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15. Straight Talking (1995)

Stevi Jackson

Many feminists have drawn attention to the need to dissociate critiques of institutionalised heterosexuality from criticisms of individual heterosexual women, but this separation has not always been easy to maintain. I believe this problem is bound up with a wider one: we have yet to find satisfactory ways of conceptualising sexuality as fully social. While the majority of feminists agree that sexuality is socially constructed rather than natural, there is no consensus on what we mean by social construction, nor on how it should be analysed.

Three main strands of analysis have developed over the last two decades, which have, in practice, become associated with particular variants of feminism. Each emphasises a specific aspect of sexuality—the centrality of male domination, the variability and plasticity of sexuality or the construction of our individual desires. It is my contention that each of these facets of sexuality must be addressed and that we should explore the ways in which they intersect with each other. What has tended to happen, however, is that particular groups of theorists concentrate on one aspect of sexuality to the exclusion of others. Because each is pursuing its own political and theoretical agenda, little genuine exchange of ideas takes place.

I am not trying to find some neutral ‘middle ground’: I write from a particular theoretical and political position as a materialist radical feminist, and from a specific personal location as a white heterosexual academic feminist. I want to explore these issues and debates in order to seek a way forward for feminist analysis.

Sexuality and male power

The first tendency, which locates sexuality as a site of male power, had its roots in feminist political activism, in efforts to challenge men’s sexual appropriation and abuse of women. This form of analysis has been pursued primarily, but not exclusively, by radical feminists. It has given rise to analyses of sexual violence and pornography and, more generally, of the ways in which sexuality has been constructed from a masculine perspective. The social construction of sexuality is here seen as serving the interests of men, as coercing women into compulsory heterosexuality. It is therefore linked to a structural analysis of patriarchy. Moreover, the erotic itself is understood as culturally constituted, so that current definitions of

eroticism are shaped by the patterns of domination and subordination intrinsic to patriarchal societies, and written into their cultural representations. (Examples of this argument can be found in Susanne Kappeler's *The Pornography of Representation* and Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer's *The Lust to Kill*.)

Curiously, radical feminist perspectives of this kind are often misread as essentialist, as implying that men are naturally sexually violent and predatory while women are innately loving and egalitarian. It is odd that a perspective dedicated to challenging and changing both male and female sexuality, and to radically transforming our ideas about what is erotic, should be seen as biologically determinist. Nonetheless this has become a familiar theme in attacks on radical feminism. Our emphasis on coercive aspects of sexuality and on the connections between sexuality and women's oppression has also led to the charge that radical feminists cannot deal with sexual pleasure and are simply anti-sex. This ignores the diversity of opinion among radical feminists, and equates opposition to specific sexual practices with a general anti-erotic stance.

There are, nonetheless, aspects of sexuality which are under-theorised from a radical feminist perspective. Radical feminists have not devoted much attention in print to the ways in which sexuality is constructed at the level of our individual feelings, identities and practices. While generally assuming that specific sexual desires and preferences are learnt, we have had little to say about how this happens.

The variability of sexuality

Radical feminists endorse the idea that human sexuality is historically and culturally variable. This is fundamental to all forms of social constructionism, since it challenges the notion that human sexuality is fixed by nature. Historical work on sexuality has been undertaken from a range of perspectives: radical feminists' contributions include Sheila Jeffreys' work on the pathologising of lesbian relations, and Margaret Jackson's analysis of sexological constructions of sexuality. The idea that radical feminists regard sexual relations as fixed and unchanging is another false stereotype.

The agenda for much academic writing in this area, however, has been set by other feminists, particularly those influenced by the French theorist Michel Foucault. The appeal of Foucault to feminists lies in his radical anti-essentialism and his view of power as *constituting* sexuality, rather than merely repressing it. On the other hand feminists have found fault with Foucault's blinkered attitude to gender and with his view of power as diffused throughout society. This conception of power—as everywhere and nowhere, rather than concentrated in the hands of the privileged—is

difficult to reconcile with structural inequalities, with the real material power men have over women. This may explain why Foucault is so attractive to some of those who used to call themselves Marxist feminists, who were always reluctant to accept the degree to which individual men benefit from women's subordination.

