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# Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism

Alix Kates Shulman

## I

Thirteen years have passed since a handful of radical feminists began organizing for women's liberation and analyzing every aspect of the relations between the sexes, including the sexual. Not that the subject of women's sexuality was ignored before then. Sex had long been a "hot," salable subject. Men were studying it in laboratories, in books, in bedrooms, in offices; after several repressive decades, changes called the "sexual revolution" and "sexual liberation" were being widely discussed and promoted all through the sixties; skirts were up, prudery was down. Nor was the sudden feminist attention to the political aspects of sexuality in the late sixties without precedent, as it appeared at the time; for feminists have always understood that institutions regulating relations between the sexes were their concern.<sup>1</sup> But by the 1960s feminism itself had long been in eclipse, and, far from being viewed as a political relation, sex was considered a strictly biological, psychological, personal, or religious matter. Until the radical feminists boldly declared that "the personal is political," opening for political analysis the most intimate aspects of male-female relations, women's sexuality had not for decades been viewed squarely in its political dimension as an aspect of the power relations between the sexes.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such sex-related institutions as family, motherhood, chastity, prostitution, birth control, and the double standard of morality had been subjected to feminist

1. Linda Gordon traces the development of feminist ideas about sexuality in the United States, especially as they pertain to birth control, in her important book, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

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analysis by the “first wave” of feminists. Sexual repression had been privately acknowledged as a primary problem by the older Elizabeth Cady Stanton when she wrote in her confidential diary, begun at the age of sixty-five, “The first great work to be accomplished for woman is to revolutionize the dogma that sex is a crime.”<sup>2</sup> But the suffragists and women’s rights advocates mostly shied away from publicly discussing women’s sexuality. Though first-wave feminists did focus on the connection between the subjugation of women and *male* sexuality,<sup>3</sup> for the most part they did not make women’s sexuality central to their analysis of woman’s social condition, except as it affected other institutions, like motherhood.<sup>4</sup>

It was Simone de Beauvoir who reopened the subject of sex and power to feminist analysis in 1949 with the publication of *The Second Sex* in France. A year earlier, Ruth Herschberger, biologist and poet, had published the witty feminist analysis of female sexuality, *Adam’s Rib*, in this country; but her ideas seemed too eccentric to postwar America to gain the audience they deserved.<sup>5</sup> A larger feminist context was needed—like that provided in Europe by Beauvoir’s work and in this country by Betty Friedan’s 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, which signaled a second round of organized feminism.<sup>6</sup> In her book, Friedan discussed the use of sexual exploitation in advertising, the effect of sex roles on sexual fulfillment, and women’s sexual discontents; but NOW, the organization Friedan founded to fight sex discrimination, did not at first concentrate on exposing injustice in the sexual sphere; indeed, that organization’s early homophobia may even have exacerbated it. It remained for the radical wing of the new feminism—those mostly young women of the New Left whose discontent with their subordination by male radicals led them in the late sixties to form the women’s liberation movement (WLM to the FBI)—to make sexuality a central part of their

2. Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 145.

3. In her chapter, “Social Purity,” Linda Gordon shows that “feminists believed that men had developed excessive sexual drives which contributed to the subjection of women and hence limited the development of the whole civilization. From this they drew the inference that excessive sex drive had to be *eliminated*, not merely checked or sublimated, in order to create a pure and sexually equal society” (pp. 118–19).

4. Outstanding among exceptions were the free-love advocates, notably the notorious Claffin sisters, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claffin, who wrote frequently on the connection between sexuality and oppression in their publication of the 1870s, *Woodhull and Claffin’s Weekly*. Dora Marsdon is quoted by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977) as proposing in 1913 that frigidity is the result of repression and economic dependence. The anarchist Emma Goldman spoke on injury to woman’s sexuality resulting from male domination and publicly defended homosexual rights in the first decades of this century [see Alix Kates Shulman, ed., *Red Emma Speaks* (New York: Random House, 1972)].

