

Lesbianism as political practice

Author:

Thompson, Denise

Publication details:

Second Women and Labour Conference, papers 1980, vol. 2
pp. 729-745

Event details:

The second Women and Labour conference
Melbourne University

Publication Date:

1980

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/675>

License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/43829> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-26

Lesbianism as political practice

(January/February 2004): As I acknowledged at the time I gave this paper, the theory contained in it is undeveloped and consequently highly compressed, even at times labyrinthine. Although it never did get developed to my own satisfaction, the main argument is clear enough—lesbian feminism felt so central to the feminist enterprise and could lay claim to being the most radical practice of second wave feminism, for two reasons: it posed a threat to the chief mechanism of women's subordination, heterosexuality, by refusing to be implicated; and it involved women focusing on each other, not on men. That the threat was more symbolic than real is obvious, and not only with hindsight. (We were vaguely aware of it at the time too). In fact it was wildly improbable, as indeed it turned out. But that makes the question of why it was being said, not to mention the strength of the negative reactions it evoked, even more interesting.

I have supplied a summary below, paragraph by paragraph, which may help to clarify matters somewhat.

The paper starts (paragraphs 1 and 2) by setting out what I saw as the crucial conflict within lesbian feminism—between the importance of lesbianism on the one hand, and the comparative silence about it in the public arena of feminism on the other. It is this latter point that the more coherent of my critics kept disagreeing with—lesbianism hadn't been silenced, they said, and it was only my ignorance of what had been done that led me to say so.

In paragraph 3 I suggest that the reason why lesbianism was not discussed to the extent it should be, might be in order to avoid outright conflict among feminists. Paragraphs 4 to 9 suggest a number of reasons why lesbianism might be important in feminist terms, eventually finding these reasons inadequate. Paragraphs 10 to 12 cast the issue of the current situation of women under capitalist patriarchal conditions in

Marxist terms (because there was a hope around at the time that feminism and Marxism might be found to be compatible). What I was talking about here was not lesbianism but the social problems to which lesbianism was being posited as a solution.

Paragraph 13 starts with the statement that I was concerned with 'the ideological mechanism whereby that exclusion of women from the process of material production is effected'. That statement needs unpacking and updating. What I was trying to do in this paper was to clarify the feminist meaning of lesbianism, so the crucial phrase in that statement is 'ideological mechanism' (that is, dealing with the question of how meanings come to be imposed even though they are against people's best interests). But coupling it with 'material production' meant that I was accepting, at least in part, the 'ideological'/'material' distinction that bedevilled so much of the Marxist theorising at the time. What I went on to talk about, however, involved two concepts centrally concerned with the notion of meaning, 'discourse' and 'ideology'. I concluded in paragraph 16 with an argument in favour of a theory of ideology with which to theorise social relations of domination. This was a plea for a theory of meaning which would allow for a distinction to be made between ideological and non-ideological systems of meaning. (I developed this further in my thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning* (1993-1996)—published as *Radical Feminism Today*).

Paragraphs 17 to 20 contain a discussion of the notion of 'subject' (starting from a statement by Foucault), using the term in two senses, 'class' (as in the Marxist insistence that classes, and not individuals, were the true subjects of history), and 'the individual'. The discussion of 'class' pointed out that men didn't constitute a 'class' in any sense resembling the Marxist one (and neither did women). The argument seems pretty pointless now. The discussion of the individual was more cogent, cautioning against a politics that targeted different types of individuals (in this case, 'men'). It recommended instead exposing the ways in which ideological individualism

'nullifies collective interests by "personalising" them as "individual problems" to be punished/cured, and "universalising" hegemonic interests as the "general social good"'.

This is a very compressed statement indeed, and I'm not sure I could simplify it even now. Many years after I wrote this paper I would return to this problem of ideological individualism, first in my thesis, and then in a research project resulting in a number of papers, and which is still ongoing as I write— 'Feminism and the Problem of Individualism', 'The Trouble with Individualism ...: A Discussion with Some Examples', 'Social Welfare Policy and "the Unemployed": A Case Study in the Ideology of Individualism' and 'Individualising the Social: or, Whatever Happened to Male Domination?'). It was in the course of this research project that I came to realise how extraordinarily difficult it is to disentangle oneself from ideological individualism, so hegemonic is it, much less convey the force of the critique to anyone else.

The last two paragraphs, 22 and 23, contain the theory of lesbian feminism as I saw it at the time. I don't disagree with what I said then, although I wouldn't use the Marxist terminology, e.g. 'class society' would become social relations of domination. I would also bracket off the assertions about lesbian feminism rather than making direct statements, stressing that this is what lesbian feminism *meant*, not what it did, or even what it could do. It wasn't possible to decide what to do unless we were clear on what was already happening. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

As I mentioned in 'Introduction to Lesbian Feminism', this paper created something of an uproar. Some echoes of the fuss can be found in 'Lesbianism as political practice: discussion' (in UNSWorks).

