

How Orgasm Politics Has Hijacked the Women's Movement

Why has the Big O seduced so many feminists -- even Ms. -- into a counterrevolution from within?

by Sheila Jeffreys

1 The November/December 1995 issue of *Ms.*, cover-lined HOT UNSCRIPTED SEX, showed a close-up of an African American woman licking her lipsticked lips. Despite all the feminist work that has been done in the last quarter-century to critique and challenge the male-supremacist construction of sex, none of the four articles inside made connections to the whole of the rest of women's lives and status. Set in display type above one was a line from Barbara Seaman's 1972 book, *Free and Female*: "The liberated orgasm is an orgasm you like, under any circumstances." To judge from this issue of *Ms.*, and from the shelves of women's "erotica" in feminist bookstores, an unreflective politics of orgasm seems to have won out.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, it was widely believed that the sexual revolution, by freeing up sexual energy, would make everyone free. I remember Maurice Girodias, whose Olympia Press in Paris published *Story of O*, saying that the solution to repressive political regimes was to post pornography through every letterbox. Better orgasms, proclaimed Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, would create the revolution. In those heady days, many feminists believed that the sexual revolution was intimately linked to women's liberation, and they wrote about how powerful orgasms would bring women power.

Dell Williams is quoted in *Ms.* as having set up a sex shop in 1974 with precisely this idea, to sell sex toys to women: "I wanted to turn women into powerful sexual beings.... I had a vision that orgasmic women could transform the world."

Ever since the '60s, sexologists, sexual liberals, and sex-industry entrepreneurs have sought to discuss sex as if it were entirely separate from sexual violence and had no connection with the oppression of women. Feminist theorists and anti-violence activists, meanwhile, have learned to look at sex politically. We have seen that male ownership of women's bodies, sexually and reproductively, provides the very foundation of male supremacy, and that oppression in and through sexuality differentiates the oppression of women from that of other groups.

If we are to have any chance of liberating women from the fear and reality of sexual abuse, feminist discussion of sexuality must integrate all that we can understand about sexual violence into the way we think about sex. But these days feminist conferences have separate workshops, in different parts of the building, on how to increase sexual "pleasure" and on how to survive sexual violence -- as if these phenomena could be put into separate boxes. Women calling themselves feminists now argue that prostitution can be good for women, to express their "sexuality" and

make empowering life choices. Others promote the practices and products of the sex industry to women to make a profit, in the form of lesbian striptease and the paraphernalia of sadomasochism. There are now whole areas of the women's, lesbian, and gay communities where any critical analysis of sexual practice is treated as sacrilege, stigmatized as "political correctness." Freedom is represented as the achievement of bigger and better orgasms by any means possible, including slave auctions, use of prostituted women and men, and forms of permanent physical damage such as branding. Traditional forms of male-supremacist sexuality based on dominance and submission and the exploitation and objectification of a slave class of women are being celebrated for their arousing and "transgressive" possibilities.

Well, the pornography is in the letterboxes, and the machinery for more and more powerful orgasms is readily available through the good offices of the international sex industry. And in the name of women's liberation, many feminists today are promoting sexual practices that -- far from revolutionizing and transforming the world -- are deeply implicated in the practices of the brothel and of pornography.

How could this have happened? How could the women's revolution have become so completely short-circuited? I suggest that there are four reasons.

Reason No. 1 Victims of the sex industry have become "sex experts."

Sexual capitalism, which has found a way to commoditize nearly every imaginable act of sexual subordination, has even found a way to repackage and recycle some of its victims. As a result, a small number of women who have had lifetimes of abuse and learned their sexuality in the sex industry serving men are now able, often with backing from male sex industrialists, to promote themselves as sex educators in the lesbian and feminist communities. Some of these high-profile women -- who are hardly representative of most victims of the sex industry -- have managed to set up sex magazines such as *On Our Backs* (for practitioners of lesbian sadomasochism) and stripping and pornography businesses. Many women have mistakenly accepted these formerly prostituted women as "sex experts." Annie Sprinkle and Carol Leigh, for instance, have recirculated into women's communities the woman-hating practices of the sex industry. These women have led the derisive laughter directed at those of us who have said that sex can and must be different.

At the same time, a few women who have profited from free-market capitalism in the '80s have demanded sexual as well as economic equality with men. They have escaped, and now want to use women as men do, so they consume pornography and demand strip clubs and brothels in which women will service them. This is not a revolutionary strategy. There is no threat here to men's privilege, no chance of releasing other women from their subordinate sexual status. And once more, men have become the measure of all things sexual.

