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Love your enemy?

the debate between
heterosexual feminism
and political lesbianism

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We are publishing this pamphlet because we think the discussion among feminists about political lesbianism is important. The Leeds Revolutionary Feminists paper was originally written as a conference paper and then published in WIRES, the internal national newsletter of the women's liberation movement. Many women have heard of the debate who have never read any of the papers. It generated so much interest and feeling that we wanted to make the arguments available in a more permanent form. But our publication of the paper and the ensuing correspondence does not mean that we as a collective necessarily agree with or support the positions stated or the ways in which they are stated. There are a number of other letters which we wanted to include in this pamphlet. We wrote to all the women involved but in several instances received no reply and thus could not publish without permission. For the sake of political and editorial clarity we have decided to include brief statements, collective and individual of our own (Onlywomen Press) ideas. These are to be found towards the end of the pamphlet.

Letters marked with a star ☆ have been cut

POLITICAL LESBIANISM: THE CASE AGAINST HETEROSEXUALITY

We know that the question of whether all feminists should be lesbians is not new. We have had to work out our ideas on the subject because often when we talk about our politics and what it means to say men are the enemy, with other women, we are asked whether we are saying that all feminists should be lesbians.

We realise that the topic is explosive. It is something we are supposed to talk about at home and in close and trusted groups of friends and not make political statements about in the movement, lest our heterosexual sisters accuse us of woman-hating. Is it true that we must conceal our strong political beliefs on the subject when talking with other feminists? We would like to raise the whole issue for discussion in a workshop; not just whether all feminists should be lesbians, but precisely why we think they should be and whether and how we may begin to talk about it more openly.

We do think that all feminists can and should be political lesbians. Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women. The paper is divided into two parts. The first covers the reasons why we think serious feminists have no choice but to abandon heterosexuality. The second is arranged in the form of questions raised and comments made to us about the subject of political lesbianism and the way we think they should be answered.

(1) What heterosexuality is about and why it must be abandoned

Sexuality

What part does sexuality play in the oppression of women? Only in the system of oppression that is male supremacy does the oppressor actually invade and colonise the interior of the body of the oppressed. Attached to all forms of sexual behaviour are meanings of dominance and submission, power and powerlessness, conquest and humiliation. There is very special importance attached to sexuality under male supremacy when every sexual reference, every sexual joke, every sexual image serves to remind a woman of her invaded centre and a man of his power. Why all this fuss in our culture about sex? Because it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained. (This should be a book, can't really be gone into now.)

The heterosexual couple

The heterosexual couple is the basic unit of the political structure of male supremacy. In it each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps or even sheds at the bottom of the garden. In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying 'their' man as part of the enemy. Any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger.

Penetration

Penetration (wherever we refer to penetration, we mean penetration by the penis) is not necessary to the sexual pleasure of women or even of men. Its performance leads to reproduction or tedious/dangerous forms of contraception. Why then does it lie at the heart of the sexualised culture of this particular stage of male supremacy? Why are more and more women, at younger and younger ages, encouraged by psychiatrists, doctors, marriage guidance counsellors, the porn industry, the growth movement, lefties and Masters and Johnson to get fucked more and more often? Because the form of the oppression of women under male supremacy is changing. As more women are able to earn a little more money and the pressures of reproduction are relieved so the hold of individual men and men as a class over women is being strengthened through sexual control.

The function of penetration

Penetration is an act of great symbolic significance by which the oppressor enters the body of the oppressed. But it is more than a symbol, its function and effect is the punishment and control of women. It is not just rape which serves this function but every act of penetration, even that which is euphemistically described as 'making love'. We have all heard men say about an uppity woman, 'What she needs is a good fuck'. This is no idle remark. Every man knows that a fucked woman is a woman under the control of men, whose body is open to men, a woman who is tamed and broken in. Before the sexual revolution there was no mistake about penetration being for the benefit of men. The sexual revolution is a con trick. It serves to disguise the oppressive nature of male sexuality and we are told that penetration is for our benefit as well.

