The Feminist Sexuality Debates and the Transformation of the Political

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In this essay I examine the history of the sexuality debates among feminists. In both the nineteenth century and the recent sexuality debates the personal is taken to be foundational for a political stance, while simultaneously the debates transform feminist understandings of the extent to which the personal is political. I suggest that this transformation undermines the epistemological assumptions of the debates, resulting in a feminism that cannot be radical.

I.

Ann Ferguson has claimed in several articles that central to the most recent feminist sexuality debates is disagreement over the “correct” feminist theory of sexuality, social power, and sexual freedom (Ferguson 1983, 10-16; 1984, 106-12; 1986, 11-13). According to Ferguson:

a. While one party to the debates sees a fundamental connection between intimacy and sexuality, the other sees such a connection between pleasure and sexuality,

b. While the first party sees sexuality shaped by sexual objectification as a tool of male domination, the other sees sexuality as shaped by sexual repression that is the product of all institutions, interactions, and practices that distinguish the normal/legitimate/healthy from their opposites and privilege certain sexual expressions over others,

c. While the first party sees sexual freedom as presupposing equality and respect, as well as requiring the elimination of patriarchal institutions and sexual practices, the other sees
sexual freedom as requiring oppositional practices that transgress respectable categories.

Ferguson suggests that these are the central disagreements in the sexuality debates because they are implied by the beliefs of each party about the “correct” feminist position on sexuality. Moreover, she points out that

d. While the first party believes that “feminists should repudiate any sexual practice that supports or ‘normalizes’ male violence” and “reclaim control over female sexuality by developing concern with our own sexual priorities which differ from men’s,” the other believes that “feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions, or moral judgements that stigmatize sexual minorities and thus restrict the freedom of all” and “reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives us pleasure and satisfaction.” (Ferguson 1984, 108-09; 1986, 12).

According to Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, the most recent feminist sexuality debates are similar to debates among first wave, that is, nineteenth and early twentieth century, feminists (Dubois and Gordon 1984, 31-49). DuBois and Gordon, like Ferguson, point out the major foci of disagreements between the parties to the first wave feminist sexuality debates. It seems that first wave feminists also disagreed about sexuality itself, one party believing that male and female sexual desire differ fundamentally, the other believing that both are healthily lusty. Consequently, the first party saw male sexuality as dangerous to women, while the second saw a double standard that represses women as bad and, as a result, while the first party looked for means to impose boundaries on male sexuality, the second looked for means to liberate female sexuality.

In light of the similarity between past and present sexuality debates among feminists, it is tempting to believe that the terms of the sexuality debates have been steady. But, this is not so. In what follows, I will argue that even the terms of the sexuality debates among second wave feminists have not been steady.

The most recent sexuality debates are not the first for second wave feminists. Those that preceded them expressed an underlying tension in the feminist movement and resulted in an open heterosexual—lesbian split. I will examine a history of the earlier and later sexuality debates among second wave feminists. I will use the history to point out that in both the nineteenth century and the recent sexuality debates the personal—especially the experiential connection of marginality, difference, sexuality and consciousness—is taken by the parties to the debates as foundational for a political stance, while simultaneously the debates bring with them a transformation of feminist understandings of the extent to which the personal is political. I will end by examining the conse-
quences of this transformation and suggest that it undermines the epistemological assumptions of the debates. I will show that the result is a feminism that cannot be radical.

II.

I stated above that the current sexuality debates are not the movement’s first and that the previous ones expressed the tension and brought out into the open a heterosexual-lesbian split. In retrospect, neither the tension nor its eventual expression is surprising in a movement that adopted as a slogan and took seriously the claim that the personal is political and, therefore, did not shy away from examining sexuality and practices and institutions that legitimize specific sexual relations, such as love, marriage, the family and sexual violence. Second wave feminists made strong claims about sexuality and its setting from the start. Thus, for example, the 1970 manifesto of the New York Radical Feminists states:

Radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression. . . . The oppression of women is manifested in particular institutions, such as marriage, motherhood, love, and sexual intercourse. . . . Through those institutions the woman is taught to confuse her biological sexual differences with her total human potential. . . . Biology is destiny, she is told . . . She is told that sexual intercourse, too, is her function, rather than a voluntary act which she may engage in as an expression of her humanity. (Connell and Wilson 1974, 253-54)

That same year Kate Millet declared in “Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution” that a sexual revolution would bring about “the end of sexuality in the forms in which it has existed historically—brutality, violence, capitalism, exploitation, and warfare—that it may cease to be hatred and become love” (Millet 1973, 365-67).

