

Lesbian Ethics Part 1 – Sheila Jeffreys

Lesbian Ethics. Lesbian History Group Event 3/06/2016

What is lesbian ethics?

In the 1980s Lesbian Ethics was a hot topic in a way that is unknown today. In the US the journal *Lesbian Ethics* was published from 1984 into the 1990s. In the UK the journal *Gossip: a journal of lesbian feminist ethics* was published from 1986 onwards by Onlywomen Press in response to the US version. Lesbian ethics was understood to cover analysis and theoretical exploration of issues concerning lesbian personal lives, sexuality and relationships. There was not a clear distinction between ethics and theory. Indeed the UK publication, *Gossip*, covers a wider ground of lesbian theory with much material on lesbians in fiction and in the movies, for instance. The US journal is a little more limited in scope.

Origin in the male left?

Lesbian feminists in the WLM considered that the personal and the political should reflect each other. They were not alone in thinking this. Many had come from the left where thinkers in the 1960s and 70s talked about what they called ‘living the revolution now’, how activists and revolutionaries should conduct their ‘private lives’ in consonance with their political beliefs and aims. They talked about prefigurative forms, i.e. creating forms of practice that would prefigure what would happen after the revolution. For those on the left this related to issues such as squatting, non-monogamy, sharing resources. These ideas travelled over into the WLM as we saw last meeting in relation to squatting.

Non-monogamy

In particular, the idea that the correct politics of relationships entailed non-monogamy was adopted by some within feminism and particularly lesbian feminism. This idea had its origins with sexist men who wanted widespread sexual access to women and were able to lecture non-compliant women that they were too hung up on seeking ownership and property in another person and deeply bourgeois ‘romantic love’, rather than ‘free love’. Within heterosexuality these ideas benefitted men but not women so much.

So, some of the ideas of living the revolution now came to lesbian feminism from the male left, though lesbian feminists added their own interpretations. Other ideas came specifically from lesbian feminism and included radical critiques of the male left ideas. Lesbian feminists agreed with the radical feminist understanding that the personal is political, i.e. issues of personal life are shaped by political structures. Lesbian ethics could be seen as a way to turn that around and accept that the political is personal, i.e. political values should form the foundation of the way in which we live our personal lives. Lesbian feminists often took these ideas very seriously indeed. The idea that we should not be looksist, for instance, was interpreted by some to mean that we should not 'fancy' other women but engage in sexual relationships with them solely on the basis of their right on political ideas.

Feminist philosophy

In the 1980s, lesbian feminists in the US in particular, began to address these ideas within discussion of what was called 'lesbian ethics'. From 1984 an important journal was published by Jeanette Silveira in California, called *Lesbian Ethics*. This published articles by many of those involved in discussing what we in UK were probably still calling the politics of the personal, such as Julia Penelope, Bev Jo, Sidney Spinster, the UK novelist Anna Livia, and the Bloodroot Collective which ran the feminist vegetarian café and bookstore in Connecticut and first delivered their paper at the W.I.T.C.H. lecture series in Boston, Women's Intellectual Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.

Lesbian Ethics featured a regular "Readers' Forum," offering short pieces by many contributors on special topics set in advance. Memorable topics have been "Non? Monogamy?" (1: 2, Spring 1985); "Lesbian Therapy" (3: 3, Fall 1985); "Femme and Butch" (2: 2, Fall 1986); "Sex" (2: 3, Summer 1987); and "Separatism" (3: 2, Fall 1988). Articles covered topics such as lesbian nuns, sado-masochism, Dyke Economic, fat oppression, lesbian violence and the possibility of lesbian community.

Gossip, in the UK, republished some of the articles from *Lesbian Ethics* in the US, notable Julia Penelope's series The Mystery of Lesbians, but also pieces by UK lesbians like me on butch and femme, separatism, AIDS, fat oppression, lesbian movies and literature.

