees will fill out detailed questionnaires which will help eliminate from the [waiting] list those who specify which gender [sic] they will accept’. (*S.M.H.*, 8/10/1987) And this is by no means an isolated example. Used like this, ‘gender’ has become a ‘buzz-word’, indicating nothing but a hazy perception that the word ‘sex’ is ‘out’ and ‘gender’ is ‘in’. And it is not just the mainstream media which engage in this particular solecism, but feminists themselves. Take, for example, this statement by Rosalind Petchesky in her paper discussing the ethics of abortion: ‘Should women get an abortion on the grounds that they prefer a different gender (which amniocentesis can now determine)?’ (Petchesky, 1980:100)
 8. The interested reader is invited to evaluate the arguments linking male sexuality and violence on their own terms. See: Dworkin, 1981 (cited by Echols); Dworkin, 1977, 1983, 1987, and 1988; Griffin, 1980, and 1981; MacKinnon, 1987b.
 9. To quote Catharine MacKinnon: ‘Male is a social and political concept, not a biological attribute’. (McKinnon, 1987a: 150n3)

Chapter Eleven: ***‘Moralism’***

1. Strictly speaking, Rubin would not, I think, identify herself as a socialist feminist, although she comes from a Marxist tradition which she has not entirely repudiated. (Rubin, 1975) In her 1984 paper, *Thinking Sex*, she acknowledges Marxism as ‘the most supple and powerful conceptual system extant for analyzing social equality’, but questions its status as ‘the sole explanatory system for all social inequalities’, and confines its relevance to ‘the areas of social life for which it was originally developed—class relations under capitalism’. (Rubin, 1984:308) Her political commitment is sexual libertarian, even (see below) at the expense of her commitment to feminism.

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