

## OBSERVATIONS & COMMENTARIES

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### *Heterosexuality: A 'Feminism & Psychology' Reader*

Sheila JEFFREYS

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Congratulations to *Feminism & Psychology* for the *Reader* on Heterosexuality. Feminist theorizing on heterosexuality has taken place in rather a stop/start fashion over the last 20 years. The punishments which are regularly visited upon those who seek to draw heterosexuality out of the protective camouflage of 'nature' or 'just the way things are', and into the spotlight of political analysis, can be considerable — and tend to impede the consistent development of the analysis. The history of feminist attempts to theorize heterosexuality is described by Denise Thompson (1993). In the early 1970s, lesbians in the USA started to describe heterosexuality as oppressive and socially constructed and called on feminists to abandon it (see, for example, the article from the USA reprinted in Hoagland and Penelope [1989]). In the late 1970s, these arguments inspired Leeds Revolutionary Feminists in Britain (see Onlywomen Press, 1981) and radical lesbians in Paris and Montreal (see articles reprinted in Hoagland and Penelope, 1989). Lesbian theorists such as Adrienne Rich (1980), Monique Wittig (1982) and Janice Raymond (1986) rounded out the analysis of heterosexuality as a political institution. But if the experience of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists is anything to go by, it is no accident that this line of feminist inquiry did not flow with ease and produced few published works.

I had always expected, after Leeds Revolutionary Feminists wrote the 'political lesbianism' paper in 1979, that we would go on to write a volume on how heterosexuality was manufactured and how it shaped and organized the oppression of women. That book was never written. The anger and vituperation of some lesbians and some heterosexual feminists, both in person and in the pages of newsletters, was so fierce that our group split up and for a few years we threw our energies into general feminist campaigns against male violence (e.g. Women Against Violence Against Women), rather than into the creation of lesbian theory and culture. I went on to write about the construction and function of heterosexual sex (Jeffreys, 1985, 1990), but the wider project was not approached. *Heterosexuality: A 'Feminism & Psychology' Reader* goes some way towards fulfilling the objectives some feminists had back in the 1970s. I suspect that it is this sort of punishment of those who seek

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to politicize heterosexuality that has impeded the development of the analysis up to now. I write to give the editors — and all, heterosexual and lesbian, who wish to continue this inquiry — my support for the long haul. The anger which such questioning can call forth shows the pivotal importance of the issue, but it can cause self-doubt. It can even cause recantation. It can cause even the most clear-thinking to become less sure or less focused upon heterosexuality. Hopefully this volume will put the political questioning of heterosexuality respectably on the academic map. It is a book, not a pamphlet; and many feminists are involved, not just a small group — both those who identify as lesbian and many who do not. But should a backlash develop to this important venture, it is useful to analyse it politically, and to ask why such an area of inquiry is seen to be impolite, off limits, anti-woman. Differences of opinion amongst feminists can be accepted around many issues, but this seems to be one which generates an interesting amount of heat — a heat which cannot be allowed, this time, to shut off discussion.

*Heterosexuality: A 'Feminism & Psychology' Reader* takes the analysis of heterosexuality a crucial step forward by seeking to draw feminists who do not identify as lesbians into the debate. It is exciting to see women grappling seriously with the idea that their sexual orientation is political, however diverse their conclusions and strategies. Heterosexual women replied to the 'political lesbian' article (Onlywomen Press, 1981) too, but on that occasion the responses were defensive, since they were replying, in the main, to an article that was seen as very threatening in its analysis. In this *Reader*, this is not the case. Heterosexual feminists were invited to take part in the debate on their own terms — and they do. It may well be that exciting research and personal writing will follow from this departure and carry the discussion further. It should not be up to lesbians to keep heterosexuality political. Heterosexual feminists have a crucial part to play.

This volume also takes the analysis forward by the inclusion of pieces which look in detail at the ways in which heterosexuality is enforced. The analysis of heterosexual sex here takes place in a context in which heterosexuality itself is problematized, so the discussions cannot simply be liberal or seek to assimilate women into the norms of the institution. Feminist theory which starts from the position that heterosexuality is not a given has an exciting dynamism, and looks very different from an analysis which assumes near-universal and inevitable heterosexuality. The effects of heterosexuality on women's experience of disability, friendship and motherhood, and on the intersection of heterosexual imperatives and racism, all further feminist analysis in ways that can only derive from the problematizing of heterosexuality.

It is particularly encouraging that this volume should be published at a time when there has been a backlash against feminism, not only in the heteropatriarchal world, but in the lesbian community too. Much lesbian writing of the 1980s and 1990s excoriates lesbian feminism. The most hostile attacks on lesbian feminism are coming from proponents of butch/femme role-playing, sadomasochism, queer and post-structuralist theory (see Jeffreys, 1993/4). Apart from attacks on the foolishness of the idea of eroticizing something so unsexy as equality, and on the terrible dangers of separatism, these writers choose to single out the idea of heterosexuality as a political institution for particular attack. Some subscribe unequivocally to the new essentialism which is emerging from the gay male academy, in which gay doctors such as Simon LeVay (1993) have 'proved' that male homosexuality is caused by a particular formation in the brain. Some seek to establish masculinity and femininity

as the products of 'nature', as 'yin and yang' or as the products of some kind of collective unconscious. Others seek to establish that eroticized dominance and submission is essentially what sex is. They seem determined to see the replication of heterosexual forms in the lesbian and gay culture of the 1990s as something authentically 'homosexual', and react with fury to the suggestion that their behaviour, dreams, fantasies, may be affected by living in a heteropatriarchal culture which is constructed out of the norms of an immensely political heterosexuality. This kind of analysis is all a far cry from the social constructionism, the brave and far-reaching questioning, that seemed possible in the 1970s. It is, then, particularly good news that lesbian and heterosexual feminists can work together in the 1990s to theorize heterosexuality, to push back the biological essentialism, the sadoimperative, and the anti-feminism, which are characterizing much that is seen as progressive in 'gender' studies and sexual politics at the present.

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