These strong claims forming the kernel of early second wave feminist critique of sexuality and the practices and institutions that legitimate specific sexual relations also form implicitly the kernel of a critique of male-dominated heterosexuality and heterosexism. They were quickly followed by an open critique of male-dominated heterosexuality and heterosexism that was intimately tied with the examination of lesbian practice. The feminist connection of experiential marginality, difference, sexuality, and consciousness as foundational for a political stance is first made in this context.

Two documents are very instructive in this respect Radicalesbians’ “Woman-Identified Woman” (1973, 240-45) and Charlotte Bunch’s “Lesbians in Revolt” (Bunch 1975, 29-37). Both analyze the symbolic value of lesbian
practice in a heterosexist world. The first document opens with the question "What is a lesbian?" and answers as follows:

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then but certainly later—cares to allow her... She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society—the female role. (Radicalesbians 1973, 240)

Charlotte Bunch further develops this answer.

In our society which defines all people and institutions for the benefit of the rich, white male, the Lesbian is in revolt. In revolt because she defines herself in terms of women and rejects the male definitions of how she should feel, act, look, and live.... The Lesbian rejects male sexual/political domination; she defies his world, his social organization, his ideology, and his definition of her as inferior. (Bunch 1975, 29)

Though she points out clearly that a lesbian does not choose women to escape oppression but because she loves women, Bunch emphasizes the political nature of lesbian practice. She states:

Woman-identified Lesbianism is ... more than sexual preference; it is a political choice. It is political because relations between men and women are essentially political; they involve power and dominance. Since the Lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system. (Bunch 1975, 30)

Even after pointing out that not all lesbians are politically conscious and therefore are not necessarily aware of their choices as political choices, Bunch adds:

The lesbian's independence and refusal to support one man undermines the personal power that men exercise over women. Our rejection of heterosexual sex challenges male domination in its most individual and common form. We offer all women something better than submission to personal oppression. We offer the beginning of the end of collective and individual male supremacy. (Bunch 1975, 33)
Thus far, lesbian practice has been presented as a challenge to male domination. Bunch goes on to call attention to the relative marginality of lesbians in a heterosexist society and proclaims distrust in heterosexually committed women. She writes:

Heterosexuality separates women from each other; it makes women define themselves through men; it forces women to compete against each other for men and the privilege which comes through men and their social standing. . . . The lesbian receives none of these heterosexual privileges or compensations since she does not accept the male demands on her. She has little vested interest in maintaining the present political system since all of its institutions . . . work to keep her down. (Bunch 1975, 34)

And she ends by saying:

As long as straight women see lesbianism as a bedroom issue, they hold back the development of politics and strategies that would put an end to male supremacy and they give men an excuse for not dealing with their sexism. . . . Lesbianism is the key to liberation and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance. Those who remain tied to men, individually or in political theory, cannot always put women first. (Bunch 1975, 36)

I have quoted from Bunch’s essay at length because her formulation of the connection between the personal and the political and her claims about experiential marginality, difference, sexuality, and consciousness as foundational for a political stance are striking, and also because in the two decades that have passed since the publication of “Lesbians in Revolt,” they have been forgotten. I believe that the forgetfulness is not due to this formulation’s lack of theoretical sophistication nor to “dyke baiting,” a common movement experience in the early and mid seventies. The forgetfulness is the result of the normalization of both lesbian practice and lesbian-feminism. This normalization naturalized lesbian practice and robbed it of its symbolic value, thereby robbing it of its earlier political significance. It clipped the political wings of lesbian-feminism by validating lesbianism as one among a plurality of feminist perspectives.

The normalization of lesbian practice and the normalization of lesbian-feminism are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The poorer the symbolic value believed to be embodied in lesbian practice, and the less the practice is perceived as deeply political because of its fundamental opposition to male-dominated heterosexual society, the less compelling is the claim that lesbian-
feminism, as a conscious articulation of the politics of lesbian practice, provides a vanguard understanding of women’s experience in male-dominated heterosexual society and the strategies needed to radically transform that society. Similarly, the less a radical feminist political promise is seen as special to lesbian-feminism, the less compelling is the claim that lesbian practice should be perceived as deeply political and rich in symbolic value.

III.

