

## **The Eroticism of (In)Equality**

© Sheila Jeffreys

(presented at 'One is not born a woman' conference, celebrating 50th anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* organised by Fruaenmediatum at Cologne, 22-24 October, 1999.)

**Abstract:** In this paper I will argue that a massive obstacle to women's equality lies in the way in which sex under male supremacy is constructed out of the eroticising of women's subordination and male dominance. I will look at how the eroticism of inequality is constructed by sexologists, the 'scientists' of sex, and the sex industry which they take as their example. I will show how this eroticism of inequality is celebrated and justified in queer and postmodern theory. I will suggest that only a sexuality of equality is consonant with women's freedom. To reach this men's prostitution behaviour must be brought to an end. The behaviours of male dominance and female subordination, called gender, or masculinity and femininity, that are presently the basis of the sexuality of inequality must be replaced by the behaviour of equality.

### **Sex and male dominance**

Potentially sex could be a simple source of pleasure. It is not inevitably about violence and domination. But the sex of male supremacy is created out of women's subordination and male dominance. Sex is not just a simple pleasure but politically constructed to maintain male dominance. Through sexual pleasure men, and, unfortunately women too, can obtain excitement from women's subordination. The difference that is celebrated in the sex of male supremacy is the difference of power between men and women. It is power difference that is eroticised.

Men's sexual use of women is crucial to their idea of themselves as masculine, through sex manhood is created. Through sex the difference between men and women is acted out physically but much more important is the power difference that is acted out politically. Sex under male supremacy is not about biological difference but about power difference. It is women's subordination and men's domination that are eroticised as what sex is right now. That is what gives the cruel excitement to pornography and prostitution and leads to rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and children.

Women in the west get told that they have equality now, or at least equality of opportunity. But that the equality must not interfere with sex. Sex in the west has not changed with the advances women have made towards equality. With the massive legalised sex industry based upon the eroticised subordination of women, sexualised inequality has become more and more entrenched in the economies of countries all over the world and institutionalised. Sex, the pornographers and queer theorists argue, is sexy precisely and only because it is about the excitement of power difference. Those feminists who have campaigned against pornography and prostitution are accused of spoiling the fun and being anti-sex. This shows how entrenched is the notion that there can be no sexuality of equality. Unfortunately, I suggest, whilst what

is seen as fun, sex and even love, is created out of the excitement of women's inequality, no real equality or freedom for women is possible. If the future still holds prostitution and sadomasochism then it does not hold women's freedom.

## **The construction of the eroticism of inequality**

### **Eroticising the housewife in the postwar period**

In this century women have fought back against the alienating and humiliating sex of male dominance and female subordination. One way in which they did this was through seeking to avoid sexual intercourse or simple lack of enthusiasm for that practice. An industry of sexology has been created by male doctors to treat what was diagnosed by the sex experts in the 1920s as women's political resistance. Much of my work has involved reading the books of the sexologists, the scientists of sex. The sexologists have been responsible for constructing our understanding of what sex is through sex advice books and sex therapy. At time of *The Second Sex* the advice of European sexologists was blatantly sexist. Sexologists argued that women should seek sexual pleasure through surrender to their husbands.

Eustace Chesser popular sexologist of 40s and 50s writes that many a girl may:

...find it impossible to surrender herself completely in the sex act. And complete surrender is the only way in which she can bring the highest pleasure to both herself and her husband. Submission is not the same thing as surrender. Many a wife submits, but retains, deep within herself, an area which is not conquered, and which, indeed, is in fierce opposition to submission.

Women were to have only vaginal orgasms and men were given strict instructions to ensure that women did not wriggle around during sexual intercourse so as to try to get clitoral stimulation. Women were given strict instructions on how to behave before and during sexual intercourse. They must approach it with 'joyful anticipation', clearly many did not. They must show enthusiasm during the act but not move too forcefully lest the penis drop out. It was considered very hard for men to get a penis back in once their concentration had been broken.

The sexologists were determined that all women should submit to sexual intercourse because sexual pleasure in that act was understood to ensure a woman's submission to her husband in all aspects of her married life. Women who sought to avoid sexual intercourse were accused of seeking mastery over their husbands. Some women used subterfuges to avoid their duty of sexual pleasure in submission during sexual intercourse. One sexologist told what he considered the shocking story of how women would be insubordinate during sexual intercourse in ways which could put men off their stroke. One husband complained that his wife would continue to read a book during sexual intercourse, another that his wife would continue to put nail varnish on her toenails. Sexologists in the postwar period had to pay lip service to women's 'equality' though, as one commented, it had been bad for 'family life'. They could not suggest that men simply ignore women's feelings and use their bodies as entirely passive masturbation aids. The strategy was changed to one in which women would

actively seek and glory in their submission, through orgasm in intercourse, to their husbands. This was called 'women's sexuality'.