Every act of penetration for a 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.

(2) Questions and Comments

(a) But it sounds like you are saying that heterosexual women are the enemy!

No. Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. All the good work that our heterosexual feminist sisters do for women is undermined by the counter-revolutionary activity they engage in with men. Being a heterosexual feminist is like being in the resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe where in the daytime you blow up a bridge, in the evening you rush to repair it. Take Women's Aid for example: women who live with men cannot tell battered women that survival without men is possible since they are not doing it themselves. Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle.

(b) But we don't do penetration, my boyfriend and me

If you engage in any form of sexual activity with a man you are reinforcing his class power. You may escape the most extreme form of ritual humiliation but because of the emotional accretions to any form of heterosexual behaviour, men gain great advantages and women lose. There is no such thing as 'pure' sexual pleasure. Such 'pleasure' is created by fantasy, memory and experience. Sexual 'pleasure' cannot be separated from the emotions that accompany the exercise of power and the experience of powerlessness.

(If you don't do penetration, why not take a woman lover? If you strip a man of his unique ability to humiliate, you are left with a creature who is merely worse at every sort of sensual activity than a woman is).

(c) But my boyfriend does not penetrate me, I enclose him

A rose is a rose by any other name and so is penetration. Or possibly, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a boar's ear' is a more apt expression. The kindest interpretation is to say that believing in enclosure is wishful thinking. It would be more realistic to say that it is a cop-out and a rationalisation for continuing the activity. Enclosure, where an active vagina (helped by strengthening exercises) sucks in a penis could only take place where a woman and a man were born fully formed, totally innocent, onto an uninhabited desert island (where they might well never discover fucking anyway). No act of penetration takes place in isolation. Each takes place in a system of relationships that is male supremacy. As no individual woman can be 'liberated' under male supremacy, so no act of penetration can escape its function and its symbolic power.

(d) But I like fucking

Giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously. Women who are socialists are prepared to give up many things which they might enjoy because they see how these things tie into and support the whole system of economic class oppression which they are fighting. They will resist buying Cape apples because the profits go to South Africa. Obviously it is more difficult for some feminists to give up penetration which is so fundamental to the system of oppression which we are fighting.

(e) It is much easier for you in the lesbian ghetto than for me. I have to live out the contradictions of my politics which is a hard, relentless, day-by-day struggle with the man I live with

That's simply not true. Living without heterosexual privilege is difficult and dangerous. Try going into pubs with groups of women or living in a women's house where youths in the street lay siege with stones and catcalls.

Heterosexual privileges are male approval, more safety from physical attack, greater ease in dealing with the authorities, getting repairs done, safety from a besieging obscene phone-caller, being able to refer to a man in the bus queue or at work which brings smiles of approval from women and men, let alone the financial advantages of being attached to a member of the male ruling class who has greater earning power.

Because we choose to live without these privileges we resent being used by heterosexual feminists as fuelling stations when they are worn down by their struggles with their men. Women's liberation groups and women's households should be a refuge and support for heterosexual sisters in resolving their contradictions by getting out but should not be used to prop up heterosexual relationships and thereby shore up the structure of male supremacy.

(f) But lesbian relationships are also fucked up by power struggles

That is sometimes true, but the power of one woman is never backed up by a superior sex-class position. Struggles between women do not directly strengthen the oppression of all women or build up the strength of men. Personal perfection in relationships is not a realistic goal under male supremacy. Lesbianism is a necessary political choice, part of the tactics of our struggle, not a passport to paradise.

(g) I won't give up what I've got unless what you offer me is better

We never promised you a rose garden. We do not say that all feminists should be lesbians because it is wonderful. The lesbian dream of woman-loving, bare-breasted, guitar-playing softballers, gambolling on sun-soaked hillsides is more

sued to California, supposing it bears any resemblance to reality, than to Hackney.

