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Homosexuality: The Invisible Alternative

(A paper presented at the first Women and Labour conference, Macquarie University, Sydney, May 1978)

This paper is a response to the plea voiced by Sue Bellamy on p.19 of Bulletin no.3, expressing her hope that 'between now and May there is a miraculous rising of consciousness and new thoughts about lesbian sexuality and lifestyle, about the oppressiveness even among feminists of heterosexism'. In a conference devoted to the dimensions of women's oppression, where are the papers and sessions dealing with the problems of lesbians? I do not intend this as a whine for support from our straight sisters—we must first and foremost (although not only) fight the oppression and quietude we lay upon ourselves. Why didn't we come forward, or rather, having come forward, why weren't we forward earlier, in the initial planning stages? Oh, we were *there* all right (although I wasn't), but not as lesbians—we were involved in other issues, many of which are just as vital to our progress towards liberation, but which are not central to the issue of the political implications of our sexual orientation.

It might perhaps be argued (although I hope it won't) that, since this is a conference on 'Women and Labour', it is not the appropriate venue to discuss lesbianism. But there *is* a section included on the politics of sexuality—wholly subsumed under *heterosexuality*. Apart from the imperialism of this assumption, it has implications which I find fascinating—are we to assume that lesbians having no (or no longer) sexual relations with men, are therefore immune from the sexually repressive consequences of patriarchal capitalism? While I don't think that this is by any means the case, the exclusion of lesbianism from the original agenda would appear to imply just that.

It is not sufficient, either, to argue for the lack of our inclusion on the grounds that we are a numerical minority (should anyone be inclined to argue any such thing). In the first place, lesbians are not a small minority in the Women's Movement—firstly, because the Movement naturally attracts 'women identified women', and, secondly, because many of us, having no family commitments, especially children (although I

do), have more time and energy to devote to political activity. Moreover, the number of women who have 'changed' their sexual preference from men to women as a result of joining the Movement (or who joined the Movement because they felt it coming on) is not insignificant. (I can't be more explicit than that—I don't at the moment know of any research which deals with the issue. My assertion is based on personal experience). This would indicate that the numerical strength of lesbians in the Movement, as in the wider society, is difficult to estimate because of the problem of latency, denial, suppression, call it what you will, of what I am convinced is a genuine human alternative, and for some women the only sexual possibility. Many of us have felt the 'call'—how many are still wavering, or denying outright their own possibility?

This screed which I have dignified with the title of 'paper' is not quite that in the academic sense. It is, in the first place, a discussion opener—it raises a number of questions for debate, while attempting to answer none of them. In the longer term, it is based on a preamble for a post-graduate thesis, upon which I have not yet started work for various reasons. While our initial task here is to discuss the particular implications of the suppression of lesbians in the Women's Movement, in this paper I want to place the issues within the wider context of the position of homosexuality in a predominantly (and dominantly) heterosexual society—what I usually refer to as 'heterosexist imperialism'.

We are invisible—and there is no need to go any further than the initial planning stages of this conference for evidence of that. We are invisible to the public at large, to ourselves and to each other. Raised in an exclusively heterosexual milieu, that is, the family, the troubled lesbian adolescent has no role models who can counter those depersonalising assurances that her strongest emotions are merely a 'passing phase' which she will eventually 'grow out of'. Older women, having obediently 'grown out of it' and into marriage and children, or alternatively deeper into the 'closet' through fear of the reactions of family, employers, etc., are discouraged from exploring the possibilities of the Women's Movement by the vitriolic abuse which is heaped on 'women's libbers' by the public media. The ideological justifications which support this concealment of the existence of homosexuality range from outraged moralism—'an evil which is capable of sapping the highest and best in

civilisation’;¹ through pity—the ‘poor things’ approach;² to ‘science’—an ‘error in psychosexual differentiation’, ‘psychosexual pathology’, ‘eonism’, etc.³ In other words, we are either bad, mad or childish. Of course, the explicitly moralistic approach to the condemnation of homosexuality has fallen out of favour in the theoretical literature; but the failure to grant homosexuality the status of genuine human possibility, and hence to make this moralistic attitude overt, has resulted in an underground moralism which surfaces as ‘science’. The very fact that the investigation of homosexuality falls under the rubric of ‘sexual deviation’ or ‘perversion’ is an implicit moral judgement. And yet homosexuality survives, despite opprobrium, ridicule and the absence of positive social definitions. If we are not to accept a self-definition of ourselves as sick or emotionally retarded, that is, if we are to avoid pejorative moralism and take a positive moral stand, then the intransigent survival of homosexuality can only be attributed to a genuine human need.