### **The sexual revolution of the 1970s**

In the 1960s and 70s a sexual revolution is supposed to have taken place in the west (now being exported all over the world). I have identified this sexual revolution as being the promotion of men's rights to sexually use women in whichever way they choose and women's duty to relish servicing men's desires. The message of the 'revolution' is clear in the book generally seen as the highpoint of the sexual revolution, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (ref). In this book women are told that men's sexuality is very fixed and automatic, like 'putting a quarter in a vending machine' whereas women's sexuality is flexible so women are well suited to servicing men's interests through such things as covering themselves in black latex and becoming a cross between a snake and a seal, or allowing themselves to be tied up. Comfort instructs men, for instance, that the expression on a gagged woman's face when she finds she can 'only mew' is 'irresistible to most men's rape instincts'.

The sex that women were allowed to have, the sex they were encouraged to embrace by sex advice writers, women's magazines, pornography, was sex in which they gained pleasure through 'surrender' whilst men remained in control and gained excitement from the degradation of the women. The model for the sex of the sexual revolution was prostitution. Masters and Johnson, for instance, based their sex therapy, designed to cure men's problems with erections, on interviews with prostitutes about how they serviced men. Married women were advised to do the same. Alex Comfort advised women to learn the wiles of the prostitute if they wished to save their marriages from the divorce court.

In reaction to this model of sex, feminists in the 1960s and 70s, whether in relationships with men or women, sought to construct a whole new understanding of what sex could be, a sex consistent with their desires for equality and human dignity. Feminists criticised the masculine model of aggressive, penis-orientated, goal-orientated, penetrative, objectifying sex. Conference workshops discussed how to practice a sexuality of mutual respect and equality. Feminist campaigns against pornography were able to demonstrate precisely the model of sex that was demeaning or violent towards women from the plentiful examples in porn, the propaganda of womanhatred.

### **The sex industry as sexual liberation: the 1980s**

In the 1980s, to the horror of anti-pornography feminists like myself, some women embraced men's sex industry as offering sexual liberation to women. They defended men's pornography of and about women as offering good ideas for women about how to achieve sexual pleasure. The feminist alternatives that we had begun to envision and practice were all but overwhelmed by traditional masculine notions of what sex should be, this time proclaimed by some women to be what women really wanted. Firstly some women defended men's porn from feminist resistance. Then some of these women started porn businesses of their own, representing precisely the same values as men's porn. The new porn was marketed mainly to lesbians and was strongly sadomasochistic in content.

Sadomasochism: In the 1980s sadomasochism was promoted as the really revolutionary and progressive form of sex by the sex industry, pornographers, queer and postmodern theorists. Whilst the sex of male supremacy has always contained male dominance and female subordination, brutal violence was not usually part of the mix. What was new about the 80s contribution to the 'sexual revolution' was the promotion of practices of clear and obvious violence as 'sex'. Sadomasochism in the sex industry reached into new territory. In Melbourne as in cities around the western world, an sm club was set up called the Hellfire Club. In the club vulnerable women were paid to be whipped. Videos were made and of the activities and circulated around the world. Fashionable young men watched and tried to get their girlfriends to join in. The practices of the brothel were now ordinary entertainment for young people. I wrote and spoke out against it, saying that the sex it promoted was precisely the sex that women had to end in order to have any freedom, the sex that underlay men's sexual violence against children, against women at work, in relationships, against women in prostitution. The proprietor of the Melbourne club who conducts enthusiastic correspondence with serial killers in US prisons and holds nights in his club to celebrate them, as well as Nazi nights, dedicated a night to ridiculing me with publicity across town.