Among the products of the normalization of lesbian practice and lesbian-feminism was a containment of the critical force that lesbians in the second wave feminist movement claimed for themselves. By 1979 both the feminist critique of the practices and institutions that legitimize specific sexual relations and the feminist experimentation with alternative practices and institutions were in decline, and the New Right was on the rise. Responding to this threatening combination, some socialist-feminists that were not identified as lesbians, like Barbara Haber, called for the reinitiation and development of a feminist critique of personal life, especially of the family as a setting in which personal life takes place (Haber 1979, 417-30).

At first it may seem that what Haber was calling for in her essay “Is Personal Life Still A Political Issue?” was simply the continuation of an examination of practices and institutions that legitimize specific sexual relations. But I believe that Haber’s essay is an example of the ways in which the normalization, hence the containment of the critical force of lesbian-feminism worked.

Haber saw the critique of personal life as the most relevant contribution that the feminist movement could make to the lives of women in the late seventies. Because she was aware that by 1979 the movement had been trying to bridge the heterosexual-lesbian split, and because she also saw dangers in the bridging, she stated that “a feminist movement that attempts to maintain its gay-straight unity at the price of ignoring the crisis that faces the majority of women makes itself irrelevant” (Haber 1979, 422).

Though she may have hoped otherwise, Haber seems willing to risk resplitting the movement. Moreover, her call for the initiation and development of a critique of personal life was a call to heterosexual feminist women. She appealed to them because, like the women the critique was to speak to, they belonged to what she calls the “American sexual mainstream.” She believed that while (a) lesbians “have maintained to a far greater degree than heterosexual feminists a cohesive, critical view of the family and heterosexuality,” and (b) lesbians have a vantage point that is invaluable in future development of a critical theory of personal life,” nonetheless, (c) “the feminist movement must take advantage of the experience of both gay and straight women” (Haber 1979, 421).
Thus Haber puts the lesbian-feminist and heterosexual-feminist perspective on the same plane. Moreover, she goes beyond normalization to identifying indirectly lesbian-feminism as the cause of the heterosexual-lesbian split in the movement. She describes the split as the product of the early seventies lesbian moralism and the dismissal of heterosexuality. She writes:

Having discovered that smashing monogamy and heterosexuality were inadequate programs for their lives, women who were committed to their sexual preference for men and unwilling to write off family life became defensive and eventually (more or less) silent on sexual and family issues. (Haber 1979, 422)

The most subtle of Haber's containment moves is her call for a critique of personal life that is focused on the family as the setting of personal life. A critique of the family can demystify it without necessarily being critical of the family or of personal life. Thus in Capitalism, The Family and Personal Life Eli Zaretsky argues that under capitalism, personal life—the life of people as individuals capable of and seeking intimacy and happiness—while still falling short of what it can be, which is autonomous life activity, is served by the family, the only existing, even if not wholly satisfactory, institutionalized refuge from the brutality of capitalism (Zaretsky 1976). And in The Reproduction of Mothering Nancy Chodorow exposes the complex relations between gender and generation as structures underlying the family, but it is only the family as engendering, the family insofar as it reproduces women as mothers and men as fathers, that is the subject of Chodorow's criticism (Chodorow 1978). According to her, it is the function of the family as an engendering agency that is the core problem of the family, but this function can be disposed of and the family can be restructured and preserved.

Neither Zaretsky's nor Chodorow's work includes an examination of the family as a social institution that legitimizes specific sexual relations, or explores its connections to other practices and institutions that do this such as romantic love, marriage and sexual violence. Both Zaretsky and Chodorow concede that the family is male dominated, yet they believe that the family is redeemable and affirm its value. Indeed, Zaretsky's work can be used to assign the family and personal life the same kind of symbolic political value that Bunch assigned to lesbian practice because the family and personal life, as he sees them, stand opposed to capitalism and the alienation and dehumanization it produces.

Zaretsky's and Chodorow's treatment and affirmation of the family tends to make the family immune against a lesbian-feminist critique. Thus, they have contributed to the more than decade-long reprivatizing and depoliticizing personal life, processes to which Haber also contributes. These processes stand in tension with and even undo the deprivatizing and politicizing of personal life begun by the New Left and carried on by feminism. Chodorow's contribu-
tion to the re-privatization and depoliticization of personal life has two dimensions. Her work has been used to naturalize and, therefore, normalize lesbian practice. She showed that in the engendering family girls became psychologically women and mothers without separating themselves from women and mothers in the radical way that boys separate themselves from women and mothers in order to become men and fathers. This has been used by some, such as Adrienne Rich, to suggest that lesbian attraction rather than heterosexual desire is natural (Rich, 1980).

IV.