Lesbianism as political practice¹

(A paper presented at the second Women and Labour conference, Melbourne University, May 1980)

[The text in red in the paper below contains interpolations written in 1992.]

If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organising it for all time there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the *ruthless criticism of the existing order* . . . our task is not to draw a sharp mental line between past and future but to *complete* the thought of the past . . . the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age. (Marx to Ruge, 1873)

When we consider it, we find that by putting the question “What is man?” [sic] we really mean “What can man become?”, that is, whether or not man can control his own destiny, can “make himself”, can create a life for himself. Therefore, we say that man is a process, and precisely the process of his actions. (Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Modern Prince’)

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it. (Marx, IX Thesis on Feuerbach, 1845)

1. The starting point for this exercise in feminist theory was my own confusion at the status of lesbianism within the women’s movement. On the one hand, and at the practical level, it would seem to hold a position of central importance for feminists. Not only did countless numbers of lesbians flock to the women’s liberation movement, which provided, for the first time in history, the possibility of a cultural community of women whose primary commitment was to other women rather than to men. But an even greater number of women whose pre-feminist lives had been lived in conventional relationships with men—as wives/ mothers, girlfriends, mistresses—changed their sexual/ social orientation from men to women in response to the feminist political critique of their personal situations of social

¹. The above text is intended:

(i) as a sketching-out of an argument to be later expanded into a post-graduate thesis;
(ii) as a theorisation of a feminist practice too often ignored or silenced, and as yet inadequately incorporated into feminist discourse (discourses?);
(iii) as a process of theorisation of a political practice within which I am implicated (i.e. I am myself a lesbian/ feminist), within a specific context (i.e. the women's movement in Sydney in the last ten years). The issues raised, however, are neither personal nor parochial. Personal experience acquires political significance within the framework of feminist critique; and there is sufficient evidence from overseas publications and returned travellers to indicate that the situation in Sydney (while perhaps extreme) is not unique.

Two apologies:

(i) for the somewhat excessive use of lengthy asides in footnotes. These parentheses wander too far from the main argument to be included in the text. Some of these will be subsequently developed at greater length in the thesis;

(ii) for the equally excessive use of quotation marks. Some of these imply no more than direct reference to other sources, cited or otherwise. However, the majority imply the extraction of the ideas they enclose from this present text, and their emplacement in other ideological discourses whose justificatory function cannot be examined within their own terms.

subordination. Moreover, this mass exodus of feminist women from the confining structures of heterosexuality brought into question the institution of heterosexuality in the consciousness of those feminists who, for whatever reason, chose not to change their sexual orientation.

2. And yet, on the other hand, this phenomenon which had revolutionised the lives of so many women, which was the direct and immediate response of so many feminists to the exposure of the realities of women's oppression, was rarely acknowledged publicly within feminism. Or rather, by being acknowledged as no more than a 'valid sexual preference', lesbianism was reduced to the level of personal choice, and accorded a marginal status of minor importance in the wider struggle for women's emancipation. It was rarely listed on the agenda of conferences,² rarely, if ever, mentioned in feminist history and theory.³ The angry protests of lesbian/feminists, newly aware of the political implications of women loving women, were trivialised and patronised into silence by injunctions to concentrate on the 'real' issues of feminism.⁴ At the same time, the lesbian/feminist discourse provided no more than outraged demands that the issue not be ignored, and the largely untheorised assertion that the practice of lesbianism was the chief threat to the male supremacist social order to come out of the women's movement of the last ten years.

3. It is unlikely that the feminist reluctance to discuss the 'lesbian issue' was based on a desire to avoid providing ammunition for the perennial accusation: 'All feminists are lesbians!' The feminist commitment is not conducive to making concessions threatened male egos. It is more likely that that reluctance arose from a desire to avoid outright conflict within the women's movement itself. Originally, in 1969/1970, when the first women were

². The only paper dealing with lesbianism which was presented at the Women and Labour Conference at Macquarie University in May 1978 was my own, titled (somewhat unfortunately) 'Homosexuality: The Invisible Alternative'. The debate which it gave rise to, and the large number of women who attended its presentation, demonstrated that the issue of the connection between lesbianism and feminism was far from resolved. While the Women's Liberation Conference at Sydney University in March 1979 did allot a workshop to the topic of lesbianism, the debate which erupted in response to the Plenary Session report-back generated more heat than light, and the vituperative accusations and counter-accusations neither mollified antagonisms nor cleared up the confusion. (See footnote no, 4).

³. Most feminist texts either mention lesbianism not at all, e.g. Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate*, and Sheila Rowbotham's histories, or as a sub-group of oppressed women who are more at home in the women's movement than in Gay Liberation because of the sexist attitudes of gay men, e.g. Anne Summer's *Damned Whores and God's Police*, and most American Histories of the women's movement.