### **The lesbian sexual revolution**

In the 1980s lesbians were drawn into the values and practices of the 'sexual revolution'. In my book *The Lesbian Heresy* I show how practices of sadomasochism and pornography were marketed at lesbians as what exciting sex was. Some women set up porn magazines and video businesses producing materials with precisely the same formula as that found in men's porn. Women degraded and violated, or just mildly subordinated but this time by other women. Most of the women involved in these businesses were prostituted women whose notion of sex was formed, often from sexual abuse in childhood and then through years of sexual exploitation. It was not a sex of equality. Producing pornography for women seemed slightly less demeaning than men's sex industry, and offered a way to gain a living from their experience of victimisation. Some, like Annie Sprinkle, with 20 or more years in prostitution to men, then marketed themselves as 'sex educators' who would teach heterosexual and lesbian women how to do sex. The acceptance that such women have won in some areas of lesbian and feminist culture indicates how difficult it is for many to imagine a sexuality of freedom.

Three ideologies have been employed in the justification of these practices and in defending them from a feminist critique. These are liberal individualism, queer theory and postmodern feminism.

### **Sexual liberalism**

Liberal individualism is the ideology that inspired the sexual revolution. The practices of prostitution, sadomasochism, even pedophilia are justified by the notions of consent and choice. We are told that desiring adults, and even children, can make choices about how they behave sexually and the creation of sexual object 'choice' should be the aim of progressive sexual politics. The crucial word here is 'object'. As Suzanne Kappeler has pointed out the sexual liberal is an old-fashioned privileged gentleman who requires a variety of objects to service his needs and acquires them

from the vulnerable and needy. Sexual liberalism is about the power of men. Under male supremacy the 'choices' of women and children are severely limited by economic need, by the propaganda of womanhatred, by violence and victimisation. 'Consent' is a notion which hides the material realities of power difference and exploitation. 'Consent' implies a level playing field in which empowered adults and children frolic. That level playing field does not exist. What the sexual liberals understand as sex is constructed from inequality.

## **Queer theory**

All these practices of dominance and submission have been justified and celebrated in queer theory and queer politics in the 1990s. Queer politics is a politics constructed and dominated by the concerns of certain groups of gay men. Queer politics represents itself as a progressive coalition politics in which sexually marginalised categories of people campaign to transform sexual politics. The standard queer coalition is LGBT, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. In queer theory practices that result from oppression are promoted and celebrated as representing 'queer' liberation. Prostitution, sadomasochism, transsexual surgery, piercing and cutting even pedophilia, are justified as transgressive and creating a positive sexual future. In some versions of the transgressive coalition all of the above are included with the LGBT groups. Queer theory and politics disappears lesbians. The very word queer is discriminatory, replacing 'lesbian and gay' with one term, queer, which takes us back to the situation when 'gay' or 'homosexual' were supposed to cover women but clearly did not. Under the mantle of 'queer' lesbian interests have been suppressed and subsumed. The grand construction of lesbian feminism, theory, practices and institutions like bookstores, centres, women only spaces, based upon egalitarian values and womanloving have been badly damaged by the male dominated queer agenda.

One way to recognise the effects of oppression on young women, lesbians and gay men is to see the extent to which they mutilate their own bodies to relieve the pain they experience. In self-mutilation 2 1/2 million young Americans, overwhelmingly female, slash and burn their bodies in private and in guilt, cutting the pain of sexual abuse, rape and female oppression into their flesh. In the 1990s this self-mutilation has become the base of a rapidly growing business of cutting, tattooing and piercing studios, where cutters exploit the oppression of women, lesbians and gay men in particular, for a profit. Self-mutilation, as the human rights theorist Rhoda Howard pointed out, is a sign of socially despised status. The socially despised can now get others to mutilate them in ways that establish the mutilation as socially acceptable. This is self-mutilation by proxy. Piercing studios is one form, transsexual surgery and sadomasochism are others. Some men privately carry out penectomies in practices of self-mutilation and are recognised to suffer from serious emotional problems. When men pay for surgeons to carry out penectomies in transsexual surgery, they gain the imprimatur of medicine for their practice. These practices I call, in UN language, harmful cultural practices so-called because they are seen to be 'chosen' by the oppressed themselves, to be supported by social acceptance or tradition, to be bad for health, and to arise from the subordination of women.

## **Postmodern feminism**

Queer theory is based upon the ideas of postmodernism. Postmodern feminism is based upon the ideas of some unregenerately sexist French men, notably the gay sadomasochist Michel Foucault. Postmodern feminism has contributed 3 ideas to feminist theory in the 1980s which seriously undermine the liberation project, and make it even more difficult to envision a sexuality of equality.

1/ One is the idea that there is no such thing as woman. This is substantially different from the notion that one is not born a woman. Postmodern feminists attack any use of the word woman to describe the political category into which female children are raised as 'essentialising'.