Feminists working within a Foucauldian framework have explored the ways in which scientific, medical and legal discourses have historically defined the 'truth' of female sexuality and subjected it to regulation through the power of discourse to name, classify and categorise (e.g. by distinguishing between 'normal' heterosexual femininity and lesbian 'perversity', or between the pure wife and mother and the impure whore). Such analyses are often useful in drawing attention to major shifts in the construction of female sexuality, but tend to overlook historical continuities. This, coupled with the denial of structural power relations, means that Foucauldian feminists fail to recognise the persistence of patriarchal domination, its resilience and adaptability under changing historical conditions.

Sexuality is also subject to variability at any given time. We need to consider the intersections of gender and sexuality with class, race and other social divisions, to think about the ways in which dominant discourses around sexuality have been framed from a predominantly white and middle class, as well as male and heterosexual, perspective. Although some attention has been given to these issues, Foucauldian perspectives tend to focus on sexual diversity *per se*, on 'sexualities'. Here the lack of attention to structural bases of power can become highly problematic: there is no way to establish the similarities underpinning diverse 'sexualities', relate them to dominant modes of heterosexual practice or locate them within power hierarchies. Instead attention is directed to the 'outlaw' status of various 'sexual minorities', each, from a libertarian perspective, equally worthy of protection from persecution. It is not recognized that there is a world of difference between a street prostitute and a millionaire pornographer, or between a man who has sex with a child, and that child.

Libertarian arguments lose sight of the way power constructs desire. Bodies and pleasures are treated as unproblematic, and diverse forms of sexuality are taken as given, already there to be outlawed. This brings us back to the model of repression which Foucault so effectively critiqued. The false equation of the transgressive with the progressive is in fact framed from within the very discourses it seeks to subvert. Both libertarian and authoritarian perspectives on sexuality tend to afford it an overly privileged position; sexual license is seen either as the route to personal fulfilment and social liberation or as leading to individual degradation and social disintegration.

I find Foucauldian analysis interesting in sensitising us to the many, often contradictory, ways in which sexuality has been constructed and regulated. But its inability to deal with the pervasiveness of patriarchal power, with the ways in which what counts as 'sexual' has been constructed in terms of gender hierarchy, is a major problem for feminist theory. The idea that our sense of what is sexual, including our desires and practices, is a product of the particular discourses circulating in our society is potentially useful. But we need to retain a concept of discourses as ideological, serving to obscure or legitimate relations of domination and subordination. Discursive constructions of sexuality have produced very particular 'truths', defining male dominance and heterosexuality as natural and inevitable.

Individual desires

This still leaves us with the problem of the relationship between our individual desires and the discourses circulating within society. On this question, Foucault is frequently abandoned in favour of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has established a virtual monopoly on theorising the construction of sexuality at the level of the individual subject, despite numerous cogent critiques: many feminists and sociologists agree that psychoanalysis is ahistorical, and that it rests on essentialist premises. Moreover, it depends upon interpreting children's emotions through a filter of adult assumptions and then making incredible leaps from presumed infantile frustrations and gratifications to adult sexual desires and practices. No distinction is made between gender and sexuality: the two are conflated and ultimately reduced to the gender of our 'object choice'. Psychoanalysis has been so influential largely because of the lack of alternatives. It is not that there are no other theories, but that they are either inadequate or underdeveloped. For those who are sceptical of psychoanalysis, this is a major gap in feminist theory.

In theorising sexuality we need a means of understanding how we become gendered and how we become sexual without conflating gender and sexuality, without assuming that particular forms of desire automatically follow from feminine or masculine gender and without positing 'heterosexual desire' and 'lesbian desire' as monolithic entities. We need some understanding of how the process of becoming sexual is related to discourses on sexuality circulating within our culture and how these in turn are related to structural inequalities, particular gender inequality. We need to weave these strands together in such a way as to recognise the force of cultural and ideological constructions of sexuality and the constraints of social structure, but without denying human agency and therefore the possibility of resistance and change.