Formerly prostituted women who promote the sex of prostitution -- but now get paid to lecture and publish -- provide a message that even some feminists have found more palatable than all the visions and ideas we have shared about how to transform sex, how to love each other in passionate equality as the basis for a future in which women could really be free.

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Reason No. 2 The sex of prostitution has become accepted as the model for sex.

We cannot construct a sexuality that will enable women to live without sexual terrorism without ending men's abuse of women in prostitution. Within the women's movement, however, the sex of prostitution has been explicitly advocated and promoted. Shannon Bell in *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (1994) argues that the prostituted woman should be seen as "worker, healer, sexual surrogate, teacher, therapist, educator, sexual minority, and political activist." In this book Prostitutes of New York spokesperson Veronica Vera is quoted as saying we should affirm sex workers as "practitioners of a sacred craft" while affirming sex (presumably any sex including the sex of prostitution) as a "nourishing, healing tool." But in fact the most powerful engine for the construction of male sexuality today is the sex industry.

Prostitution and its representation in pornography create an aggressive sexuality requiring the objectification of a woman. She is made into a thing not worthy of the respect due to another equal sentient individual. Prostitution fosters a sexuality in which it is acceptable for the client to take his "pleasure" on and in the body of a woman who dissociates to survive. This is the model for how sex is conceived in male-supremacist society, and sexologists have built careers upon it. Masters and Johnson, for instance, developed their sex-therapy techniques from the practices of prostituted women who were paid to get elderly, drunken, or just plain indifferent men to have erections and be able to penetrate them. As Kathleen Barry has noted in *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, prostitution constructs a male-dominant / female-submissive sexuality in which the personhood and comfort of the woman, let alone her pleasure, is seen as irrelevant.

Prostitution is very big business and rapidly becoming globalized and industrialized. More than half the prostituted women in Amsterdam, for instance, are trafficked, i.e. brought there, often by deception, from other countries and often kept in conditions of sexual slavery. Australian women are trafficked into Greece; Russian women, into tabletop dancing in Melbourne; Burmese women, into Thailand; and Nepali women, into India. Millions of women in the rich world and many more millions in the poor world are being subjected to the abuse of suffering unwanted male hands on their

bodies and penises in their bodies. Prostituted women do not like to experience this sexual abuse any more than any other women do. They are not different.

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Prostituted women and children are expected to endure many of the forms of sexual violence that feminists would consider unacceptable in the workplace and the home. Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual intercourse are the basis of the abuse, but prostituted women have to receive obscene phone-sex calls, too. They work topless in retailing, car washes, and restaurants. Even as other women workers are seeking to desexualize their work so that they may be seen as something more than sex objects, women in prostitution and sexual "entertainment" are increasingly in demand. Men's prostitution of women reduces the women they abuse and all women to the status of bodies to be sold and used. How can feminists ever expect to eliminate abusive practices from their bedrooms, workplaces, and childhoods if men can simply continue to buy the right to those practices on the street, or, as in Melbourne, in state-licensed brothels?

Tabletop dancing is a type of prostitution now being made acceptable in rich countries as "entertainment." (In poor countries dependent on sex tourism, all prostitution is called entertainment.) Along with other women from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, I recently visited a strip club in Melbourne called The Men's Gallery. Some 20 or 30 women were "dancing" on tables. A cross-section of men -- teenagers from the suburbs, men who looked like college lecturers and teachers, grandfathers, tourists -- sat with their knees under the tables. Often in twos, these men would ask a woman to strip. Doing so, she would place her legs over the men's shoulders, gymnastically showing them her shaved genitalia from front and back in different positions for 10 minutes as the men put money into her garter. The woman's genitals would be inches from the men's faces, and the men would stare, their faces registering expressions of astonished and guilty delight as if they could not believe they are allowed such dominion. Were the men sexually aroused by the incitement of their dominant phallic status? Was this simple exhibition of female genitalia, which denotes women's subordinate status, in itself arousing? For us women observers, it was difficult to understand the men's excitement. Many must have had teenage daughters, not unlike the women, many of them students, whose genitals danced before their mesmerized eyes.

Tabletop "dancing" tells us something we must understand about "sex" as constructed under male supremacy: The men bond through shared degradation of women. The men who frequent such clubs learn to believe that women love their sex-object status and love to sexually tease as they are examined like slaves in a market. And the women, as they told us, just cut off from what they are doing.

Reason No. 3 Lesbians have been emulating gay men.

The feminist challenge to the prostitution model of sexuality has been especially resisted by many gay men and by lesbians who emulate them. As Karla Jay writes, apparently uncritically, in *Dyke Life*:

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Today, lesbians are on the cutting edge of sexual radicalism.... Some lesbians now claim the right to an erotic freedom that was once associated with gay men. A few large cities have sex clubs and S/M bars for lesbians, while pornographic magazines and videos produced by lesbians for other women have proliferated across the United States. Our sexuality has become as public as our tattoos and our pierced bodies.