2/ Another contribution is the idea that 'gender' is flexible. Feminists have long argued that 'gender', meaning the behaviours of male dominance and female submission into which boys and girls are trained, are socially constructed rather than biologically based. Postmodern feminists like Judith Butler, lose sight of the material reality in the oppression of women which is the base for the construction of gender, and subscribe to the notion that gender is like a set of clothes that anyone can put on for fun and to be transgressive. Thus gay men's traditional transvestism, and the use of surgery by transsexuals or chemicals by transgenders, is rendered progressive and revolutionary, seen as showing the world that gender is not fixed onto biological males and females but infinitely malleable. Some actually argue that there are many genders, not just the two created by male dominance and female subordination.

Postmodern theory is used to support transsexual surgery and what are called 'transgender' practices in which some men and women may choose not to undergo surgery but are almost certainly on a regime of hormones that will severely endanger their health whilst mutilating their bodies chemically. Queer and postmodern theorists pretend to a fashionable gender flexibility. As postmodern 'feminists' question whether there can be any such thing as women they laud the supposed flexibility of those, mostly gay men, who practice the adoption of some aspects of the oppressed status of women. I am not a fan of the word 'gender'.

For many queer and postmodern theorists gender is treated as if it were a sex toy. The American lesbian sadomasochist Pat Califia argues that gender, the difference between the sexes, must be retained because it provides the excitement of sex. It is indeed the dynamic of sadomasochism. But for the feminist project gender is something which cannot be retained, our freedom depends upon the elimination of 'gender'. Femininity and masculinity are not just forms of clothing or attitude but the behaviours of male dominance and female subordination. Without male dominance gender would not be imaginable, unless we really believe that there is a biological basis to the trappings of dominance and submission which sadomasochists and transgenders adopt for their pleasures.

Femininity and masculinity, Catharine MacKinnon argues, are created out of the necessity to reproduce the pleasures of eroticised inequality. In the butch/femme roleplaying of traditional heterosexuality women are constrained by tight, short clothing, uncomfortable shoes, hidden by makeup and trained to perform restricted and feminine movements whilst smiling in deference. Men do not have to expose

flesh, may wear comfortable shoes, do not have to paint their faces and may take up space and spread their bodies as they wish, without smiling at all. This is a carefully choreographed power difference on display that is supposed to result in sexual excitement. It is not natural, but it is necessary to maintain the eroticism of inequality.

Envisioning women's freedom requires us to think beyond gender, not to cling to it. We need to imagine a world in which there would genuinely be no such thing as clothes for women, i.e. more expensive, of poor materials, skimpy and flimsy, and uncomfortable, a world in which women can stride and need not have chilly gaps where their tiny blouses leave their skintight pants.

3/ A third idea is that there is no such thing as truth. Thus the postmodern theorist of prostitution Shannon Bell writes that there is 'no inherent meaning in prostitution'. There is of course a simple meaning in prostitution, male dominance. There is a glaring absence of men waiting to be picked up by the roadside by women, of men lying on beds or massage tables in brothels dissociating whilst women press parts of themselves into their orifices.

Queer and postmodern notions of 'gender' are hostile to the interests of women and often simply inscribe gay and heterosexual male interests over the interests of women. Women do in fact exist, as a political category of the oppressed. How do we know this? We can, for instance, look at who is in pornography. Last week I tapped the term, 'sexual slavery' into a search engine on the internet. I was writing an entry for a feminist encyclopedia. The list of sites that came up included a few on the comfort women who were forced into sexual slavery to the Japanese military in World War 2. All the others were pornography sites showing prostituted women in sex slavery. There were moving pictures of naked women at top and bottom of my screen. I assume these come up whenever a search includes the word sex. We must remember that internet technology was partly the result of the pornographers search for a more profitable medium. The sex slavery sites encouraged men to be excited by the sex slavery of women and ejaculate to it. None of the sites showed men imprisoned for men's delight. Women do exist, it seems, or the pornography industry would have no stock in trade.