This enterprise, in my view, also requires that we do not over-privilege sexuality. Part of the problem we have in thinking about it derives from the symbolic weight it is made to carry, the way it is conventionally singled out as 'special', as qualitatively different from other aspects of social life. Feminists need to give more critical attention to this cultural obsession with sexuality, including the ways in which it shapes the theories that we ourselves have produced. We should be wary of treating sexuality as important in and of itself, since the importance it is accorded derives from the ways in which it is interrelated with other aspects of women's subordination. While I would insist on the necessity of relating sexuality to gender, I am firmly convinced that the latter is more important than the former. Here my perspective differs from that of some other radical feminists, notably Catharine MacKinnon, who sees gender as constructed through sexuality. My position is derived from Christine Delphy's argument that gender, the existence of 'men' and 'women' as social categories, is a product of hierarchy. Sexuality, in particular institutionalised heterosexuality, is woven into this hierarchy.

Heterosexuality and feminism

Radical feminists have always treated heterosexuality as problematic, and been sensitive to the pervasiveness of power within sexual relations. They have also analysed the ways in which the heterosexual framing of desire impinges on *lesbian* sexuality: analyses of heterosexuality have played an important role in anchoring critiques of lesbian and gay sexual practices (such as S&M) which eroticise power, and of the libertarian theorists who defend and celebrate those practices.

If we are serious about endorsing a social constructionist position, we must accept that those who are fugitives from compulsory heterosexuality do not necessarily escape from its influence. We all learn to be sexual in a society in which 'real sex' is defined as heterosexual penetration, in which sexual activity is thought of in terms of active subject and passive object, in which passion is often infused with fantasies of domination and submission. Thus it seems to me that a critique of heterosexuality needs to underpin all theorising about sexuality.

This is precisely what is missing from many libertarian analyses. In defending sexual 'pluralism' it is often forgotten that feminist theories of sexuality began by questioning the relations of dominance and submission inscribed in conventional heterosexual practice, suggesting that such relations were neither natural nor inevitable, but resulted from the hierarchical ordering of gender. Many of the 'sexualities' currently being defended or promoted reproduce these hierarchies, whether in the form of sado-masochism or 'cross-generational relations' (a euphemism for child sexual abuse). There is no questioning of where such desires come from.

As it is institutionalised within society and culture, heterosexuality is founded upon gender hierarchy, upon men's appropriation of women's bodies and labour (the implicit terms of the marriage contract). The benefits men gain through their dominant position in the gender order are by no means reducible to the sexual and reproductive use of women's bodies. In marriage, for example, the home comforts produced by a wife's domestic labour are probably far more important to a man's well-being and his ability to maintain his position as a man than the sexual servicing he receives. Nevertheless, a man does acquire sexual rights in a woman by virtue of marriage, and a woman who is not visibly under the protection of a man can be regarded as fair sexual game by other men. Fear of sexual violence and harassment is also one means by which women are policed and police themselves. The institutionalisation of heterosexuality also works ideologically, through the discourses and forms of representations which define sex in phallogentric terms, which position men as sexual subjects and women as sexual objects.

Because heterosexuality is the privileged norm in our society, it is rarely thought of as an identity. Nonetheless many of the identities available to women derive from their location within heterosexual relations—as men's wives, girlfriends, daughters or mothers. Attachment to these identities affects the ways in which women experience the institution and practices of heterosexuality. For example, women's ambivalent feelings about housework, their unwillingness to be critical of the appropriation of their labour, spring from their feelings about those they work for and from their desire to be good wives and mothers. In sexual terms, too, women's identities are likely to be shaped by heterosexual imperatives—the need to attract and please a man.

To name oneself as heterosexual is to make visible an identity which is generally treated as an unquestioned fact of life. This can be a means of problematising heterosexuality and challenging its privileged status. For women, however, being heterosexual is not a situation of unproblematic privilege. Heterosexual feminists may benefit from appearing 'normal' and unthreatening, but heterosexuality as an institution entails a hierarchical relation between (social) men and (social) women. Resistance to subordination within this hierarchy is fundamental to feminist politics.

It is hardly surprising that heterosexual feminists prefer to be defined in terms of their feminism—their resistance—rather than their heterosexuality, their relation to men. Resisting the label heterosexual, though, has its problems. It can imply a refusal to question and challenge both the institution and one's own practice. It can serve to invalidate lesbianism as a form of resistance to patriarchy and to deny the

specific forms of oppression that lesbians face. For these reasons many lesbian feminists may share Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson's scepticism about those who 'call for the dissolution of the dichotomous categories "lesbian" and "heterosexual"'.

