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12. Sex and Danger: Feminism and AIDS (1987)

Sara Scott

AIDS is a feminist issue. It is no longer, if it ever was, simply the name of a medically recognised syndrome; it is a social disease. AIDS brings with it an enormous range of politically loaded questions; for the Right it has become a metaphor of corruption, retribution and moral decay. For the media, the government and the medical profession, the questions it raises are divided into the moral and the political, with the former frequently disguised as the latter. Organising media linked AIDS advice lines during the last few months has provided me with plenty of food for feminist thought, but little space for discussing the sexual politics of AIDS. At the very least, such a politics would deny the division between practical and moral questions and could argue for changes in sexual practice which would be in the interests of women.

It strikes me as bizarre that through all the sound and fury of the AIDS debate, feminists have remained so quiet. AIDS has created the biggest public debate on sexuality, sexual practice and sexual morality since the media recovered from the shock of the 1960s; yet it is one to which feminists have yet to make a particular contribution. Our silence seems bizarre because the issues raised by AIDS are very much on our political patch. I believe we ought to be thinking fast about the implications of AIDS as a health issue for women, and the implications for feminism of all the things other people are saying.

Condom-bound solutions

The idea that there might be other reasons for criticising male heterosexual practice, apart from catching or spreading disease, has not entered public debates. Instead, the liberal establishment are seeing the past (their own male youth perhaps) through rose-tinted spectacles, building a myth of a pre-AIDS golden age of sexual liberation. While bemoaning the loss of wilder days, they appear to be uncritically accepting a monogamous, condom-bound solution to the present crisis. Meanwhile, the Right are regarding the whole affair if not as the wrath of god, then certainly as a gift from god in providing an argument 'from nature' in support of their views on 'promiscuity', the sanctity of the family and the evils of homosexuality. The Left has had very little

to say about AIDS except to criticise the government campaign. It certainly cannot be assumed that the male Left have listened to feminist insistence that sexuality is socially constructed any harder than other men.

The ways of curtailing the AIDS crisis pushed by the government, media and medical profession are by no means the ones that feminists would promote, but they still raise interesting contradictions. For example, a government opposed to sex education in schools is now obliged to promote the most explicit sexual information for young people. It is being advocated that women carry condoms — previously the prerogative of prostitutes and men alone. This suggestion is itself full of ambiguities. In accepting uncritically that women are more responsible than men, it fails to challenge male behaviour and puts the burden of changing their acts and attitudes on to individual women within personal relationships. It takes as 'natural' men's resistance to self control, and falls far short of promoting what an earlier generation of feminists referred to as 'male continence'. At the same time, public permission for women to carry condoms urges us to declare an interest in and preparedness for heterosexual penetrative sex, which women have always been supposed to deny. Most women on the pill, for example, have chosen this form of contraception in part for its invisibility. Young women's only approved role in relation to sex has been to be 'overwhelmed', an attitude which fits uncomfortably with having a packet of Fetherlite in their handbags.

There is a major contradiction for those who use AIDS to advocate a return to 'old fashioned' values: the act which is most acceptable to them is, in AIDS terms, the most dangerous. Women's health campaigners have recognised this

HE HAD JUST FAILED CYNTHIA'S ROUTINE BOY TEST

for generations — hence the campaigns for male continence in relation to venereal disease in the early part of the century. Feminists have understood that penetrative sex has never been free of fear for women: the fear of pregnancy, in or out of marriage; fear of contraceptive failure or side-effects, many of which are life threatening; as well as fear of disease. Our solution has been to promote changes in men's sexual practices. We should advocate non-penetrative sex, with all its positive implications for women's sexual pleasure, as the best way of combatting the spread of AIDS. It's too contradictory for men in general and the Right in particular to advocate 'non-normal' sex because of a health crisis — which is why they're trying to get away with condoms as the solution. We shouldn't be letting them.

The male gay line

Because AIDS is such a new problem it is possible to get radical ideas through to places they would never normally reach, but there is no-one pushing feminist ideas through these channels. Gay men active around AIDS have had unprecedented success in encouraging the media and others to talk about high risk practices in relation to AIDS, rather than high risk groups. This has been argued on the basis that not all men who engage in homosexual sex identify as homosexual and they will not therefore 'hear' advice aimed at high risk groups. When some people are identified as 'high risk', it is possible for others to disassociate themselves from the problem as they do from the group. At the same time, this argument is an attempt to use a philosophical idea about the historical construction of sexuality, in a political present tense. Contemporary sexologists have argued that the concept of a homosexual person is an extremely recent one; until fairly late in the 19th century, homosexuality was identified solely in terms of acts not identities. The law encoded only a series of non-procreative sexual acts, in which buggery appeared alongside bestiality.

What are the implications if gay men are successful in using this argument as a health education tack, an argument which also aims to reduce the homophobia which AIDS has been used to stir up? Could this kind of intervention be part of a continued retreat from identity amongst gay men, with the demise of a gender conscious gay liberation movement? In the context of a 'queer bashing' media, the interventions of gay men are a step forward, but we need to be talking about the wider sexual politics.