Postmodern feminists argue that there is no such thing as 'truth'. This is not helpful for a revolutionary movement which wants the oppression of women to be taken seriously. It is important that we recognise that there is truth in pain and exploitation, in sexism and racism. These oppressions are particularly clearly evident in pornography and prostitution. One good example is a Cambodia's first pornographic internet page recently created by an expatriot American man. Titled "Welcome to the Rape Camp," the web site features nude Asian women in sexual bondage and encourages users to "humiliate these Asian sex slaves to your hearts content." The site's expatriate American creator, Dan Sandler, has defended his work as legitimate business that will help the economy. "There is a big market in the U.S. for Asian women," he was quoted as saying. "And when I start making money, I'll pay 10 percent in taxes. If I'm successful, I could get a lot of other guys doing it and get a lot of tax revenue." Feminists in Cambodia pointed out that it could promote violence against Cambodian women. Sandler said it was really meant for US consumption so: "It might promote violence against women in the United States. But I say good," Sandler was quoted as saying by the newspaper. "I'm going through a divorce right

now. I hate American women." The three women appearing in the site said to be ethnic Vietnamese were paid dlr\$ 20 each, according to Sandler. This site is a perfect example of that blend of racial and sexual hatred that inspires the sex industry. There is truth in it and there are women.

### **Prostitution is sexual inequality**

Presently the sex of women's subordination and male dominance is becoming established as a profitable industry throughout the world through the legalisation and globalisation of prostitution. In Victoria, the state in Australia in which I live, there are licensed brothels. Prostitution is a massive industry with an estimated 60, 000 men in my town of 3 \_ million abusing prostituted women every week. As well tabletop clubs and other prostitution outlets service many more men's desire to experience the power of sexual dominance. In the brothels and tabletop clubs prostituted women dissociate to survive the assault on their personhood. Men can pay to inflict upon women who would rather be anywhere but there, those practices which would be seen as violence if enacted upon women in any other situation, unwanted sexual intercourse, sexual harassment of twisted nipples and fingers stuffed into women's anuses. Anyone who doubts the violation of self involved in prostitution should ask prostituted women about the smell. They will tell you about how men's penises smell, how their sweat smells and drips on their bodies, how their anuses smell.

If men do these things without paying they are called violence. Ex-prostituted women, survivors, are now asking that we recognise these harmful cultural practices in which men engage as 'commercial sexual violence' or 'bought rape'. In Victoria there are more illegal brothels than legal ones, child prostitution is increasing even in the 'legal' brothels, and both legal and illegal brothels contain Asian and Russian women kept in debt slavery and by force. Meanwhile women in street prostitution still suffer terrible violence. Welcome to the new respectable prostitution industry, quoted on the stock exchange, creating massive profits for male sex industrialists. This must be happening here in Germany too, which has a long tradition of accepting men's abuse of women in prostitution, of allowing profit from this harmful cultural practice.

For the women in the industry prostitution is simply violence they must learn to survive. For women outside the effect of legalisation is a considerable loss of status. Women coming to us in the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women in Melbourne talk of how their marriages of 24/25 years have been destroyed by their male partner's prostitution abuse of women. The women sometimes leave immediately they find out, sometimes try unsuccessfully to change their men. But the damage and humiliation are extreme. They know that the supposed equal marriage was a sham because the men went out to experience the excitement of humiliating other women in brothels. They could not be 'equal' when their male partners did this to other women since they are women. No woman can really be free when forced to live with, work with, or socialise with men who so abuse women and think that some women exist for such abuse.

The sex industry is a vast and growing reservoir of womanhatred. It is teaching a generation of boys and men worldwide what women are and what sex is. It is sex as brutal oppression of women. There are moves now to homogenise the legalisation of prostitution across the EC. It is important that this should be stopped. Important for

the future of all women. A good model to follow is that adopted this very year in Sweden of penalising the buying of sexual services. This is the very opposite of legalising prostitution. Not even a little bit of prostitution is consistent with women's freedom. But it seems hard to know how to pull back from the situation women currently face from the sex industry. The engine of male dominance in the west is fired by the sexual excitement men gain from mastery over women, the sexualised difference of power. Progress for women in the west against the globalisation of sexual exploitation will help to halt that sexual colonisation of women which has spread out through pornography and the trafficking in women to aboriginal communities in Australia, to villages in Papua New Guinea, to South Africa, to eastern Europe and central Asia.

Women's freedom from sexual violence, women's ability to engage in relationships of equality and mutual respect with men at home, at work, depends upon the creation of a sexuality of equality. In a sexuality of equality prostitution would be unthinkable. It would be impossible for men to imagine using a woman's body in marriage or in prostitution simply as an object for his pleasure, irrespective of her personhood or her pleasure. We need to think about and discuss what a sexuality would look like. Until we can imagine it, it is hard to work towards it. In a sexuality of equality, love and passion will not depend upon lacy knickers but upon relationships of mutual respect.