5. Ruth Herschberger, *Adam’s Rib* (New York: Peligrini & Cudahy, 1948).

6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963).

analysis of sexism. Applying the tools of analysis and organization they learned in the civil rights movement and the New Left to their own situation, and drawing on the works of both Beauvoir and Friedan (as they would later draw on their earlier feminist predecessors), they used their sexual discontents to help them understand the power relations between men and women.<sup>7</sup>

By late 1967 small groups of women were meeting regularly to discuss the effects of male supremacy not only on women's professions, education, and public life, as the women in NOW were doing, but on their "private" lives as well. I was a fortunate participant. Those early discussions (which soon evolved into the technique called consciousness raising, later abbreviated CR) produced a great emotional outpouring of feelings against the way women had been used sexually and revelations of sexual shames and terrors we had all lugged through our lives. I was surprised to hear so many women who had come of age in the sixties talk resentfully about their sexual experience, for I had believed the media version of the great sexual revolution among the young. But far from having felt freed by the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties, those young, dedicated women—many of whom had been politicized in the New Left—actually felt victimized by it. They complained that they were expected not only to type the speeches, stuff the envelopes, and prepare the food and coffee for the radical men they worked with, but to sleep with them besides, without making any demands in return. Their own feelings, their needs for affection, recognition, consideration, or commitment, did not count. If they did not comply, they were often made to feel like unattractive, unhip prudes who could readily be replaced. Sexual favors were often the price of political favor. Naturally, these women resented being used sexually, as they resented performing political labors without appreciation, and resented being relegated to doing what they called movement "shitwork"—all by so-called radicals whose proclaimed purpose in life was to end oppression. And these women saw an intimate connection between the way men treated them in their organizations and the way they treated them sexually; they were two sides of a single demeaning attitude toward women—one that would not take them seriously.

As soon as the earliest radical feminist groups were organized many women without prior political experience began joining them and voic-

7. Sara Evans recounts the emergence of radical feminism from the civil rights movement and the New Left in her valuable history, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979). Although Evans does not discuss radical feminist analyses of sexuality, she does document the sexual insults and exploitation of women within the New Left and the persistent refusal of the male radicals to take the complaints of the women seriously. For a firsthand account of the sexual resentments of New Left women, see Marge Piercy's essay, "The Grand Coolie Damn," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970).

ing other resentments. Some said they felt sexually rejected by their partners, others complained that their husbands never left them alone sexually. Some said they were afraid to tell their lovers what pleased them sexually, others said their partners resented being told. Some told about passes they had to submit to at work and on the street, others were bereft because men were intimidated by them and they, the women, were forbidden to make advances themselves. Some spoke about reprisals they feared or suffered as lesbians, others spoke of their fear of lesbians. Some shamefully confessed to having masturbated all their lives, others declared in anguish that they could not masturbate. Many complained bitterly that their men never took responsibility for birth control, for children, for the progress of their relationships.

The stories poured out. In those days, few of the women had had the opportunity to talk honestly about sex with anyone; it had been a taboo subject in the fifties and was still suspect in the sixties. Certainly, women had not felt free to talk about the intimate physical details, for not only were sexual topics embarrassing, but sexual problems had long been taken as signs of personal failings or illness and as such were shameful, and talk about sexual secrets was considered a betrayal of your man and thus dangerous. I remember the excitement generated when the women in my group in 1967 first admitted to each other that they had been faking orgasm—and for various “reasons.” Once the truth was out, we tried to analyze why so many of us had all felt the need to fake. Instead of feeling guilty about it, we saw faking as a response to pressures that had been put upon *us* by men.<sup>8</sup>

Still, no matter how liberating and exhilarating our discussions of such intimate matters may have felt, our purpose was not simply to improve our sex lives or to find some personal solution to our problems. We wanted nothing less than to understand the social basis for our discontents, including the sexual, and then to do something to change it—for everyone.

This is a very important point. Consciousness raising was not simply a technique to make people feel better about themselves or to cure their personal problems. It was not therapy.<sup>9</sup> It was conceived as a political tool, modeled on the Chinese practice called Speaking Bitterness. The idea was this: The so-called experts on women had traditionally been men who, as part of the male-supremacist power structure, benefited

8. This attitude is explored in the article, “When Women Rap about Sex,” evidently the transcript of a meeting edited by Shulamith Firestone, in one of the first publications of the women’s liberation movement, *Notes from the First Year* (New York: New York Radical Women, 1968).