⁴. This was the tenor of the argument put forward by one Conference participant (herself a lesbian) at the above mentioned Women's Liberation Conference, in response to the Les/Fem Collective's accusation that the movement ignored the issue of lesbianism. She admitted that her argument was patronising, but went on to advise the Collective that their objection was an old one, raised a number of times over the years by young lesbians newly come to feminism. Once they had been in the movement for a while (I heard six months specified on another occasion), they came to realise that their objections had no foundation, and they 'came over and joined the rest of us'.

autonomous Women's Liberation groups, partly in reaction against the male domination of the traditional Left, the immediate feminist response to media accusations of 'lesbian' was how to convince the general public that they were *not*. However, this response was short-lived, and did not long survive the realisation that, in fact, many feminists *were* lesbians, or soon became so. Along with this realisation came the unofficial and largely unverballed conviction that lesbianism was the ultimate expression of sisterhood—that lesbians, who no longer 'consorted with the enemy',⁵ and who directed all their 'energies' including the sexual into relating to women, were somehow 'better' feminists than women who continued to relate sexually to men. In opposition to this view was the feeling that this lesbian pretension to being the vanguard of the feminist revolution, undermined any relevance feminism might have to the mass of uncommitted women, and divided the movement into self-congratulatory 'women-identified women', and defensive or scornful heterosexuals still bound by ties of love, loyalty, passion or convenience to situations they saw only too clearly as the source of their personal subservience. The lesbian response to accusations of divisiveness was to point to their continued commitment to political action on 'heterosexual' issues—abortion, rape, marital violence, contraception. To the extent that the dilemma seemed incapable of resolution, the most politic response was silence, and a sisterly agreement to live and let live.

4. Nevertheless, despite (or because of?) the comparative public silence of feminism on the topic of lesbianism, it was obvious to anyone involved that the issue was neither trivial nor irrelevant. On the contrary, there was no other single topic more likely to generate conflict and divide feminists into mutually uncomprehending antagonistic factions. One fact could not be denied: there has been a mass exodus of feminists from heterosexuality.⁶ To the women involved, the advantages of lesbianism are obvious: at one stroke, they have abolished in their personal lives the more pressing consequences of women's 'traditional role'—economic dependence, rape,⁷ domestic violence, frigidity, unwanted pregnancy,

⁵. From the discussion surrounding my paper at the 1978 Women and Labour Conference

⁶. I have no figures on the extent of this 'mass exodus', nor on the number of feminists who are lesbians. The amorphous nature of feminism, both ideologically and organisationally, precludes any attempt to identify who is and who is not a feminist. And the shifting sexual preferences among feminists which so amaze Gay Liberation men—those who do and those who don't, and those who do and *then* don't (although such 'recidivism' is regarded as somewhat 'ideologically unsound')—creates difficulties for anyone who wants to identify who is a *lesbian*. It is, however, irrelevant whether lesbians comprise a numerical majority, or simply a large and cohesive minority (depending on where the parameters of feminism are drawn), since it is the manifest influence of the discourse of lesbian/feminism ('text and practice') which is important. And as one woman pointed out: 'In every lesbian gathering, every second woman has been married, and three-quarters of them have kids'.

⁷. Lesbians are not, of course, immune from rape. Indeed, to the extent that rape is a form of social control of women, they may, in certain contexts, be more likely to be raped than women who appear feminine—'All she needs is a good fuck!' However, as women who have no desire to associate

abortion, the mutilating effects of contraceptive technology, and all the pervasive denigration faced by women who 'need' men—and established a celebration of female sexuality unhampered by the exigencies of erection, intromission and ejaculation. But listing the advantages does not explain the reasons *nor* the motives for the lesbian commitment. After all, all these problems have other solutions, albeit piecemeal and short-term; and lesbianism is not simply a reaction to the more aversive aspects of women's conventional situation, but a positive orientation towards women which precedes (not necessarily chronologically) at the same time as it enhances women's commitment to each other.

5. What needed to be explained was why innumerable (if unquantifiable) numbers of feminists espoused lesbianism as the crucial practice of their feminist consciousness. It must be admitted at the outset that no satisfactory answer is to be found in the relevant literature.⁸ Texts which provide an avowedly lesbian/feminist discourse are few and far between.⁹ Much of the discussion concerning the relationship between lesbianism and feminism has taken place verbally, at conferences, meetings, CR groups and 'speaking bitterly' sessions. The paucity of documentation and the confusion engendered by the inconclusive nature of the debate can, perhaps, be attributed to the feminist reluctance to accept the extreme (and consistent) position advocated by Jill Johnston. In *Lesbian Nation*, she argues that lesbians are the only 'true' feminists:

Feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution. Which is another way of putting what Ti-Grace Atkinson once described as 'Feminism being a theory and lesbianism being the practice ... [since] feminists who still sleep with men are delivering their most vital energies to the oppressor'. (Johnston, 1973: 166, 167)¹⁰
Hence, the strategy for the feminist revolution is straightforward: 'When theory and

intimately with men, they are unlikely to put themselves in situations where rape is the outcome of manipulative ploys—'petty rape', 'rape by fraud'. Neither are they any longer subjected to marital rape.