That lesbianism has not been subjected to the same legal restrictions as male homosexuality, at least in England and the colonies, reflects the double denial to which lesbians, as both women and homosexuals, are subjected. While it is true that we are not faced with the same brutal suppression as are gay men, that very situation ensures that the oppression lesbians face is more diffuse and less easily recognised, Queen Victoria’s apocryphal remark to the effect that she couldn’t believe that any woman could behave in such a fashion, is a reflection of the belief that women are wives and mothers first and foremost and solely, with no possibilities of their own apart from the social definitions they acquire in their relationships with men. In the two principal statutes in English legislation⁴—1533 and the Labouchère amendment of 1885—which prescribed penalties for male homosexual behaviour, female homosexuals are not mentioned. Acts of ‘gross indecency between female persons’ are mentioned in the Macquisten amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1921, and the ensuing debate in both Houses brought into the open many of the justificatory arguments for the suppression of female homosexuality and women in general. The amendment involved both

¹ Frederick Macquisten, the Scottish Conservative member of the House of Commons, who moved an amendment to the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill, under the heading of ‘Acts of indecency between females’ (Hyde, 1972: 200).

² As instanced by the Editorial Forward to Storr, 1964.

³ This sophisticated name-calling is to be found in Money, 1972

⁴ The following account relies on Hyde, 1972: 199-205.

Houses in a quandary. On the one hand, the legislative guardians of our civilised sexual morality were faced with the task of eradicating this ‘dreadful degradation’, ‘this horrible grossness’, this vice which ‘debauches young girls’ and ‘stops child-birth’.⁵ The Lower House was swayed by such ‘arguments’, and passed the amendment. On the other hand, the Lords, like Queen Victoria, was reluctant to admit to the existence of this subversive activity, or at least to publicise it. The explicit reason for the failure of the Lords even to vote on the amendment before they rejected it, was the fear that respectable women would be open to blackmail on the flimsiest evidence. But the deeper reason, which reflected a denigration of all women and not just lesbians, was summed up by Lord Desart:

we all know of the sort of romantic, almost hysterical friendships that are made between young women at certain periods of their lives and of its occasional manifestations. (Hyde, 1972: 203)

In other words, women are silly creatures and we can’t place too much importance on their activities. Moreover, there was a very grave possibility that, by passing such legislation,

it would be made public to thousands of people that there was this offence; and there was such a horror. (Hyde, 1972: 203)

The Commons, convinced by the ‘arguments’ of the Lords, did not reintroduce the amendment. Hence, the argument which swung the decision in favour of excluding women from the legislation was to the effect that since women were naturally affectionate and emotional creatures, much given to caressing and kissing each other under the most normal and unsuspecting circumstances, it would be very difficult to tell who was a lesbian and who was not. Some grave miscarriages of justice might occur, and it simply would not do to have perfectly respectable gentlewomen accused of a heinous crime and languishing in some fetid prison, when all they were doing was living together (or even sleeping together) in perfectly harmless companionship. Moreover, at whatever cost, the knowledge of the fact of the existence of lesbianism must be kept hidden from the public at large, and certainly from the women themselves.

⁵ From Hansard, quoted in Hyde, 1972.

Now, it seems to me unlikely that the House of Lords was prevented from passing legislation by an overdeveloped sense of justice. Neither is it likely that they were overly concerned with the fate of women, gently born or otherwise, who had been convicted of a hideous crime, especially a crime against the inalienable right of the male to retain custody of his property, in this instance women. What seems to me a far more likely explanation for the exclusion of women from the legislation is that what women do is irrelevant. The vast majority of women were economically dependent on men—the ideology of ‘kinde, küche, kirche’, and its consequences of low paid, low status, menial and subservient employment for women ensured that. Even in 1921, gentlewomen had few alternative fates to that of being passed from father to husband. The best of those alternatives was a drop in social rank to the status of genteel servant—governess or companion—the worst was starvation. Legislation against female sexuality, of whatever orientation, was unnecessary—on the one hand, it was assumed not to exist; on the other hand, as Freud so ably, if unconsciously, pointed out, it is impossible to express oneself sexually if one lacks control over the course of one’s destiny. There was no need to pass laws against female homosexuality—its suppression had already been catered for quite efficiently by other arms of the ideological state apparatus. And the benefits to be gained by an over-determination of the suppression of subversive women through legislation, were outweighed by the threat occasioned by the legislation itself to the institutionalised ignorance which is the most common mechanism of oppression.

In order to illustrate how the mesh of ideological justification which entangles us economically and politically stretches disguised tentacles from its roots in the public sphere to the deepest reaches of our most private desires, I want to use Freud’s theory of female sexuality. Let me assure you at the outset that this is no condoning of Freud’s own personal value judgements on what was right, fitting and proper for the status of women—I don’t disagree with Kate Millet, but I want to go further than resentment and condemnation. I am using Freud’s writings for two main reasons: firstly, because a misuse of his theory is the foundation of most ‘theories’ of homosexuality; and secondly, because he gives us a brilliantly observed picture of the fragmentation and alienation of female sexuality under patriarchy.