Questioning this distinction, however, is by no means antithetical to radical feminism. The categories 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' and 'lesbian' are rooted in gender—they presuppose gender divisions and could not exist without our being able to define ourselves and others by gender. If we take Christine Delphy's argument that 'men' and 'women' are not biologically given entities but social groups defined by the hierarchical and exploitative relationship between them, then the division (also hierarchical) between hetero and homosexualities is a product of this class relation.

The practice and experience of heterosexual sex: power and pleasure

Recent analyses of heterosexuality, whether attacking it or defending it, have tended to focus on sexual experience and practice (by 'experience' I mean what is felt both sensually and emotionally, while 'practice' refers to what we do and how we do it. Specifically sexual experience encompasses our desires, our pleasure and displeasure). These debates have been centrally concerned with power, and the degree to which women can subvert or challenge it within heterosexual relations. The battle lines are drawn between those arguing that heterosexual sex is inescapably oppressive for women (e.g. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger), and those who maintain that men's sexual power is fragile and vulnerable to subversion (e.g. Lynne Segal in *Straight Sex*). Both arguments are problematic. On the one side are those with an overly deterministic view of male power and on the other, those who minimise its effects and overestimate its instability.

From a materialist perspective, desire, as currently socially constituted, is inevitably gendered. This is as true of lesbian sexuality as of heterosexuality. Desiring 'the other sex' or 'the same sex' requires the existence of 'men' and 'women' as socially—and erotically—meaningful categories. What is specific to heterosexual desire is that it depends on gender *difference*, on the sexual 'otherness' of the desired object. This difference is not anatomical but social: it is the hierarchy of gender which 'transforms an anatomical difference (which is itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice' (Christine Delphy, *Close to Home*, p 144).

Since it is gender hierarchy which renders anatomical differences socially and erotically significant, heterosexual eroticism is infused with power—but this

eroticisation of power is not reducible to the mere juxtaposition of certain body parts. It is not an inevitable consequence of an anatomical female relating sexually to an anatomical male, but results from the social relations under which those bodies meet. These social relations can be challenged. Even the most trenchant critics of heterosexuality and penetrative sex (such as Sheila Jeffreys and Andrea Dworkin) recognise that it is not male and female anatomy nor the act of intercourse itself which constitute the problem, but rather the way in which heterosexuality is institutionalised and practised under patriarchy.

But to argue that the power hierarchy of gender is structural does not mean that it is exercised uniformly and evenly at the level of interpersonal sexual relations, nor that our practice and experience is wholly determined by patriarchal structures and ideologies. There is room for manoeuvre within these constraints. To deny this is to deny heterosexual women any agency, to see us as doomed to submit to men's desires whether as unwilling victims or misguided dupes. It cannot be assumed that if women like heterosexual sex we must all be wallowing in a masochistic eroticisation of our subordination—the consistent message of the radical lesbian, or revolutionary feminist, position. Heterosexual feminists, here as elsewhere in their lives, have struggled against men's dominance. We have asserted our right to define our own pleasure, questioned phallocentric models of sexuality and in the process often changed our own desires and practices.

Nonetheless, I am acutely aware that negotiating sexual pleasure with men is often difficult, and depends on their willingness to give up conventional masculine

prerogatives. That there are a few (very few) men out there prepared to attempt more egalitarian sexual forms of sexual practice does not negate the structural power that accrues to men as a group. Moreover, some women are materially better placed to challenge this power than others. Academic heterosexual feminists are relatively privileged compared with most other women: we have access both to economic independence and to feminist ideas and support networks—hence we are in a stronger position to negotiate the terms under which we enter into sexual relationships with men. Many women have little option but to accommodate themselves to male desires and seek fulfilment in the giving of pleasure. (This attribute of femininity is not confined to sexuality: the ethic of service to men is also fundamental to other aspects of gender relations.)

In the end, what heterosexual feminists do in bed has little impact on institutionalised male domination. While the personal is always political, concentrating on the narrowly personal while ignoring the broader political context is not the way forward for feminism. It is impossible to imagine a truly egalitarian form of heterosexuality while gender hierarchy and hence gender division persists; and if that division were eradicated heterosexuality would no longer exist in any meaningful sense.

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