⁸. I no longer agree with this statement. The relevant literature at the time *did* contain the answer—that lesbianism within feminism was the major feminist challenge to male supremacy, because it undermined the phallocratic hegemony by withdrawing sexual energy from men and devoting women's energy and recognition to women. What I meant at the time was that the early literature merely asserted that, without drawing out its theoretical and political implications.

⁹. The footnote which appeared here in the original paper contained what I called at the time 'a close-to-exhaustive list of lesbian/feminist texts'. I have deleted the footnote, because I think that a 'close-to-exhaustive list' of anything is impossible, and because, as one woman pointed out when I gave the paper, (Bebbington, 1980) the list had many important omissions.

¹⁰. I have been unable to find where Ti-Grace said that. She certainly didn't say it in *Amazon Odyssey*. Indeed, in that book, she obviously finds no necessary connection between lesbianism and feminism at all: 'I now know that the greatest counterrevolutionary force *within* this early women's movement were the lesbians within it . . . instead of being *for* women they were the most reactionary on feminism. and in inter-movement struggles, they fought—quite literally—*alongside* the men for their interests'. (Atkinson, 1973: 145—emphasis in the original. See also: p.137)

practice come together we'll have the revolution. Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution' (p.166).

6. Other writers are not quite so blunt as this, often explicitly refusing to assert this extreme conclusion—'from a feminist viewpoint it is irrelevant whether feminists are straight or gay' (*Purple September* Staff, 1975: 82)—or bracketing off the assertion without committing themselves either way—'*an answer* [to the objection that there are more relevant issues than lesbianism to be discussed] *that is growing in popularity* is that lesbianism is the most radical position for a feminist to adopt' (*Refractory Girl*, no.4: 2—emphasis added). Nevertheless, the implication is clear: the practice of lesbianism is accorded a prestige (admittedly often reluctantly) which belongs to no other feminist issue:

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion ... the issue of lesbianism ... is no side issue. It is absolutely essential to the success and fulfillment of the women's liberation movement that this issue be dealt with. (Radicalesbians, 1970: 471, 475-6)

Lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal, and economic basis of male supremacy ... heterosexuality is crucial to maintaining male supremacy. (Bunch, 1975: 33, 37)

7. The major problem with this position is that it leads to the conclusion (unacceptable to most feminists) that women who continue to maintain sexual relationships with men are (at the very least) less consistent¹¹ in their feminist practice than are lesbian/feminists. One way out of the dilemma is to extract the sexual connotation from the definition of 'lesbian', and define all women politically committed to women's liberation as 'lesbians'. However, this tactic is, at best, a glossing over of the radical implications of lesbian/feminism; at worst, it is an outright denial of that dimension which ensures the radical status of lesbianism: sexuality. For within the context of feminism (and *only* within that context) lesbianism as *sexual* practice demonstrates the *political* nature of that most 'personal' of human activities.

8. However, to the extent that lesbian/feminist discourse asserts (implicitly or overtly) that 'Every feminist *ought* to be a lesbian', it fails to transcend the 'personal'/'political' dichotomy, and re-inserts that opposition within its own analysis by reducing it to the level of moralistic injunction. For it is sufficient that the discourse of lesbian/feminism exist as the *dominant* feminist discourse for its political implications to be already fully manifest. It is in

¹¹ 'The consistency issue is that there must be some consistency between a person's beliefs and its actions ... [footnote:] Lesbianism became a full-blown facet of the consistency issue in 1972' (Atkinson, 1974: 99).

no way essential to feminist revolutionary practice that every individual feminist adopt lesbianism as her 'personal' choice. Indeed, such an eventuality would weaken the feminist cause by confining it to a ghetto excised from the 'body politic',¹² and even further from the relations of power than women already are.¹³

9. Even were it the case that 'Every woman can be a lesbian!' (an unlikely event in the near future, as any feminist still struggling with male sexual power games, or with a bewildered and resentful celibacy, knows only too well), the most likely male reaction within the present social order to a mass refusal by women of sexual favours to men, is rape, assault and economic deprivation to bring the women back into line.¹⁴ The feminist revolution does not lie in that direction. Neither can it be found in the hope that women who have voluntarily renounced the 'protected' status women derive from 'belonging' to individual men, can, from the stronghold of their autonomy and independence, overthrow the male supremacist social order. No amount of fist-shaking at the bastions of male privilege, any more than sweet reason or pleas for justice and equality, are adequate mechanisms for social change. 'Sisterhood is powerful!' and 'The women's army is marching!' are fine rousing slogans to bolster one's courage in the face of violence and ridicule. But such determined whistling in the dark is not the feminist revolution.

10. The revolutionary implications of lesbian/feminism lie, not in its adoption as a 'personal life-style' by every single feminist, but in its demonstration by antithesis of the ideological mechanism whereby women are situated within the present social order: their ideological constitution of 'feminine subjects'. In other (and simpler) words, the practice of lesbian/feminism is a direct and immediate reaction, in response to the feminist critique, against the process whereby women come to live their lives of exclusion, isolation and control within the present historical epoch of the capitalist mode of production.¹⁵

¹² Here the quotation marks are used to indicate a cliché which is also a deliberate pun, given the *biopolitics* (Foucault's term) of the 'relations of power' within which women are *subjected*.