Freud’s account of female sexuality is given within the context of the Oedipus complex, that struggle to resolve the conflict of love and power which the female child always loses. Initiated by the threat of castration, the Oedipus complex culminates for the male child in his introjection of the father figure and consequent

acquisition of a super-ego. To achieve this result, the boy must relinquish his present desires—exclusive possession of his mother—for the deferred promise of future power—his birthright which is symbolised by his penis. The little girl, by contrast, receives neither threat nor promise—having never possessed a penis, she cannot be deprived of it; and her lack of the universal symbol of power ensures that she has no hope of ever attaining full human status. Instead she must identify with powerlessness and passivity, that is, her equally castrated mother. It is her resentment at the mother who gave birth to her as a girl, which propels her out of her original, pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, and towards her father and men in general, in the hope of a second-hand promise—a substitute penis, that is, a baby, preferably male.

In the course of this resolution of the Oedipal dilemma the girl has two tasks to perform, two discontinuities in her psychic life, which are not matched by anything the male child encounters. In the first place, she must withdraw her libidinal attachment from women in the person of her mother—the primal sexual love object for both sexes—and redirect it towards males. Whereas the boy is permitted, indeed required, to retain his original attachment to the nurturing sex who first aroused his desires with her ministrations and manipulations of his body (as long as this is generalised to other females but his mother), the girl must wrench herself away from the nurturing sex, and re-direct her emotional life towards the powerful sex, one representative of which will deign to provide her with the resources necessary for the half-human existence which is her only destiny. The second task she must perform in her long forced march to second-rate humanity, is to transfer her orgasmic sensitivity from the clitoris, the locus of orgasm in the ‘phallic’ or masturbatory phase, to the vagina. While the boy retains the continuity of orgasmic sensitivity in his penis, the girl must reject the organ of ‘active’ sexuality, the clitoris, in favour of the organ of ‘passive’ sexuality, the vagina.⁶

Having resolved the Oedipal dilemma at her own expense, the girl is faced with three alternative lines of development. She can accept her role as the passive recipient of the male’s sexual advances—she can lie back and enjoy her ‘normal’ femininity. Or, in her resentment at having to abandon her active sexuality by means of clitoral masturbation, the girl may, in her progress towards adult sexuality, deny her sexuality altogether, instead of merely abandoning activity in favour of

⁶ I wonder where he got *that* idea from?

passivity. But since sexuality will not be denied except at a price, she must pay that price by the formation of compensatory neurotic symptoms—*anxiety, phobias, obsessive actions or hysterical paralysis*—which are attempts to disguise her desires and their sexual nature, while at the same time revealing it by means of symbolic displacement devices. Hence, on Freud's account, 'normal' femininity and the neuroses both belong on the same continuum of decreasing control over one's sexual destiny. The neuroses are a protest at the feminine condition, exposing at the same time as they conceal the conflict within which women are placed by the Law of the Father.

The third alternative possibility Freud saw succeeding the Oedipal resolution indicates that he allowed himself to observe far more than he was aware of. The girl, going beyond resentment at her female fate, and moreover, in a grand refusal to diminish her sexual and other possibilities at the expense of her psychic health, avoids both 'normal' femininity and neurosis by retaining, or returning to, the activity inherent in the phallic phase, and develops a 'masculinity complex'. She refuses to be subservient to the male, is unlikely to get married (or if she does, she 'wears the trousers'), and may even be 'masculine' in her sexual preference, that is, a lesbian. In this way she avoids both the 'normal' female fate, and also the neurotic repression which is the only socially acceptable alternative to femininity.

To me, this sounds remarkably like the manifesto issued by the NY Radicalesbians when they broke away from GLF [Gay Liberation Front] in 1970 (although not all women with a 'masculinity complex' were necessarily lesbians), 'The Woman-Identified-Woman':

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society ... cares to allow her ... She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society—the female role (Teal, 1971: 183—deletions in the text).

While Freud himself, unlike some of his 'followers', did not regard homosexuality per se as neurotic, it is highly unlikely he was recommending lesbianism as the only human reaction open for women fighting for an autonomous existence. And yet he

was remarkably value neutral on this third alternative (as far as I have been able to ascertain at this stage). Women with a ‘masculinity complex’ were not neurotic—it is one of three alternatives, only one of which is neurosis. His only case study dealing directly with female homosexuality—‘Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman’—bears this out. Indeed, he is even rather admiring of the girl’s intelligence and rationality in her search for a solution to her life’s dilemma, given that hers was probably a case of ‘constitutional homosexuality’. (Committed feminists would not agree with that solution, which was to find a complaisant husband who would turn a blind eye to her affairs with women).