Women's monogamy

Some parts of the media AIDS campaign have been targeted at women. An AIDS week programme from Thames Television informed women of a commissioned

survey which showed that women are more monogamous than men. The solution proposed for men's non-monogamy and their unwillingness to use condoms was for women to put pressure on them. No attention was paid to the respective difference between men's and women's commitment to monogamy, or to how women are meant to persuade their long-term and supposedly monogamous partners to use condoms as a precaution against AIDS. How many women could admit, even to themselves, that their husbands might visit prostitutes or have affairs? The media made it quite plain during AIDS week on TV that they were not prepared to advocate monogamy for men outright. Instead they landed responsibility on women, saying that women are 'good girls' naturally and can look after the other half of the population.

Just as the 'naturalness' of women's monogamy is assumed, so is the necessity of heterosexual intercourse. I found the nearest to a feminist media statement in the following from a Channel 4 update to its *Well Being* booklet on sexually transmitted diseases:

Many people have found that sexual pleasure does not have to depend on penetration; mutual masturbation, for instance, is completely without risk and can give great satisfaction to couples who are worried about the risks of infecting each other.

No comment.

Most women's magazines have carried articles on AIDS and their approach is best summed up by the *Good Housekeeping* headline: 'AIDS: is all the hysteria a blessing in disguise?' Emanating from these articles is a sense of relief, a current of 'we told you so' satisfaction presented as the view of middle-aged, middle-class married women. Celebrating the death of the permissive society, they suggest smugly: 'If you tend to "sleep around", be sensible and aim to settle down with one partner over the next few years'.

It's sad that so many women felt conned, exploited or threatened by sexual 'liberation' but never developed a feminist critique of it. The line taken by these magazines is not anti-women, but it takes for granted that women prefer monogamy by nature rather than because of the social options available to them, and it takes a cheerfully moral view of the joys of less sex.

On the implications of AIDS for relationships between the sexes, Philip Hodson in *She* magazine wrote:

Men who don't look bisexual (even though they may be) will stand in greatest demand. Women will dress to attract the masculine male, paradoxically appearing more seductive, alluring and sexy ... while others will become practically celibate, with all the sex appeal of boiler suits and bags ...

In this scenario a return to 'old fashioned' moral standards and earlier marriage is to be accompanied by a return to old fashioned sex-roles and stereotypes.

Why our silence?

The more I hear about AIDS and the new morality, the more puzzled I become about feminist silence on the subject.

I don't think that as feminists we are immune to the attitudes of the population at large. A recent Gallup poll showed that 80% of people interviewed see themselves at no risk from AIDS, and that 48% agreed that 'most people with AIDS have only themselves to blame'. The idea of AIDS as a gay men's problem has been a slow one to die. This, coupled with the immunity many of us have so far felt as lesbians, plus our political criticism of many gay male lifestyles, means we have been slow to regard AIDS as having much personal meaning for us. Certainly Vada Hart's article in *Gossip* was an extreme example of burying one's head in the sand. Her argument that lesbians and gay men have nothing in common, only the media insists on lumping us together, is fair enough. But the directive that we therefore reject anything to do with AIDS seems positively callous in the face of the biggest surge in 'queer bashing' that the streets or the press have ever seen. It is also incredibly shortsighted.

As lesbians we are associated with male homosexuality, like it or not. We may not regard homosexuality as a unitary concept — believing that in a society where men have power over women, loving your own sex has completely different meanings depending on which sex you are — but attacks on gay men do not leave us untouched. Attitudes towards homosexuality and the position of women are often closely linked. What distresses me most about the article is that it regards lesbians as unconcerned and unaffected by something of major importance in the lives of other women. I find this hermetically sealed concept of the lesbian community deeply shocking.

Another explanation for feminist silence is that WLM debates about heterosexual practice have been few and far between in recent years. Few public feminist agendas include responsibility for contraception, non-penetrative sex, non-monogamy or

even marriage. In *Marxism Today*, Melissa Benn observes that heterosexual socialist feminists do not talk about sexuality any more:

If the debate about sexuality has taken place anywhere in the 1980s it has taken place within lesbian feminism. It is almost as if the subject of sexuality has returned to a pre-1970 situation for women on the Left: the unspeakable clothed as the irrelevant, the disruptive dismissed as the merely embarrassing.

For these reasons we were ill-equipped to raise feminist issues in the context of AIDS. If we don't rebuild our critique of heterosexuality and heterosexual practice our position will be defined for us *within* the parameters of the present debate. This is what I feel Lynne Segal in last month's *New Socialist* is already doing. She claims that feminists have failed to distance themselves from the mainstream anti-sex response to AIDS and, even suggests that the anti-sex scare tactics of the popular press, equating casual sex and death, are following the lead set by some feminist positions on sex:

they convey a message women have been hearing for some years from a small, but vocal, feminist minority. Sex with men is always and inevitably dangerous. 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bisexual' they might say today.