In the late 1980s in the US, lesbian ethics became a field of teaching and literature in philosophy departments in universities where lesbian feminists were teaching. Philosophy in the academy seems to have taken a rather different form from here in the UK, where

universities have not nurtured feminist philosophers. In the US however, a number of academic lesbian feminists were able to incorporate issues such as sadomasochism into the remit of philosophy in a way that I think would have been unthinkable in the UK. These remarkable and exciting US academic lesbian feminist philosophers include Marilyn Frye, Sara Lucia Hoagland, Claudia Card, Joyce Trebilcock and Jeffner Allen. For example, Sara Lucia Hoagland published her book, *Lesbian Ethics*, in 1988, Claudia Card published *Lesbian Choices* in 1995, and Jeffner Allen's collection *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures* was published in 1990.

Sado-masochism

Lesbian feminist ethics was concerned with how lesbians related sexually with each other. In concert with the idea of living the revolution now, there was some outrage and horror when, in the early 1980s, the ideas of a lesbian sado-masochist movement were imported from a group of San Francisco dykes who called themselves Samois, into the UK. The revolution was, of course, to be about equality, so how could a sexual practice based upon the eroticising of extreme differences of power, be consistent with our revolutionary aims. We did not want to create a future, through our actions in the present which continued to eroticise women's inequality.

We understood that the eroticising of women's inequality was the foundation, the very bedrock of the way in which sexuality was constructed under male supremacy. We did not see sex as 'essential' or 'natural' but as a form of thinking and behaviour that is shaped by the power relationship of men to women. Women are born into inequality and only have powerlessness to eroticise. Heterosexuality embodies women's masochism and powerlessness, in makeup and clothing, high heeled shoes for instance, having to show bottoms in skirts and not be able to climb trees etc. Men, very clearly, find women's subordination sexy and this is the very basis of their sexual response. Pornography and men's writings make that extremely clear. Men are trained to be initiatory and aggressive towards women sexually. Women are expected to eroticise submission and this works fairly well. Collections of erotica and women's sexual fantasies show women eroticising men's power. Mills and Boon novels feature big, strong men and women as swooning fans. The murder of women, rape and all forms of sexual violence against women and children are ordinary aspects of men's sexual sadism. We argued as

lesbian feminists, and I argued in my book *Anticlimax*, that for women's revolution to have any chance of success it was necessary to transform sexuality so that it featured the eroticising of equality because, as I wrote in my paper in *Lesbian Ethics* onSM, it was hard to fight oppression when you responded sexually to the boot that kicked you into submission.

In the early 1980s revolutionary feminist lesbians such as myself would go to conferences and set up workshops to discuss sadomasochist fantasies. Our practice was to ask women what sort of fantasies they had and make them seem funny and laugh at them. We considered that laughter was the best response and would take the power out of the fantasies, which would not be capable of creating such a sexual frisson after a roomful of women had rolled about laughing at them. In 1984 we set up the group Lesbians Against Sado-Masochism in London, and I wrote the piece, Sado-Masochism: the erotic cult of fascism which was published in the US journal *Lesbian Ethics* in 1986, and then became the appendix of my book *The Lesbian Heresy* in 1993. In the 1980s the term sado-masochism was used whereas the term BDSM is used today.

The ideology of SM

In the early 80s there was a detailed ideological defence of sado-masochism mainly created by gay male practitioners. Not surprisingly, SM was central to the sexuality of gay men, as they had 'damaged' masculinity and therefore eroticised powerlessness and powerful, aggressive masculinity in the way that women were expected to do. Many books and articles were written by them, and critique was thin on the ground. The forms of defence put forward were that SM was a valuable form of practice because it created a particularly powerful and pleasurable sexual response. Gay sex that did not focus on SM was called disparagingly at the time, vanilla sex i.e. colourless, or bambi, and seen as namby- pamby or niminy-piminy. SM sex was called by gay men 'heavy-duty', i.e. the real thing.