¹³ I no longer agree with this last statement. Although I still agree that there is no point in insisting that 'all women' (or all feminists) *should* be lesbians, I now believe that separatism (as I define it in: Thompson, 1991: 94-5) is the only feminist strategy available.

¹⁴ While I still think that that male reaction is likely, and indeed current, I am not happy with what that statement implies, i.e. that the safety of lesbian feminists is bought at the expense of women who continue to relate sexually to men.

¹⁵ I no longer identify 'the present historical epoch' as 'the capitalist mode of production', but as male supremacy. When I wrote the paper, I had not developed the social theory of male supremacy to the point where I could leave behind the only social theory of domination I knew at the time, i.e. Marxism. I also wanted to avoid having my argument labeled 'ahistorical'. I was convinced by Marxist arguments to the effect that consciousness is historically and culturally specific. I am still convinced by those arguments, but I no longer believe that 'history' or 'culture' need be defined in terms of 'modes of production'. And although it is undoubtedly the case that the present historical conditions

11. Within their 'traditional role', women are defined as 'non-workers', dependent for the basic necessities on the good-will of individual male bread-winners. Domestic labour ('women's work'), performed in isolation outside the network of commodity production and exchange, is regarded as contributing nothing of value to that process. Within the work force, women's 'primary commitment' to the domestic sphere, and dependence on the earnings of men, allows them to be paid at less than subsistence level, and facilitates their restriction to monotonous unskilled jobs, or servile 'professions' accorded none of the prestige and remuneration attached to male-dominated professions.¹⁶ Confined to domesticity, and to the least prestigious, remunerative and organised segments of the work force, women are isolated from the public arena of power and productivity, and from each other.

12. There is a sizeable body of literature on the part played by domestic labour and the sex segmentation of the work force in the production of value and the process of capitalist accumulation.¹⁷ Despite the inconclusive nature of the debate, I am assuming without

are capitalist, it is also the case that they are male supremacist, an identification which is entirely sufficient for feminist purposes.

The argument of this paper (and of the longer work I hope to develop from it later) is specific to the present historical period of the capitalist mode of production (always supposing the *pertinence* of a concept such as 'mode of production'— See the work of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst: *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, and their 'auto-critique', *Mode of Production and Social Formation*). Within other modes of production than that of Western Europe of the last four hundred years, the situation of women, while still one of subordination within patriarchal modes of social order, yet enabled women to play an important role in material production. See: Beard, 1946, for an erudite and lucid account of the social importance of women in medieval society. Beard's text is explicitly anti-feminist in intent. She takes to task the US feminists of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 for basing their case for the historical subjection of women on Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the first volume of which appeared in 1765. However, her argument—that women have actually played an important historical role—is feminist in its implications.

See: Goldberg, 1977, for a virulently anti-feminist (and naïve inductivist *whatever that means*) argument for the 'universality', and hence 'inevitability', of the subordination of women—or, what amounts to the same thing, 'male dominance' over women (*not* other men). I think now that I included a reference to this nasty little piece (which I never did manage read right to the end) because, once again, I wanted to avoid my argument being labelled 'ahistorical'. What I was saying by including it was: 'See, I know what is ahistorical, and I know that it is the kind of argument which is used by male supremacist ideologues in their own interests, and my argument is not like that'.

¹⁶ At this point I had a number of references to discussions of women in the work force and the professions. Since I do not think they are relevant to the main argument in this paper, I have deleted them.

¹⁷ For the same reason, I have also deleted the references to the 'domestic labour debate'. The interested reader is referred to my *Reading Between the Lines* (Thompson, 1991, chapter 8) for discussion and references.

In fact I no longer agree with my own argument in this paragraph. (I'm not even sure that I entirely agreed with it then, either). I no longer agree with it even in Marxist terms, i.e. that the sex segmentation of the labour force is functional to the process of capital accumulation. As Maxine Molyneux pointed out, it is quite possible that work could be desegregated—men could perform domestic labour, and women enter the paid work force on equal terms with men—'with no loss to capital whatsoever'. (Molyneux, 1979: 21) More importantly, I no longer believe that the exclusion of women from 'productive labour' is the central problem to be addressed by feminist theory. That I said

examining the debate in detail, that the social subordination of women is determined 'in the last instance', by the functional role¹⁸ performed by that situation in the production of the material necessities of human life, and the accumulation and concentration of wealth under the control of elites at the expense of the majority; and that the 'ruling class' whose interests are served by the subordination of women is that same 'ruling class' (or fractions thereof) delineated within Marxist theory. The sexual division of labour is not specific to the capitalist mode of production (unlike the accumulative process of commodity production, and the concomitant division of 'labour' between the owners and controllers of the means of production, and the sellers of labour power). What is peculiar to the capitalist era is the separation of a privatised sphere of domesticity from the public sphere of production, the confinement of women to the former as their 'natural' sphere of human existence, and the devaluation of a domain of 'personal life' of no relevance to the production of social value.¹⁹