But yes, it is better to be a lesbian. The advantages include the pleasure of knowing that you are not directly servicing men, living without the strain of a glaring contradiction in your personal life, uniting the personal and the political, loving and putting your energies into those you are fighting alongside rather than those you are fighting against, and the possibility of greater trust, honesty and directness in your communication with women.

Communication with heterosexual women is fraught with difficulties, with static which comes from their relationships with men. Men distort such communication. A heterosexual woman will have a different perception and reaction to things you say; she may be defensive and is likely to be thinking 'What about Nigel?' When you talk of women's interests and the future and survival of women, her imagination may be blocked by concern for her man and his brothers. You feel under pressure to say nice things which will not threaten her.

(h) You are guilt-tripping us

No. Guilt-tripping is used to prevent women from telling the truth as they see it and from talking about hard political realities. It is you, heterosexual sisters, who are guilt-tripping us. It is possible to stop collaborating and asking you to do that is not a guilt-trip.

(i) Are all lesbian feminists political lesbians?

No. Some women who are lesbians and feminists work closely with men on the male left (either in their groups or in women's caucuses within them), or provide mouthpieces within the women's liberation movement for men's ideas even when non-aligned. It may well be that these women find it more difficult to see that men are the enemy because they are treated as substitute but inferior men by left males and are able to feel superior to the straight women who are still struggling against sexual oppression in their beds. They are not woman-identified and gain privileges through associating with men and putting forward ideas which are only mildly unacceptable to male left ideology.

(j) But you don't understand how difficult it is to give up men

Most of us know from personal experience how practically difficult and painful it is to decide not to fuck again and get out from the man we live with and/or love. It is usually only done with the love, support and strength of other women who have made that break and whose criticism and straight-talking spurred us

on. We know that for some women, e.g. those with children, those with no easy access to the movement, and those without the experience of living on their own, the break is more difficult than for others and they need more time and practical support. We know how difficult it is to find a women's house to move into and what it is like to feel like a 'new girl' at the women's disco. But part of the support must be in explaining as clearly as possible the political reasons for our own choice and talking honestly about all the difficulties with the women who are making it.

Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group
(WIRES 81)

Paper first given to a conference in September 1979



Dear Wires,

Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group's paper "Political lesbianism: the case against heterosexuality" offended and angered me, but I'm glad they wrote it and Wires printed it because those ideas have been hanging around for years but have never been stated so baldly before.

It's also the first time I've seen feminists directly deny the principle that every woman's experience is real, and valid, — that women have the capacity and the right to make their own choices about their lives without being told what's good for them by someone else, or being ostracised for not conforming.

I know there's unspoken tension between lesbians and heterosexual feminists. We're suspicious of each other — cautious and defensive because it's hard to empathise with choices that seem strange — even perverse. The same credibility gap divides other groups of women — mothers and non-mothers, older and younger women, black and white women.

But to canonize those divisions with abstract theory instead of communicating with each other — confronting them in a way that MEANS something to our own conscious experience of our different lives, and builds on those experiences — well, whatever happened to consciousness raising? This isn't a vanguard cadre group with a five-year apprenticeship and an entrance exam, it's a liberation movement, for all women.

Standard, sexist heterosexual sex with penetration as the unquestioned pinnacle is oppressive to women and tailored to men's interests, but that's not news and it's not contentious. The tragedy is that women's tentative attempts to explore and reveal and challenge standard sexual practice have been killed stone dead by the two commandments that if you do it with women you're OK and if you do it with men, you're out.

"If you engage in any form of sexual activity with a man you are reinforcing his class power." Full stop. End of discussion.

But lesbianism, we're told, provides "the pleasure of living without the strain of a glaring contradiction in your personal life, uniting the personal and the political, loving and putting your energies into those you are fighting against, and the possibility of greater trust, honesty and directness in your communication with women."

What's the secret? My "personal life" (I'm a lesbian) is riddled with glaring contradictions, dubious motives, irrational and compulsive needs and desires. I have a very few friends I really trust and none of them is a lover. I may be unique, but I suspect from observation and conversations I've had with others