If only it were so easy to persuade the popular press to promote feminist messages. Actually, the sex and danger line is a lot older than us and has done very nicely without our help.

Lynne Segal is trying to associate feminist critiques of heterosexuality with right-wing morality, obviously believing that we have a secret attachment to the nuclear family, will do anything to reduce heterosexual sex in the world or we are simply too stupid to see where our criticisms lead. Feminists, she feels, are liable 'to join the chorus condemning the "permissive" sixties and heralding a new confining morality'. In her fear that political lesbians are going to forge alliances with Right wing politicians, Segal fails to recognise that if the formation of the WLM owes anything to the sexual liberation movement, it is as much to feminist criticism of its philosophies as to the opening up of sexual mores it created. This acceptance that the 1960s really did represent sexual liberation—the freeing of sexuality from 'policing and punishment' rather than the construction of new codes for social control—suggests a dangerous forgetfulness of the lessons of the early 1970s in the face of the quite different problems of the mid-1980s.

We have to find a fuller way of discussing sexual liberation and sexual morality. In Melissa Benn's recent article on feminism in the eighties, she dances on the grave of political lesbianism (a little disconcertingly for those of us yet unburied) and the possibility of a feminist sexual 'morality': 'There has been a growth in the refusal of feminism to accept any idea of a 'correct' or 'incorrect' kind of sexual practice'. She claims the lesbian S/M debate was about 'a rejection by some lesbian feminists of a prescriptive public morality about sex'. I do not believe that our views on sex have become so liberal, nor that we are in danger of being embraced by the Right, but I fear we will be allocated to one side or another unless we get our act together.

Getting our act together

Some of Lynne Segal's points are important — for example, that the media campaign has consistently reduced sex to the 'activity of the penis', and that the government campaign has fostered anxiety and guilt about sex in both men and women (witness thousands of helpline calls from people frantic about oral sex — a comparatively low risk practice, but one that is not seen as 'normal'). She argues that given the power imbalance between the sexes, AIDS can only be countered by 'honesty', 'openness' and more 'imaginative' (women-centred?) sexual habits, which necessitates more equal relationships between men and women, ie women's liberation. What concerns me is her lack of criticism of men's sexual exploitation of women in 'normal' heterosexual sex, her association of feminists who voice this criticism with the anti-sex lobby, and her nostalgia for a 'joint sexual politics with men', which she sees as integral to the WLM of the early 1970s.

By contrast, Ros Coward makes a well-argued case for feminist engagement in discussions about AIDS. She states that AIDS is going to create a 'sexual revolution' of one sort or another, so we may as well use the opportunity to push our vision of what that revolution should look like. She suggests that women may have something to gain from the AIDS tragedy:

men and women have different interests at stake in any possible sexual revolution and the crisis produced by AIDS may well have different implications for men and women ... women have been bearing the brunt of making sex safe for men in the past ... But now, suddenly, it's a matter of life and death to *men* that they abandon their historical privilege of spontaneous sex and assume personal responsibility for their actions ... sexuality could be redefined as something other than male discharge into any kind of receptacle. In this new

context where penetration might literally spell death, there is a chance for a massive relearning about sexuality.

It's a long shot, and condoms are far more likely to catch on, but given the personal terrors and dilemmas many heterosexual women are facing at the moment, we really must be saying something. The explicit discussions of sexual practice which AIDS has caused have got to be welcomed, and the necessity for a new kind of sex education for young people is pressing. Youth workers and feminist teachers around the country are using the AIDS crisis as a way into discussing responsibility and the rights of women to redefine their own sexuality. As a movement we should be making as much public noise as possible in support of them.

Cruel ironies, exploitable contradictions

Friends have bemoaned the fact that no-one has listened to feminists when we've tackled the very issues which AIDS is getting everyone in a spin about. As Ros Coward puts it:

There are some especially cruel ironies for feminism in the current situation. We have to watch general pressure mounting to transform sexual innuendo in advertising yet feminist campaigns against sexism in advertising have largely failed. Especially cruel is the conclusion of the British Government AIDS leaflet: 'Ultimately defence against the disease depends on all of us taking responsibility for our own actions'. The feminist call for men to do just that has been something of a voice in the wilderness in the past.

Feminists could be exploiting the numerous contradictions in the Right and Left positions. Like how the Right's 'sex is dangerous' position rests incongruously with their advocacy of 'normal' heterosexual practice. Or the Left's espousal of an outdated liberation politics which substituted one form of women's sexual oppression for another. Perhaps the most satisfying exploitable contradiction is that of a government who, within the space of weeks, moved from attempting to ban sex education in schools, to having to promote frank and detailed information about sexual practice for the entire population!

Ironically, AIDS has promoted the open discussion of sexual practice on an unprecedented scale. We should seize the opportunity to get into the debate, proposing alternatives to a penetrative heterosexual morality and placing a radical, feminist analysis of sexuality firmly on the agenda.

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