13. My concern here is to give an account of the ideological mechanism whereby that exclusion of women from the process of material production is effected.²⁰ In order to do that, it is necessary to digress from the main argument for the purpose of clarifying the theoretical framework within which that argument is set, and, in particular, two concepts that have been used somewhat interchangeably in the course of the analysis: 'ideology' and

I did was another result of my too close adherence to Marxism. The central problem addressed by feminist theory is male domination, of which women's exclusion from the status of 'productive worker' is but one manifestation. And although I would still agree that the ruling class I referred to is the one delineated by Marxism, Marxism itself did not identify the main problem with it from the feminist standpoint—that however else it is characterised, the ruling class is male.

¹⁸ I admit that the functionalist terminology is suspect on a number of counts. In the first place, it is an illegitimate extension of Darwin's theory of the evolution of species into the domain of the social, and, to the extent that it is true, it is tautologous—if a social practice ('culture', 'structure', mode of human existence, etc., like a biological species, survives, then it must be functional because it survives. It is usually asserted by functionalist social theorists (e.g. Parsons, Bales, Smelser) that the circle can be broken by resort to empirical evidence of the way in which any social phenomenon actually *does* function in the maintenance of the existing social order. Attempts to do this in the case of 'domestic labour' or 'sex segmentation of the work force' have met with so many dysfunctions, anomalies and resistances, that one is left with the suspicion that functionalist explanation itself serves certain ideological, i.e. justificatory and conservatising 'functions'. Nevertheless, I have retained the term deliberately, as an ironic comment on the utilitarian ethic of the profit motive—human life has no 'value' except to the extent that it produces, as the commodity labour power, the surplus value that accumulates as wealth.

¹⁹. I have only recently realised that I don't know the source of the argument that capitalist relations of production demand a separation between the public sphere of production and the privatised sphere of the conjugal family. I still don't, but I've lost interest in the argument. Nevertheless, see: Ariès, 1960 (although he seems to have the argument back to front: 'In the eighteenth century, the family began to hold society at a distance, to push it back beyond a steadily extending zone of family life', p.385); Oakley, 1974; Shorter, 1975; Zaretsky, 1976.

²⁰ It would not be my concern now to give an account of women's exclusion from the public sphere of production, and I'm not sure it was then, either—See notes 15 and 17. What I am concerned with now, is the ideological mechanism whereby women are excluded from the 'human' norm.

'discourse'. The first is from the debate surrounding the work of Althusser, the second from that of Foucault. Both imply an 'intermingling' of 'text and practice',

a grasping of ideas in their materiality, not only insofar as they are texts and words but also in that, fundamentally, they also produce institutions and forms of conduct (Chatelet, 1979: 24).

Or as Althusser put it: 'There is no practice except by and in ideology' (Althusser, 1971: 170).²¹ Both are situated within theoretical endeavours to account for the 'relative autonomy' and 'effectivity' of the 'superstructure' of ideas, as opposed to the unmediated determination by the economic 'base' posited by the simplistic Marxism which plunged Marxist practice into the sterile terror of Stalinism. Both theoretical endeavours are concerned to account for mechanisms of social control specific to the present historical era—in Foucault's terminology, 'relations of power' (Foucault, 1976), in Althusser's 'the reproduction of the relations of production' (Althusser, 1971: 148ff).

14. Foucault rejects the concept of ideology on grounds which indicate cogent difficulties (Foucault, 1979: 36). Nevertheless, unlike 'discourse', it incorporates the idea of 'hegemony'. Foucault would doubtless also reject *that* concept, on the grounds that it implies the 'possession' of power on the part of some (dominant) 'subject(s)' as against (an)other (subordinated) 'subject(s)'. However, while agreeing that 'power' is not some 'thing' which can be possessed, the fact remains that those 'relations of power' which permeate every facet of human existence, even to the most 'intimate' areas of individual bodies, are manipulated in the interests of some 'subject(s)' and against the interests of others. If it were not so, there would be no possibility of those 'resistances' which exist wherever there are 'relations of power', that is, everywhere.

15. For that reason I have retained both the concept of 'ideology' *and* that of 'discourse'. Neither implies privileged access to 'truth', or rather, *both* do, despite the fact that 'truth claims' on the part of any particular ideology (discourse) may exclude/contradict those of any other discourse (ideology). Moreover, 'ideology' *is* 'discourse', with the added connotation that *ideological* discourses provide a justificatory reality for the continued maintenance of social relations of domination/subordination; while at the same time there exist what might be called *subversive* discourses which provide justifications for resistances against those relations. Nor can ideology be termed 'illusion'. The situation of women as housewives/wives, mothers, helpmeets and whores is no illusion, but the actuality of

²¹ Much more work needs to be done before the work of such 'profoundly androcentric writer(s)' (Morris, 1979: 152) as Foucault and Althusser can be used/scrapped/criticised in a feminist theoretical endeavour.

women's lived experience in a reality as intransigent as any factory floor, mine or picket line. And neither can any discourse which, 'from within ideology ... tries to break with ideology' (Althusser, 1971: 173), claim a lien on 'truth', scientific or otherwise. Lesbian/feminist discourse can lay no more claim to 'truth' than can 'male supremacist ideology'. Indeed, it would seem to have somewhat *less* claim, since it runs counter to the recognition/misrecognition (p.172)²² of 'what everyone knows' about 'women'.