While large segments of personal life became and stayed taboo subjects, sexual practices and choices became the focus of a feminist critique as a by-product of the attempt to organize a feminist response to pornography in the late seventies. There was already a beginning of a feminist critique of pornography and the pornographic imagination in the late sixties. But during most of the seventies feminist energies were focused on sexual violence—on rape, battering, sexual harassment, and child abuse—and not on pornography. Feminist energies that had been focused on sexual violence were slowly drained as they were submerged in victim service organizations that were dependent on state, federal, or other funding agencies whose interest was not in the feminist critique of the sexual victimization of women nor in the development of strategies of social transformation. At the same time, a feminist critique of pornography and a related critique of sadomasochistic practices gathered momentum.

A feminist critique of sexual violence, because it is a critique of systemic victimization and it is not victim-blaming, is not a critique of women’s personal lives and life choices. At first, it may seem that a feminist critique of pornography and sadomasochism is merely an extension of the feminist critique of sexual violence and that it, too, is not critical of women’s personal lives and life choices. But this is not so since some women, including women with unquestionable feminist credentials, find pleasure in partaking in the pornographic imagination and in sadomasochistic practices. For these women a critique of pornography and sadomasochism is a critique of their sexual practices and choices.

The critical feminist response to the feminist critique of pornography and sadomasochism together with that critique and the ensuing debate between feminists on both sides of the issues form the most recent feminist sexuality debates. They have followed and developed the pattern set for the containment of the critical role that lesbians claimed for themselves in the feminist movement in the early seventies. This is especially clear in Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (Rubin 1984, 267-319).
In this essay Rubin relies on Foucault’s work to develop a description of the common discourses about sexuality. According to her, these discourses share several assumptions: they take sex as a natural, thus a pre-social force; they consider this force to be dangerous, destructive, and negative; they assign it special significance in human life; they provide a single standard to which all sexuality has to conform; they appraise sex acts or practices according to a hierarchical system of values about sex and their distance from the standard; and they take there to be some line in sexual conduct that if crossed, only peril can follow.

Rubin claims that feminism, specifically what she calls “anti-sex” feminism, shares a variant of these assumptions. She makes this point most explicitly in relation to her extensive description of the hierarchical system of values about sex:

According to this system, sexuality that is “good,” “normal,” and “natural” should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is “bad,” “abnormal,” or “unnatural.” (Rubin 1984, 280-81)

Later she describes the “anti-sex” variant of feminism:

Proponents of this viewpoint have condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression as anti-feminist. Within this framework monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term intimate relationships, and which does not involve playing with polarized roles, has replaced married procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy. Heterosexuality has been demoted to somewhere in the middle. Apart from this change, everything looks more or less familiar. The lower depths are occupied by the usual groups and behaviors: prostitution transexuality, sadomasochism, and cross-generational activities. (Rubin 1984, 301)

Rubin’s comparison of the common discourses about sexuality with “anti-sex” feminist discourse of sexuality points out both the latter’s achievements and its limitations. A comparison of these achievements and limitations in the context of the previous comparison establishes one thing very clearly—the absence of radicalism in “anti-sex” feminism and, by implication, in certain lesbian practices.
According to Rubin, there are radical lesbian practices and they are radical because they are transgressional. Their practitioners are a true vanguard in the current struggles about sexuality. They are, however, not alone:

The women's movement may have produced the most retrogressive sexual thinking this side of the Vatican. But, it has also produced an exciting, innovative, and articulate defense of sexual pleasure and erotic justice. This “pro-sex” feminism has been spearheaded by lesbians whose sexuality does not conform to movement standards of purity (primarily lesbian sadomasochists and butch/femme dykes), by unapologetic heterosexuals, and by women who adhere to classic radical feminism rather than to the revisionist celebrations of femininity which have become so common. (Rubin 1984, 302-03)

By identifying certain sexual practices, whether lesbian, homosexual, or heterosexual as long as they are transgressional, as providing a vantage point from which one can understand and transform sexuality in a better way than “anti-sex” feminism understands and transforms it, Rubin in the early eighties, like Bunch in the early seventies, treats experiential marginality, difference, sexuality, and consciousness as foundations for a political stance. Bunch’s connections led her to claim the feminist vanguard for lesbians. However, Rubin’s connections lead her away from feminism. After acknowledging that feminism has provided guidance to progressive thinkers interested in thinking about sex, she states:

I want to challenge the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To automatically assume that this makes it a theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender on the one hand and erotic desire on the other. (Rubin 1984, 307)

Denying that feminism, any feminism, is capable of a theory of sexuality that explains sexual oppression and sexual liberation, Rubin denies the value of the current sexuality debates. In addition, she removes from the domain of feminist discourse another segment of personal life. In doing so she contributes to the construction of a feminism for which the personal is not political.