9. In “The Personal Is Political,” an article by Carole Hanisch in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, ed. Shulamith Firestone (New York: New York Radical Feminists, 1970), Hanisch discusses the differences between therapy and CR groups.

from perpetuating certain ideas, and therefore what they said was suspect. If we were truly to understand the situation of women in our society, we had to base our analysis on information we could trust, information that was *not* suspect, and for this we had to gather it ourselves. We had to question all the generalizations that had been made in the past about women and question the interests they served, substituting knowledge based on the experience and feelings of women, starting with ourselves. Those early CR sessions were really fact-gathering sessions, research sessions on our feelings. We wanted to get at the truth about how women felt, how we viewed our lives, what was done to us, and how we functioned in the world. Not how we were *supposed* to feel but how we really did feel. This knowledge, gained through honest examination of our own personal experience, we would pool to help us figure out how to change the situation of women. Those early meetings felt like life-transforming discussions because our object was justice for all women.<sup>10</sup> We *had* to tell the truth; so much depended on it. We were going to change the world.

What made the discussions so powerful was the sense we had that a great floodlight had been turned onto the world, lighting up *all* our experience; it was as though all the murky and scary shadows we had been living with all our lives were suddenly wiped away by the powerful new light. Sex was a central and explosive subject to which we continually returned; but as we talked of our most intimate feelings we began to see how interconnected were all our experiences and our seemingly disparate lives.

Since everything we discussed was connected, we felt we could start anywhere in our analysis of women's lives: sex, class, work, marriage, motherhood, sex roles, housework, health, education, images, language—all these aspects of women's lives were riddled with sexism. The movement we envisioned would change them all.

A review of the major actions of those earliest years of WLM—actions initiated by a mere handful of ardent women, at first maybe 100 in 1967, then, by 1970, many thousands—reveals how central was the new feminist analysis of sexuality to our collective struggle for justice. In 1967 the first small groups began organizing and doing CR. By September 1968 the fledgling movement considered itself ready for its first national demonstration: about sixty feminists, mostly from New York, went to Atlantic City to picket the Miss America Pageant, using that event to demonstrate how women are (degradingly) judged as sex objects. Inside Convention Hall women unfurled a huge banner in the

10. In her widely disseminated "A Program for Feminist Consciousness Raising," in *Notes from the Second Year*, Kathie Sarachild, a founding member of Redstockings and a vitally important theoretician of consciousness raising, repeatedly emphasized the importance of connecting personal testimony with testimony of other women, now and in the past, and with political organizing.

balcony that read, simply, Women's Liberation. Outside on the boardwalk, demonstrators mockingly crowned a live sheep "Miss America," filled a "freedom trash can" with items of female "torture" like curlers, bras, girdles, and high-heeled shoes; spoke only to female reporters; and paraded with leaflets and posters. One of the most powerful posters was a replica of a display ad for a popular steak house depicting a woman's naked body charted with the names of beef cuts. The pageant seemed a perfect symbol of the exploitation of women as sex objects, but the ideas of WLM were then so unthinkable that the demonstration was not well understood. Many onlookers and reporters were incensed; it was at that demonstration that feminists became known as "crazy bra burners," though no bra was burned. So acceptable was the practice of valuing women for their sexual attractiveness that many people genuinely believed the demonstrators must be ugly women, motivated by simple jealousy of the contestants, proclaiming a politics of sour grapes.

The following spring the newly formed Redstockings held their first abortion speak-out, at which women gave public testimony describing in heart-rending detail what they had to go through to get abortions. This testimony broke a very deep taboo and started a passionate public debate that is still going on. It is hard to believe how stunned the country was by this action. At the heart of the prohibition against abortion (and birth control) is the deeply held feeling that female sex outside of procreation must be punished. As a national columnist wrote at the time, "She had the fun, now let her pay." (In the same way, the early speak-outs on rape emphasized not only the brutality and hatred in the act of rape but the way in which, by society's "blaming the victim," women's sexuality was held responsible for rape—as reflected in laws, police procedures, and relevance of the victim's sexual history.) What was new at the abortion speak-out was that the women, speaking of their feelings and experience and pain, tied abortion to the question of women's freedom, which had not been done publicly since the birth control debates of an earlier time.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, what prompted the Redstockings speak-out was a legislative hearing on abortion at which the "experts" testifying were fourteen men and one woman, a nun. The Redstockings thought it time to hear from the "real experts": women.