16. A theory of ideology is a theory of 'society'; but not in the static, objectivist 'social research' sense, whereby the social order is a state of affairs to be observed (quantified, tabulated, categorised, predicted and 'engineered') from a standpoint of (ideally) Olympian detachment. It is, more accurately, a *theorisation* (that is, an on-going process of elucidation and insight) of a social order, whose 'world-taken-for-granted' status has become problematic to those for whom the acquisition of a consciousness of social relations of domination/subordination is informed by their interest in and opposition to domination. Hence, it is the process of devising a critique of the social order with the explicit purpose of subverting that order. For that reason, it is in opposition to the time-honoured efforts of mainstream ('bourgeois') sociology to devise a theory of 'society' in general, universally valid for every instance of the category 'society'. This sociological endeavour, moulded in the Procrustean bed of mechanistic causality, presupposes the social order as a 'natural order of things', uninfluenced by any human practice less 'rational' than technological manipulation by an elite of experts with privileged access to 'scientific knowledge'. In contrast, a theory of ideology situates its social analysis within the present historically specific context of the capitalist mode of production. In doing so, it seeks to provide the basis for a transformation of the present social order (a possibility excluded by the search for universal determinants of 'society'), by exposing the material conditions of exploitation which support relations of domination/subordination.

17. To return to one of the objections raised by Foucault to the concept of ideology: 'it refers, necessarily I believe, to something like a subject' (Foucault, 1979: 36). Without for that reason rejecting outright the concept of ideology, it must be admitted that the theoretical difficulties inherent in any notion of 'subject' are formidable (although not intransigent). In the case of the feminist category 'male supremacist ideology', for example, the classic Marxist formulation of *classes* as the real *historical subjects* is inappropriate, since its use within the feminist critique of the subordination of women entails the conclusion that 'men' collectively comprise a 'ruling class'. In the sense in which Marx meant the term—the appropriation of the means of production for their own private profit, and the expropriators

²² See also: 'Freud and Lacan' in the same volume, pp.218-9.

of the surplus value produced by the proletariat—this is just not so. *Not* all men are owners of the means of production; indeed, most men are workers whose labour produces the surplus which is the precondition for the continuation of their exploitation. Moreover, given the assumption that the ‘ruling class’ whose ideas dominate this present historical era, and whose interests are served by the subordination of women, is the same capitalist class which exploits the value-producing capacity of the commodity, labour-power, then it is not the case that men in general, irrespective of any particular man’s relationship to the means of production, derive equal benefits from the subordination of women. While it is without doubt that men individually and in the short-term gain certain advantages from their dominance over individual women (and too often abuse the social power thereby invested in them), to the extent that working-class men concur with this state of affairs—by objecting to women’s paid work, by acquiescing in unequal rates of pay, by regarding domestic labour as ‘women’s work’ and demanding nurturance and service from their own domestic worker—they are subverting their own class interests.

18. Alternatively, neither can women collectively be said to constitute a ‘class’ in any Marxist sense, since they are not regarded as partaking directly in the production process at all, and acquire their position within the hierarchical social order at second hand through their familial (interpersonal) relationships with individual men.

19. But neither can those ‘sexed subjects’ which acquiesce in/resist the ‘relations of power’ between women and men, be regarded as female and male ‘*individuals*’—although that it how they are recognised/misrecognised within *both* that time-honoured misogyny labeled within feminism as ‘male supremacist ideology’ (‘bitch’, ‘whore’, ‘nag’, ‘housewife’) *and* aspects of feminist discourse (‘male chauvinist pig’, ‘rapist’, ‘basher’, ‘mutant’). For the notion of ‘subject’ points inexorably back to the ideological constitution of ‘concrete individuals’, and *for that very reason* demands to be included in any theoretical endeavour which purports to bring about the ‘non-reproductive transformation’ of the present social order.

20. The continued maintenance of the social *order* rests on the primal category of the ‘individual’—the isolated, privatised atom of human existence, whose ‘needs’, ‘desires’, ‘drives’, ‘emotions’ are as likely as not to come anarchically into conflict with those of other ‘individuals’. This device (apparatus, strategy) of the ‘individual’ nullifies collective interests by ‘personalising’ them as ‘individual problems’ to be punished/cured, and ‘universalising’ hegemonic interests as the ‘general social good’.