V.

Rubin’s strategy of containment was successful. By now, but for a few letters to the editor in feminist newspapers, the current sexuality debates have turned into a lukewarm debate over various legal strategies against the pornography industry. Still, Rubin's ability to distance herself from feminism is dependent
on her belief that experiential marginality, difference, sexuality, and consciousness are foundations for a political stance, especially for one that is superior to those it competes with. Because of Rubin's flight from feminism, and similarly because of Haber's call for a feminist critique of personal life, albeit one led by heterosexual feminists, it is not obvious that there is something problematic about believing that the personal is foundational to one's political stance while at the same time actually constraining the political critique of the personal. But something is definitely problematic here.

In the context of a feminism that takes seriously the claim that the personal is political, it makes sense to believe that the personal is foundational for one's political stance. This is so because in the context of that kind of feminism, one's political stance articulates the political structures and discourses, the relations of power, domination, and submission in which one is enmeshed. One's political stance is then, among other things, immediately and directly about and for oneself.

A feminism that takes seriously the claim that the personal is political because it takes the personal as foundational for the political is a standpoint feminism. It is a feminism that not merely denies the possibility of separating the personal and the political but one that could be described, following Nancy Hartsock, as a feminism according to which:

1. Material life . . . not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations.

2. If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect both that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other and that the vision of the ruling class will be partial and perverse.

3. The vision of the ruling class structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate and, therefore, cannot be dismissed as simply false.

4. In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be [politically] struggled for and represents an achievement. . . .

5. Because the understanding of the oppressed is an engaged vision, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historical and liberatory role. (Hartsock 1983, 118-232)

According to Sandra Harding in "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," standpoint feminism is a descendant of the Marxist
reformulation of the Enlightenment’s belief that men, and only men, possessed the innate abilities for objective and, therefore, emancipatory understanding of reality (Harding 1986, 645-64). According to Harding, Marxism reformulated the “Enlightenment vision so that the proletariat, guided by Marxist theory and class struggle, became the ideal knower, the group capable of using observations and reason to grasp the true form of social relations, including our relation to nature” (Harding 1986, 654). Under standpoint feminism, women became the ideal knowers.

However, a standpoint feminism that is silent about personal life, that does not critically examine sexuality and the practices and institutions that legitimate certain sexual relations, that is not critical of love, marriage, the family, heterosexism, and sexual violence is a standpoint feminism that cannot be used fruitfully by a woman for a critical awareness of her self in her socio-cultural context. It is a standpoint feminism that does not, because it cannot, have a dynamic dialectical relation of the personal and the political and, therefore, it is a standpoint feminism whose growth is necessarily stunted.

This is the kind of feminism that Haber and Rubin and the many who have contributed to the re-privatization and de-politicization of personal life—including the naturalization of lesbian practice and normalization of lesbian-feminism—offer by contributing to the constraints on a feminist discourse of personal life. This is also the kind of feminism that all premature closures of past and present sexuality debates partake in creating. No matter how heated, a discussion, a debate, a struggle for power and control of the terms of the discourse, keeps the issues alive and makes growth possible. And at this point, if it is not too late, growth in the feminist critique of personal life, which means repoliticization, is essential to a reradicalization of feminism.

NOTES

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1. Throughout the paper I use “feminist” and “feminism” in the singular, though there are many kinds of feminists and many forms of feminism. Most of those that fall under my singular “feminist” and “feminism” when I discuss specific positions are mainstream radical socialist, lesbian, and lesbian SM feminisms and feminists. At times, however, my use of the singular “feminist” and “feminism” is abstract and idealized, which is, I believe, rather problematic because of the departure from the historically situated movements. I suspect that my abstract and idealized uses of “feminist” and “feminism” are a kind of what Iris Young calls “a utopian moment.” I do struggle with it but I was unable to eliminate it from this paper.

2. The 1968 demonstration against the Miss America Pageant was motivated by criticisms of the use of women as sex objects. In 1969, Bay Area Women’s Liberation
protested a local underground paper's decision to publish pornography. For writing from this time see, for example, Dunbar (1969).

3. This is very clear from the approach to the issues. See, for example, the analyses by Barry, Griffin, Morgan, and Russell in Lederer (1980) and Linden et al. (1982) in comparison with Brownmiller (1975) and Russell (1975), the classic feminist analyses of rape.

REFERENCES