Those earliest years witnessed a proliferation of actions, from a Whistle-In in Wall Street, in which feminists made sexual passes at men on the street at lunchtime, to a protest at the National Bridal Fair by WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), to a takeover by New York Radical Feminists of legislative hearings on prostitution—all intended to raise public consciousness of sexism. The insults

11. The other source of the abortion movement was the population-control movement, which in some ways promotes the opposite of women's freedom. For the relation between the feminist and population-control movements as they apply to birth control, see Gordon.

flung at demonstrators by angry observers at these demonstrations were predominantly sexual: we were called dykes, whores, and beasts, as well as commies, bitches, and nuts.

In 1969 a coalition of feminist groups staged a sit-in at the *Ladies Home Journal* offices until we were granted twenty pages in which to present feminist ideas to the *Journal's* vast female audience. I joined the committee that wrote the article on sex. Many of the articles the *Journal* editors could stomach, but the sex piece scandalized them—in part because it briefly discussed lesbianism but also, I think, because it so clearly brought together the private and public, the personal and political. Late in 1969 the first Congress to Unite Women was held in New York City, attended by more than 500 women. That same year, 1969, Barbara Seaman's *The Doctor's Case against the Pill* was published. Then, in 1970, came Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, and the first of the large publishers' anthologies of articles and pamphlets that had been circulated earlier in movement journals: Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Leslie Tanner's *Voices from Women's Liberation*, Sookie Stambler's *Women's Liberation: A Blueprint for the Future*, and, the next year, Vivian Gornick and B. K. Moran's *Woman in Sexist Society* and others—all including important articles on sexuality. There was a great outpouring of articles, stories, books, conferences, demonstrations, debates. Lesbian feminists began forming separate groups and exploring the connections between lesbianism and feminism; at the Second Congress to Unite Women (1970), a radical lesbian group calling themselves the Lavender Menace forced the movement to examine its attitude toward lesbianism. The women's self-help movement encouraged women to examine their own and each other's bodies, inside and out, not only to overcome ignorance and shame, but to free us from the bias and control of the male medical establishment. New York Radical Feminists and other groups outside New York organized speak-outs, frequently modeled after those early Redstockings abortion speak-outs, on such volatile topics as rape, prostitution, marriage, motherhood. Feminist ideas were spreading everywhere as we made new connections and more women joined the movement. It seemed to us then that we could not be stopped.

## II

What were the early radical feminist ideas about sex? Naturally, as WLM was a political movement the new attention directed by radical feminists to our sexuality had to do with power; with taking for ourselves the control of our lives and our bodies that men—through the laws, customs, and other institutions of a male-ruled society—had appropri-



ated. The feminist movement for reproductive freedom, the women's self-help movement from California, the broader women's health movement—of which the Boston collective's best-selling *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was a product and a source—all organized around the idea of reclaiming for ourselves control over our very bodies. So with the new feminist analysis of sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Perceiving sexual relations as but one aspect of the power relations between men and women, early radical feminists questioned traditional definitions of women's sexuality, of women's "nature," of sexual satisfaction and health (conceived as heterosexual) on the grounds that such definitions, as propounded by men, tended to justify the sexual exploitation of women by men. "If sexual relations were not programmed to support political ends—that is, male oppression of the female—then the way would be clear for individuals to enter into physical relations not defined by roles, nor involving exploitation. Physical relations (heterosexual and homosexual) would be an extension of communication between individuals and would not necessarily have a genital emphasis," read a 1969 position paper put out by "The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles."<sup>13</sup>