In gay male culture we see the phenomenon of a sexuality of self-mutilation and slavery, of tattooing, piercing, and sadomasochism, turned into the very symbol of what gayness is. Commercial gay interests have invested powerfully in exploiting this sexuality of oppression as constitutive of gayness. Much of the power of the pink (gay) dollar developed from the provision of venues, bars and baths, in which the sexuality of prostitution could be exacted, though now mostly unpaid. The cultural influence of gay male resistance to feminist challenges to pornography and prostitution has been extensive, heavily financed in gay media by advertising from the gay sex industry.

Some gay men have challenged the dominant/submissive sexuality that prevails in the gay male community, but few so far have ventured into print lest they experience the ire of their brothers. Gay men, raised in male supremacy, taught to worship masculinity, also have to struggle to overcome their eroticization of dominant/submissive hierarchies if they are to become friends to feminism.

The sex of prostitution has been central to the construction of gayness because of the role of prostitution in gay history. Traditionally male homosexuality was expressed, for middle-class men, in the buying of poorer men or boys -- as done by Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, Christopher Isherwood. This was not the model for lesbian practice.

In the 1980s, as lesbians lost confidence in their own visions, strengths, and possibilities -- as feminism came under attack and the sex industry went from strength to strength -- many turned to gay men as their models and began to define themselves as "sexual deviants." They developed an identity in total contradiction to that of lesbian-feminism. Lesbian-feminists celebrate lesbianism as the apogee of woman-loving, as a form of resistance to all the practices and values of male-supremacist culture, including pornography and prostitution. The libertarian lesbians who rose up to decry feminism in the '80s attacked lesbian-feminists for "desexualizing" lesbianism and chose to see themselves as "pro-sex." But the practices of this "pro-sex" stand turned out to replicate the version of lesbianism that had

traditionally been offered by the sex industry. The brave new "transgressive" lesbians were the very sadomasochistic, butch/femme constructions that had long been staples of heterosexual men's pornography.

Such lesbians embraced sex-industry practices as constituting who they really were, the fount of their identity and their being. But all the time they felt deficient because their idea of radical, robust sexuality, that practiced by some gay men, seemed always out of reach. In publications such as *Wicked Women* magazine from Sydney, in the work of Cherry Smyth and Della Grace in the U.K. and Pat Califia in the U.S., these lesbians bewailed their inadequacies at toilet sex, at one-night stands, at managing to be sexually attracted to children. Lesbian sex therapists, such as Margaret Nicholls, became an important part of a new lesbian sex industry.

Now there is a tendency in feminist and mainstream women's magazines to represent this lesbian sexuality of prostitution as a tantalizing dish for heterosexual women to sample and consume. "Transgressive" lesbianism, derived from the sex industry and mimicking gay male culture, is now presented as a progressive "woman's" sexuality, a model for how heterosexual women could and should be.

Reason No. 4 Being subordinated can feel sexual.

There is no such thing as a "natural" sexual pleasure that can be liberated. What gives men or women sexual sensations is socially constructed out of the power relationship between men and women, and it can be changed. In "sex" the very difference between men and women, supposedly so "natural," is in fact created. In "sex" the very categories "men," persons with political power, and "women," persons of the subordinate class, are made flesh.

Nor is sex a mere private matter. In liberal male thought, sex has been shoved into the private sphere and seen as a realm of personal freedom where people can express their individual desires and fantasies. But the bedroom is far from private; it is an arena in which the power relationship between men and women is most revealingly played out. Freedom there is usually that of men to realize themselves on and in the bodies of women.

Sexual feelings are learned and can be unlearned. The construction of sexuality around dominance and submission has been assumed to be "natural" and inevitable because men learn to operate the symbol of their ruling-class status, the penis, in relation to the vagina in ways that ensure women's subordinate status. Our feelings and practices around sex cannot be immune from this political reality. And I suggest it is the affirmation of this power relation, the assertion of a distinction between "the sexes" by means of dominant/submissive behavior, that gives sex its salience and the tense excitement generally associated with it under male supremacy.

Since the early '70s, feminist theorists and researchers have uncovered the extent of sexual violence and how the experience and the fear of it curtail women's lives and opportunities. Child sexual abuse undermines women's ability to develop strong and loving relationships with their own bodies and with others, and confidence about acting upon the world. Rape in adulthood, including marital and date rape, has similar effects. Sexual harassment, voyeur-ism, flashing, and stalking undermine women's equal opportunities in education, at work, in their homes, on the street. Women who have been used in the sex industry develop techniques of dissociation to survive, an experience shared by victims of incest, and deal with damage to their sexuality and relationships. Awareness of the ultimate threat clouding women's lives, the possibility of sexual murder, is brought to us regularly by newspaper headlines about the deaths of women.