However, Freud could not bring himself to accord full human status to homosexuality, although he did refuse to call it a ‘perversion’, preferring rather to call it an ‘inversion’ of sexual object choice. For he accepted without question the prevalent biologicistic assumption of his time (and ours) that there is a universal and inescapable link between adult genital sexuality (the final stage of sexual development, and the goal of the whole developmental process) and the ‘propagation of the species’. He nowhere examined the nature of this link, but accepted it non-reflectively as a basic datum of human existence. He could deplore the psychic consequences for young *men* of the contraceptive practice of ‘coitus interruptus’,⁷ and bemoan the lack of an effective form of contraception, without at the same time being in the least aware of the implication of that argument for the assertion that there is an inalienable link between sexuality and reproduction. If there is such an urgent need for contraception, it is obvious that the primary purpose of sexual intercourse, even for heterosexuals, is *not* the reproduction of the species—most people most of the time do not want conception to occur, and go to great lengths to prevent it, or remedy the consequences when contraception fails, that is, by abortion or infanticide. In plain language, people do not fuck to beget, but for reasons which are intrinsic to the act itself. As Freud himself pointed out, the emotions demand immediate satisfaction, and cannot be motivated by an event nine months in the future.

It is this assumption of a link between sexuality and reproduction which I see as the core concept of the ideological justification for the suppression of homosexuality. As this will be the initial subject matter of my projected post-graduate thesis, I have not

⁷ In ‘“Civilised” Sexual Morality and Modern Neurosis’.

at this stage fully worked out the implications of the assumption. I am raising it only as a matter for discussion.

To conclude, I would like to return to Freud's 'theory' (or description) of female sexuality. It is not a pretty picture—it is no wonder that feminists have rejected it out of hand as demeaning and oppressive. But by expounding Freud's account, I do not intend it as a picture of what always happens in the socialisation of women, nor of what necessarily happens, nor even of what sometimes happens, but of what *ought* to happen if the patriarchy is to survive and flourish—that is, as a *moral* statement. It is, moreover, an account of what has happened, and what will continue to happen, unless we, as self-reflective feminists, become aware that it does happen (or variations on a like theme). With Freud, the 'is' became an 'ought'. But it is also possible to make an 'ought not' an 'is', in full awareness of human freedom. Freud's mistake lay, not in his powers of observation, but in placing what he observed in a particular historical era and culture, within a framework of pseudo-scientific biological necessity. The consequence of that epistemological position is that what is solely a question of morality, of human choice, becomes an institutionalised oppression, justified by appeals to 'Human Nature'; and human freedom is curtailed once again by a non-reflective dogmatism which is both a theoretical lack and a moral incapacity.

AFTERWORD:

I apologise if this last paragraph is somewhat obscure—it contains the central theme of the aforementioned thesis which I have not as yet fully developed. Since it is, however, related to that theme of 'invisibility' with which I started, I will try to state the argument in clearer terms. The oppression of lesbians is in the first place a conspiracy of silence—the patriarchy defines away our subversive potential by denying us access to the channels of information which consolidate social reality. A major part of this denial consists of the technique of creating 'theories' of lesbianism, and of female sexuality in general, which incorporate justificatory arguments for the continued suppression of women. And these 'theories', when they are not explicitly moralistic homilies, invariably contain as their basic premise some reference to what is 'natural' in terms of biological givens. I have spent so much time on Freud because his theory is one such argument, indeed it (or distorted versions of it) is the underlying assumption for all subsequent 'theories'. What I am attempting to

counterpose to such biologicistic justifications is some account of ethical choice and the implications that has for liberation.

Beyond institutionalised ignorance lie economic, moralistic and physical coercion. Those who overcome their own ideological barriers to awareness of their human needs by 'coming out', are faced with more direct forms of suppression—loss of jobs, withdrawal of funds for women's facilities, and physical violence. The more direct threat to the patriarchy offered by lesbians illuminates the special place of lesbians in the Movement—having more radically withdrawn from interaction with individual representatives of male power, they are faced more immediately with the most extreme forms of domination. In that sense they are the vanguard of the fight for women's liberation. While lesbians have realised the importance of such intrinsically heterosexual issues as abortion, child care, battered wives and the female destitution attendant upon the status of women as universal lumpen proletariat, straight women have not returned the compliment. Lesbians in the Movement are, on the whole, treated with the same conspiracy of silence as in the wider society. The patriarchy separates women from each other on a number of dimensions—to retain this division within the Movement on the grounds of sexual preference is to fall into the patriarchal trap of divide and rule. The message is clear: Women of the world unite—the Women's Movement *is* a lesbian plot!

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