"We must begin to demand that if certain sexual positions now defined as 'standard' are not mutually conducive to orgasm, they no longer be defined as standard. New techniques must be used or devised which transform this particular aspect of our current sexual exploitation,"<sup>14</sup> proclaimed Anne Koedt in her famous essay, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," published in 1968 in *Notes from the First Year* and expanded the following year. Though Koedt focused on technique, the point of her article was clearly political. She was concerned not only with the true facts about female orgasm, then under scrutiny by sexologists, but with exposing the distortion of those facts into the "myth" of the vaginal orgasm:

Today, with extensive knowledge of anatomy . . . there is no ignorance on the subject [of female orgasm]. There are, however, social reasons why this knowledge has not been popularized. We are living in a male society which has not sought change in women's role. . . .

12. Important pre-WLM feminist analyses of female sexuality included Herschberger's *Adam's Rib* (see n. 5 above) and Mary Jane Sherfey's 1966 paper for the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, "The Evolution and Nature of Female Sexuality," based on her studies of multiple orgasm in women. After WLM was launched, *Adam's Rib* was reissued in paperback by Harper and Row, and Sherfey's essay was published in *Sisterhood Is Powerful* as "A Theory of Female Sexuality" and later expanded into a book.

13. *Notes from the Second Year*, p. 114.

14. Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," reprinted in *Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie Tanner (New York: New American Library/Mentor Books, 1970), p. 159.

The establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution. For it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men *or* women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option. It would thus open up the whole questions of *human* sexual relationships beyond the confines of the present male-female role system.<sup>15</sup>

This analysis was continued by Ti-Grace Atkinson, a founder of The Feminists, the early antimarriage group which limited to one-third of its membership those women who lived with men. In "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," in *Notes from the Second Year*, Atkinson analyzed sexual intercourse itself as a "political institution," analogous to the institution of marriage, which serves the needs of reproduction and often the sexual desires of men but not necessarily those of women. Atkinson coolly proposed that we try to "discover what the nature of the human sensual characteristics are from the point of view of the good of each individual instead of what we have now, which is a sort of psychological draft system of our sexualities." Never reducing sexual relations to mere technique, Atkinson elaborated the insight that orgasm is not everything by observing that what lovers add to the sexual experience "cannot be a technique or physical improvement on that same auto-experience" but "must be a psychological component."<sup>16</sup>

Carrying the feminist rebellion against the sexual exploitation of women a step further still, Dana Densmore of Boston's Cell 16 proposed a reordering of women's priorities away from the sexual altogether. After all, the belief that sexual love of man is the core of woman's aspirations—or is even necessary for fulfillment—justifies woman's exploitation and keeps her enthralled. In her powerful 1969 essay, "On Celibacy," which appeared in the first issue of *No More Fun and Games*, the journal associated with Cell 16, Densmore wrote:

We must come to realize that we don't need sex, that celibacy . . . could be desirable, in many cases preferable to sex. How repugnant it is, after all, to make love to a man who despises you, who fears you and wants to hold you down! Doesn't screwing in an atmosphere devoid of respect get pretty grim? Why bother? You don't need it. . . . This is a call not for celibacy but for an acceptance of celibacy as an honorable alternative, one preferable to the degradation of most male-female relationships. . . . Unless you accept the idea that you don't need [men], don't need sex from them, it will be utterly impossible for you to carry through, it will be absolutely necessary for you to lead a double life, pretending with men to be something other than what you know you are. . . . If we are going to be liber-

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 161 and 166.

16. Ti-Grace Atkinson, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," in *Notes from the Second Year*, pp. 45–46.

ated we must reject the false image that makes men love us, and this will make men cease to love us. . . . An end to this constant remaking of ourselves according to what the male ego demands! Let us be ourselves and good riddance to those who are then repulsed by us!<sup>17</sup>

Writing on "Lesbianism and the Women's Liberation Movement," Martha Shelly, an early Radicalesbian, pursued Densmore's argument down another path:

To me, lesbianism is not an oddity of a few women to be hidden in the background of the Movement. In a way, it is the heart of the Women's Liberation Movement. In order to throw off the oppression of the male caste, women must unite—we must learn to love ourselves and each other, we must grow strong and independent of men so that we can deal with them from a position of strength. The idea that women must teach men how to love, that we must not become manhaters is, at this point in history, like preaching pacifism to the Vietcong. Women are . . . told to be weak, dependent and loving. That kind of love is masochism. Love can only exist between equals, not between the oppressed and the oppressor.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the price of maintaining sexual relations with men in a sexist society sometimes seemed too high to pay for many radical feminists, just as the price of motherhood in a sexist society has made many women reasonably decide to forgo that experience as well. But most radical feminists, rather than renounce heterosexuality, advocated struggle to change its basis. (Many considered separatism a cop-out.) In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone, shrewdly analyzing prevailing heterosexual relations, tried to specify the price women pay for male love. In the chapter on "Love," she describes love as requiring "mutual vulnerability or it turns destructive: the destructive effects of love occur only in a context of inequality." But because men and women are not equal, love is destructive for women. While "a man must idealize one woman over the rest in order to justify his descent to a lower caste,"<sup>19</sup> it is different for women:

In their precarious political situation, women cannot afford the luxury of spontaneous love. It is much too dangerous. The love and approval of men is all-important. To love thoughtlessly, before one has ensured return commitment, would endanger that approval. . . .

17. Tanner, pp. 264–68.

18. Martha Shelly, "Lesbianism and the Women's Liberation Movement," in *Women's Liberation: Blueprint for the Future*, ed. Sookie Stambler (New York: Ace Books, 1970), p. 127.

19. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp. 130–31.

In a male-run society that defines women as an inferior and parasitical class, a woman who does not achieve male approval in some form is doomed. . . . But because the woman is rarely allowed to realize herself through activity in the larger (male) society—and when she is, she is seldom granted the recognition she deserves—it becomes easier to try for the recognition of one man than of many; and in fact this is exactly the choice most women make. Thus once more the phenomenon of love, good in itself, is corrupted by its class context: women must have love not only for healthy reasons but actually to validate their existence.<sup>20</sup>

To this end, women must subordinate their true feelings, cultivate sex appeal, aspire to meet beauty standards, inhibit sexual spontaneity, and even fake orgasms—anything to catch a man. It is less this behavior many radical feminists deplored than the condition of unequal power and vulnerability between the sexes that makes such behavior seem necessary for survival. As Jennifer Gardner wrote in the essay “False Consciousness” that was published in the California journal, *Tooth and Nail*, “Our oppression is not in our heads. We will not become unoppressed by ‘acting unoppressed.’ Try it—if you have the economic independence to survive the consequences. The result will not be respect and support. Men will either not like you—you are a bitch, a castrator, a nag, a hag, a witch; or they will accuse you of not liking them.”<sup>21</sup> As Kathie Sarachild wrote, observing the double nature of sex and power, “For most of history sex was, in fact, both our undoing and our only possible weapon of self-defense and self-assertion (aggression).”<sup>22</sup>

That some women seem to be able to have satisfactory sexual relations with men is as much beside the point, given sexism, as that some manage to gain economic security: sexual (and economic) injustices nevertheless prevail. From the point of view of radical feminism, which addresses the problems of the many, not of the privileged few, even the best “individual solutions” will be chancy, for unless a woman is strong and independent her solution can disintegrate when she alienates her male protector, which happens to many women simply by aging. (The early feminist group, OWL, Older Women’s Liberation, defined “older” as thirty and up—by prevailing sexist standards a ridiculous cut-off age for men but a realistic one for women considered as sex objects.) Irene Peslikis placed at the head of her list of “Resistances to Consciousness”: “Thinking that our man is the exception and, therefore, we are the exceptions among women. . . . Thinking that individual solutions are possible, that we don’t need solidarity and a revolution for our libera-

20. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

21. Jennifer Gardner, “False Consciousness,” reprinted in *Notes from the Second Year*, p. 82.

22. Sarachild, p. 78.

tion.”<sup>23</sup> As for those “personal solutions” which do not depend on male protection but involve withdrawal from men, women who choose them are subject to all the sanctions, reprisals, and punishments traditionally dealt to women without men under male supremacy. “Until we have a movement strong enough to force change,” wrote Firestone in *Notes from the Second Year*, “we will have to accommodate ourselves as best we can to whichever . . . adjustment each of us can best live with,” never forgetting, however, as Anne Koedt wrote in *Notes from the First Year*, “to go to the root of the problem rather than become engaged in solving secondary problems arising *out* of [woman’s] condition.” Just as women without control over reproduction will feel sexual anxiety, so women without control over conditions for their survival will also suffer sexual anxiety. From the beginning, radical feminists had differing analyses of sexuality, but all agreed that sexual relations were deeply affected by the general power relations prevailing between the sexes, that the way to change sexual relations was through solidarity and struggle to change the power relations, and that the way to discover how these relations oppressed women was through consciousness raising.

### III

Like many other radical feminists at that time, impressed by how quickly our ideas were spreading and how much activity they generated among ourselves, I was optimistic about the effect of our movement. Our intense examination of our personal experience for its social and political significance even helped me to develop as a writer. It was hardly an accident that the first article I wrote for publication in 1969, called “Organs and Orgasms,” was on sex.<sup>24</sup> In it I cited case after case of the injustice done to women by bias in the very terminology of sex and suggested that a solution to our sexual problems might be advanced by reexamining our assumptions, definitions, and beliefs about sexuality from a woman’s point of view. It was not that I discounted the importance of political struggle, but I believed we would have to change the way we *think* before we could change the way we live. The ideas of the movement were spreading so fast that it seemed to many of us in those days that it would not be difficult to organize masses of women to revolt. (Firestone thought it would take “several more years” to build a strong enough movement to “force change.”) When the first mass August 26 Woman’s March was held in large cities all over the country in 1970 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the women’s suffrage amendment and to demonstrate our power—as thousands and thousands

23. Morgan, p. 337.

24. Alix Kates Shulman, “Organs and Orgasms,” in *Woman in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and B. K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 198.

of women marched to demand their rights—it looked as if we might win with ease. And in the years immediately following, our hopes rose as the ERA passed through Congress for the first time since its introduction fifty years before; as the Supreme Court ruled that abortion, at least in the first trimester, was a woman's right; as suits for equal pay were launched against large corporations; as prestigious all-male colleges, professions, and institutions considered admitting women.

However, even then a powerful resistance was organizing. After a few years had passed, almost everything remained to be done. People spoke differently but acted pretty much as they always had. Following our initial success came a certain foreboding. Alice Paul, the veteran suffragist who had witnessed the defeat of feminism once, warned against allowing a time limit to be attached to the ERA; but, heedless of history as Americans—especially the young—tend to be, too ready to project our own changed consciousness onto the world, feminists failed to heed her. In time it became clear that our expectations, like my own sex article, were too optimistic; we had changed only the surface of what was wrong. Even if every woman acknowledged the injustice of sexism and every man understood about the role of the clitoris in female orgasm, sexual strife would continue, for the sexual arrangements of the world were still based on unequal power. Organized antifeminism followed each of the movement's successes in changing public consciousness. Movement or no movement, feminist feelings were not given public expression, our testimony was not considered "expert," our power in the world of public decisions remained miniscule. The heart of our sexual dissatisfaction with men was still that without power women were forced to sell it or forgo it, and we were still powerless. Even if we objected to Miss America standards we still had to be judged by them in our daily lives and then be tossed on the junk heap when we no longer measured up. Reexamining everything, even achieving *perfect understanding*, was not going to be enough to enable us to change the relations between the sexes, because sex had to do with power and those with power were not about to smile sweetly and give it up. A long, difficult struggle would have to follow understanding.