The cumulative effects of such violence create the fear that makes women limit where they go and what they do, be careful about looking in the backseat of the car, locking doors, wearing "safe" clothing, drawing the curtains. As feminist research such as that of Elizabeth Stanko in *Everyday Violence* (1990) shows, women are aware of the threat of men's violence and change their lives in response to that fear even though they may not have experienced serious assault. Against this everyday reality of ordinary women's lives, the notion that an orgasm "under any circumstances" could vanquish that fear and remembered vulnerability is perhaps pseudofeminism's cruelest hoax.

Men's sexual violence is not the work of psychotic individuals but the product of the normal construction of male sexuality in societies like the United States and Australia now -- as a practice that defines their superior status and subordinates women. If we seriously want to end such violence, we must not accept this construction as the model for what "sex" really is.

Sexual pleasure for women is a political construction, too. Women's sexuality as well as men's has been forged within the dominant/submissive model, as an artifice to appease and service the sexuality constructed in and for men. Whereas boys and men have been encouraged to direct all feeling into the objectification of another and are rewarded with "pleasure" for dominance, women have learned their sexual feelings in a situation of subordination. Girls are trained through sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and early sexual encounters with boys and men in a sexual role that is reactive and submissive. We learn our sexual feelings as we learn other emotions, in male-dominant families and in situations in which we lack power, surrounded by images of women as objects in advertising and films.

Dee Graham's wonderful 1994 book *Loving to Survive* looks at female heterosexuality and femininity as symptoms of what she calls societal Stockholm Syndrome. In classic Stockholm Syndrome, hostages bond with their captors in terror and develop

submissive cooperation in order to survive. Handbooks for those who might be taken hostage, such as I was once given when working in a prison, describe survival tactics that resemble the advice offered in women's magazines for how to win men. If you are ever taken hostage, say these handbooks, you should talk about the man's interests and family to make him realize you are a person and to activate his humanity. Stockholm Syndrome develops among those who fear for their lives but are dependent upon their captors. If the captor shows any kindness, however small, a hostage is likely to bond even to the point of protecting the captor from harm and entirely adopting his point of view upon the world. Graham defines the sexual violence that women routinely face as "sexual terrorism." Against this background of terror, Graham explains, women develop Stockholm Syndrome and bond to men.

Because women's sexuality develops in this context of sexual terrorism, we can eroticize our fear, our terrified bonding. All sexual arousal and release is not necessarily positive. Women can experience orgasms while being sexually abused in childhood, in rape, or in prostitution. Our language has only words like pleasure and enjoyment to describe sexual feelings, no words to describe those feelings that are sexual but that we do not like, feelings that come from experience, dreams, or fantasies about degradation or rape and cause distress despite arousal.

The "sex" promoted by women's and even feminist magazines, as if it were quite separate from women's real-life subordinate status and experience of sexual violence, offers no hope of deconstructing and reconstructing either men's sexuality or women's. Sodomasochism and "fantasy" scenarios, for instance, in which women attempt to "lose" themselves, are often utilized by women who have been sexually abused. The orgasmic excitement experienced in these scenarios simply cannot be felt in these women's bodies if and when they remain grounded and conscious of who they actually are. The orgasm of inequality -- far from encouraging women to seek to create a sexuality commensurate with the freedom feminists envision -- merely rewards women with "pleasure" for dissociating.

So many women, including feminists, lowered their eyes from the vision of how to make women free and decided to get stuck into having more-powerful orgasms in any way that worked. The pursuit of the orgasm of oppression serves as a new "opium of the masses." It diverts our energies from the struggles that are needed now against sexual violence and the global sex industry. Questioning how those orgasms feel, what they mean politically, whether they are achieved through the prostitution of women in pornography, is not easy, but it is also not impossible. A sexuality of equality suited to our pursuit of freedom has still to be forged and fought for if we are to release women from sexual subjection.

The ability of women to eroticize their own subordination and take "pleasure" from the degradation of themselves and other women to object status poses a serious

obstacle. So long as women have a stake in the sexual system as it is -- so long as they get their kicks that way -- why will they want change?

I suggest that it is not possible to imagine a world in which women are free at the same time as protecting a sexuality based precisely upon their lack of freedom. Our sexual passions must match the passions of our political imagination for an end to a world based on all abusive hierarchies, including race and class. Only a sexuality of equality, and our ability to imagine and work for such a sexuality, makes the freedom of women thinkable.

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