At that time there was a rather small underground fetish scene of het SMers. The most publicly promoted form of SM was gay sex, and indeed, as I argue in my book *Unpacking Queer Politics*, sm became the mainstream and accepted expression of gay male sexuality and gay male porn. The promotion of sado-masochism influenced lesbians who were part of a mixed gay scene.

SM dykes

SM dykes defended their position in slightly different ways from the gay men. Some practitioners made it clear that SM was a solution for them to the problem of having a damaged sexual response as a result of sexual abuse by men, usually their fathers or stepfathers. I can remember speaking against SM at conferences where young women would jump up from the audience and say that SM had healed them from the PTSD they suffered from sexual violence. They said that it enabled them to 'feel' and broke down the defensive wall they had built up to guard against sexual feeling lest it trigger the trauma of the abuse. In reply I would always say that that just created a constant cycle of abuse and offered no way out. The feminists speaking out about sexual violence from fathers within the WLM joined what were called Incest Survivors' Groups in order to practice feminist consciousness-raising and self-help to heal from trauma. SM groups, it seemed were the new anti-feminist alternative, aimed at recycling rather than healing. Many feminists weighed in with critiques at the time, and the book *Against Sadomasochism* (1982) was a useful collection of pieces from very well-known feminists including Kathleen Barry, Diana Russell, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker. One defence lesbians made in the 80s of SM was that it was OK for lesbians to do it because no men were involved and women were each other's equals. Thus they could truly consent to the practice and no inbuilt power imbalances existed. Articles and memoirs in the book showed how the practice of SM functioned within abusive relationships wherein one lesbian could punish her partner for infidelity, for instance, by humiliating her and causing pain.

Alice Walker's piece was particularly powerful. She argued that sm was racist because it eroticised and recycled the abuses of slavery. She explained that SM dykes played out scenarios of master slave, with white mistresses and black slaves in dog collars and on their knees. This she saw as counter-revolutionary, sexist and racist in the extreme.

In the early 80s in London there was much use of Nazi imagery by SM gays and SM dykes. The swastika was an important SM symbol and both gay men and lesbians into SM wore them. It was in response to this that I wrote 'Sadomasochism: the erotic cult of fascism'. I argued that at a time when skinhead youth were beating up black gay men, and particularly disabled gay men, in the toilets at gay clubs, it was entirely inappropriate to be promoting the eroticising of fascism.

There were some within the WLM who considered that fighting SM was an unnecessary distraction, rather an unimportant side alley for feminists. The radical feminist journal *Trouble and Strife*, for instance, in the early 80s put the shoutline 'Not the sadomasochism debate' on its cover in order to show its disdain for the issue. But SM proved not to be a minor issue, tangential to mainstream feminism. The huge expansion of the porn industry mainstreamed SM. The defence by many gay male and some lesbian practitioners made SM chic, such that it became the trendy and progressive way to do sex. The effect now is that many young heterosexual feminists I speak to say they have been involved in SM. They have mostly got out by the time I talk with them but it is clear that SM is very big now in mainstream heterosexuality. But, more importantly, the promotion of SM has so influenced everyday malestream sexuality that what were once seen as SM practices are now routinely carried out against women in heterosexuality, practices such as what is called 'rough sex', anal sex which leads to teenage girls having to wear butt plugs because of the damage to their bodies, or even the choking of women, for instance. None of this was ordinary practice when I was a young heterosexual woman at all.

Far from being a diversion, the SM that we combatted so valiantly in the 80s, now called BDSM, has become de rigueur in much heterosexual practice in the present. BDSM is mainstream and not looking particularly niche and revolutionary any more. However, at this time there is vanishingly little in the feminist or lesbian communities online or off of the ethics of sexuality and everyday life and relationships. Sexual practice, in particular, is hardly examined. Whereas it was politicised as crucial to women's oppression in the WLM it has now been almost entirely reprivatized. Women do not speak of how troubled they are by SM sexual fantasies now. I see no discussion of how our sexual practice fits into the revolution we are trying to create.

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