This is not to discount the considerable political gains we did make during the seventies in the fight for sexual justice. Of all the movements that emerged in the sixties, the WLM was the one that most securely became a mass movement in the seventies. Out of those early efforts grew changed attitudes and laws regarding women's work, reproductive freedom, physical abuse, and vast changes in notions of family. But many of the changes are extremely vulnerable to the growing anti-feminist backlash, and if we stop far short of our original goals we may lose the gains we have won. It happened to the women in the first wave—they gained certain important but only partial victories, and they were defeated and silenced for decades. It could happen to us if we let

up the pressure or lose sight of our original goals. If consciousness can be changed once, twice, it can be changed again. We are experiencing a strong move to the right. Sterilization abuse, hormone abuse are on the rise. The gap between average male and female income is *larger* than it was a decade ago. If abortions were outlawed again, if women were pushed back out of the work force, if we returned to viewing sex as an exclusively private matter affecting each person in isolation rather than a political matter affecting all of us, it could happen again. Just as frightening as the organized political backlash, which at least we know how to fight, is the backsliding of consciousness, the erosion of radical feminist ideals. The radical feminist critiques of sexuality and sexual repression, originally presented as aspects, or examples, of a much larger male domination of women but hardly as leading by themselves to solutions, have been diverted into concern with mere sexual technique or increased activity. Co-optation and tokenism have made it easier for people to deny that anything is still drastically wrong between the sexes. Again and again it is claimed that women have won sexual equality because the family is in a state of flux and chaos; that since the pill there is no longer any double standard—as if fear of pregnancy (which persists in any case) were the sole source of women's sexual anxiety. People say we are equal because a relatively small number of women are in positions of token power. (As with all "individual solutions," token power is different from real power, because as soon as the women who have it refuse to play the game they will lose their positions; knowing this, they are mostly supporters of the men to whom they owe their power.) But these facts only disguise the true situation of women's continued powerlessness.

A new generation does not know that ten years ago what are now our basic demands were unspoken, many even unmentionable. The ideas of women's liberation that were so recently shocking, thrilling, and liberating are already put down by many of the young as old hat and boring and by the old as a fad that is *passe*, obliterated in the swing of the pendulum. The presentation of feminism in the mass media has trivialized the movement's goals; in the name of "liberation" courses for women too frequently teach self-promotion instead of understanding and changing sexism in society; books on sexuality too often focus on technique and, worse, on how women may make themselves more sexually appealing to men, teaching us to blame the victim rather than on how to end victimization. The renewed search for personal solutions to collective problems is as arid today as it was a decade ago. Personal solutions to sexual problems center on finding the right partner or the right attitude or the right technique—at best chancy, at worst harmful, since they obscure the power relations inherent in sexual relations.

Several years back some of the women from the earliest movement days got together to discuss the changes that had occurred in their own sex lives since the movement began. All agreed that sex had changed for

them, but very few thought it had really improved. True, some of them were now able to specify what they wanted their sex partners to do, but in some relationships the man resented the woman's desires. Several women who had changed from nonorgasmic to regularly orgasmic were sorry to find that nevertheless they were unhappy in love. Some of the women who had become lesbians found themselves facing a whole new set of problems and anxieties in a world that punishes homosexuality.<sup>25</sup> One woman grieved that since she no longer "played the game" she was no longer interested in sex at all and another that no one wanted her.

Not even the most ardent feminist can claim to be "liberated" in a sexist society. "Sexual liberation" can mean nothing unless it includes the freedom to reject or enter into sexual relationships fearing neither exploitation nor punishment. But sexual exploitation and punishment still threaten every woman. The denial of complete reproductive freedom, the total responsibility for child rearing, the psychological intimidation of rape victims are all punishments for the sexually active woman. The threat of job loss, ridicule, rejection, isolation, and even rape are punishments threatening the woman who refuses sex.

As the radical ideas of feminism, developed under the powerful insight that the personal is political, are absorbed by institutions adept at deflecting change through co-optation, and as our radical programs come under direct attack by an increasingly vocal conservative backlash, our awareness of the political dimension of sexual relations, with its powerful potential for change, is in danger of being lost. Conceiving sexual liberation apart from feminist liberation can land us where women have too often landed—not with more real freedom but with new pressures to put out or to withhold. Our only recourse is to deepen our radical insights about the connections between sex and power and build a political movement which can put insight into action.

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25. Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love observe that lesbians "suffer the oppression of all women but are not eligible for any of the rewards. . . . Fear of punishment creates tremendous anxiety, even though punishment may not occur" ("Is Women's Liberation a Lesbian Plot?" in Gornick and Moran, pp. 443 and 445.)