21. As Foucault himself points out: ‘Posing for discourse the question of power means, basically, to ask: whom does discourse serve?’ (Foucault, 1979: 33) (a question which would

seem to imply 'ideology', rather than the blander, less incriminating term 'discourse'). More cogent for feminism is the question: whose interests are diminished, ignored, rendered non-existent? It was the asking of the former question (Foucault's) rather than the latter, which led feminist discourse into the ideological stance of *re-individualising* a discourse whose starting point was the *de-individualising* of women's social subordination—neurotic, menopausal, premenstrual, post-natal depressive, emotional, flighty, irrational, intuitive 'individuals', hag-ridden by a disruptive biology—by exposing women's community of interests. To assert, as feminist discourse does, that the 'main enemy' is 'men', is to confound the demonstrable interest all women have in an end to domination, with the ideological mechanism whereby women's subordination is achieved—their *subjection* to the privatised idiosyncrasies of male 'individuals'.

22. What has remained unexamined is why the only coherent and consistently radical practice of this 'latest wave' of feminism is, necessarily, a *sexual* practice. Given that central category, we return to the main argument: it is the one feminist discourse—'text and practice'—which resists acquiescence in the only definition of female existence possible within a male supremacist social order. It is explicitly and cogently subversive of 'femininity', the category within which women's lives are prescribed, proscribed and circumscribed. The exclusion of women from any definitive role in the material production of commodities for exchange is effected by means of a 'materialism' which displaces the locus of that exclusion from the production of social wealth, to the 'materiality' of a flawed anatomy. 'Femininity' is the arrival point of that 'long forced march' undertaken/imposed on 'feminine subjects' predestined to live as passive receptacles of the valorised organ. The 'natural' phallocentricity of 'sexuality' legitimises/disguises the only access women have to the symbol of human value, as wives/whores and mothers (of sons).

23. Lesbian/feminism is an immediate personal/political reaction against this subjugation of women by means of a phallocentric sexuality (the most extreme and symptomatic expression of which is rape). As such, it is the first step in the feminist revolution, but by the same token, no more than that. For beyond that first step—the overcoming of women's isolation from each other by themselves establishing a non-phallocentric sexuality—lies the next stage—the assertion of women's equal participation with men in the social relations of production. The current feminist dilemma of where to go next, arises from the nature of capitalist society—the feminist ideal of equality is incapable of realisation in class society. Even were it possible for women to enter the work force on an equal footing with men, that simple prerequisite for women's emancipation would achieve no more than the establishment within the ranks of women themselves of the same hierarchical structures of power and privilege which exist between men. For that reason, the eventual attainment of

the feminist revolutionary ideal is intimately connected with the abolition of class society. Nevertheless, until such time, lesbian/feminism, as the refusal to be implicated in the male supremacist categorisation of 'women', remains the single revolutionary practice of feminist consciousness.

References

- Althusser, Louis (1971) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* New York and London: Monthly Review Press
- Ariès, Philippe (1960) *Centuries of Childhood* Penguin, 1973 (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1960)
- Atkinson, Ti-Grace (1974) *Amazon Odyssey* New York: Links Books
- Beard, Mary (1946) *Woman As Force in History* New York and London: Collier Macmillan
- Bebbington, Laurie (1980) 'A Reply to Denise' *Lesbian Newsletter*, no.25, Melbourne, August
- Bunch, Charlotte (1975) 'Lesbians in Revolt', in Myron and Bunch, eds.
- Chatelet, François (1979) 'Récit', in Morris and Patton, eds
- Foucault, Michel (1976) *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* Paris: Gallimard
- Foucault, Michel (1979) 'Truth and Power: Interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino', in Morris and Patton, eds
- Goldberg, Steven (1977) *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* London: Temple Smith
- Johnston, Jill (1973) *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* New York: Simon and Schuster
- Molyneux, Maxine (1979) 'Beyond the Housework Debate' *New Left Review* no.116, July-August, pp.3-27
- Morris, Meagan (1979) 'The Pirate's Fiancé', in Morris and Patton, eds
- Morris, Meagan and Patton, Paul, eds (1979) *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy* Sydney: Feral Publications
- Myron, Nancy and Bunch, Charlotte, eds. (1975) *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* Baltimore, Md: Diana Press
- Oakley, Ann (1974) *Housewife* Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976
- Purple September Staff (1975) 'The Normative Status of Heterosexuality', in Myron and Bunch, eds.

- Radicalesbians (1970) 'Woman-Identified Woman', in Brown, P., ed. (1973) *Radical Psychology* New York: Colophon Books—originally printed in *Notes From the Third Year* reprinted in 1988 in Hoagland, Sarah Lucia and Penelope, Julia, eds. *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* London: Onlywomen Press.
- Shorter, Edward (1975) *The Making of the Modern Family* Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977
- Refractory Girl*, no.4 (1974) 'The Lesbian Issue', Editorial
- Thompson, Denise (1991) *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality* Sydney: The Gorgon's Head Press
- Zaretsky, Eli (1976) *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* London: Pluto Press