



Upsetting an Applegart: Difference, Desire and Lesbian Sadomasochism

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Source: *Feminist Review*, No. 80, Reflections on 25 Years (2005), pp. 98-126

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3874367>

Accessed: 04-03-2020 14:53 UTC

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80 | upsetting an appplecart: difference, desire and lesbian sadomasochism

Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan

This article is about an ideological and political set-to over defining discussing and organizing around sexuality as lesbians in the mid-1980s in Britain.

We were both involved in the battle at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre (LLGC) over whether SM (sadomasochism) groups should be able to meet there. This battle went on for almost six months in 1985 – explosively, at times viciously. It was not just confined to the centre. Battlelines were drawn in many lesbian groups, women's centres, even bars and discos. The consequences linger today.

We want to talk about the different feminist politics which informed the groups engaged in the tactics and open fights which went on over the months. We want critically to examine SM and its lesbian feminist manifestations. We want to discuss politics which arise out of and around our sexual practice.

Although this was ostensibly a political struggle over a sexual practice, sex remained the silent item on the agenda.

It seems to us that in the London Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) there is often a chasm between discussions about the 'politics of sexuality' and discussions about what our actual different sexual practices are. Over and over, workshops at conferences, even whole conferences, bill themselves as being about sexuality, only to turn into talk shops about the things which *determine* sexuality, or how frightening it is actually to talk about sex. Evocative words are thrown around, like 'pleasure', 'danger', 'lust', 'romance', but as often as not, on the day, it's other words which apply, like distance, analysis, evasion – and above all, frustration, confusion and boredom.

Sexuality is for both of us a political and a personal concept and fact. Intriguing, jagged, hurting, sunlight and shadows, movement and moment. Recalled alone and recalling together. But the divide remains as we attempt to bridge it. That's the skirmish which we, two socialist-feminist lesbian friends, are having to go through to get this article out.

We approach our sexuality to capture it. But is it ever steady enough to capture? To haul into the political arena? Can we break through the reactions

of our feminist sisters, lovers and friends? Their disapproval or feigned boredom makes us falter, blush and backtrack. Is talking about sex political? Can politics encompass sex? Is feminism a dour tendency? Do feminists do peculiar things in secret? Do we tend to come unstuck in sex? Do we get stuck up about sex? Is secret sexy? Does any of it matter in cold, cruel light?



Picked up in Amsterdam.

Here we are, with daring words to start, yet knowing another page will be quite ordinary. But that's it: how to talk about sex – boring, passionate, regular, surprising, absent – and how it intersects with different women's daily lives as black or white women, as workers, as people in relationships, with or without children, as feminists meeting all the oppressions and hierarchies of this society. Because it *does* matter – though it matters differently in different historical moments, in different geographical areas. The literature of oppressed people so often contains the dreams which sexuality seems to offer, intertwined with their struggles to do with class, with race and imperialism, and with gender roles.

The movements for gay, lesbian and women's liberation have offered a way to understand, change or enhance those dreams. Or, rather, they have increasingly offered many *different ways*.

shattering reality

This article is being written at a time of depression and lack of confidence in feminist and left-wing politics. The reality of fragmentation and the development of a politics around the autonomy of 'new' political constituencies – women, black people, gay men, lesbians, old people, disabled people – has thrown up its own theoretical discussion around 'difference'.

From the beginning of the women's liberation movement in the west, when differences were sheltered (and hidden) under the benign umbrella of sisterhood, we moved to the situation of the early 1980s when 'differences' pulled down the umbrella and claimed sisterhood as an autonomous state for their own group. A multitude of identities defined lives, loyalties and political correctness, as the totalizing world view feminism offered to some, mainly white, women cracked open. Conflict became the keynote.

This article is about one such conflict – one which was crucially concerned with differences *between* lesbians. It struck both of us that while recognition for the oppression of different 'other' groups of people constantly came up during this struggle, in fact our political opponents had a basic difficulty in acknowledging that within our own shared identity of lesbianism, other women could drastically differ from them in attitude or practice. We wanted to take apart this apparent contradiction, wondering if it could offer us any insights into the roots of the bitterness of conflict, or give us any help in creating the alliances or coalitions we must make to affect radical change.

hello. what's your name?

What we felt happened with the increasing dominance of 'identity' as the organizing factor of so many feminist activities and discussions is that 'naming' and 'claiming' came to be invested with a peculiar moral authority. Just to *name* yourself as part of a given group is to *claim* a moral backing for your words and actions.

Where does this sort of 'naming' get its power? Why have certain words become icons? In the LLGC battle, for example, speeches by women who were opposing SM often began with a declaration of identity: for example, 'I am a lesbian mother and I think ...' In this context the words 'lesbian mother' are meant to convey a specific moral weight, not just that of personal experience. What was being invoked was a particular feminist ideology. We cannot *name* this ideology. It is not a simple political tendency, but an amalgam of various strands of feminist politics. As we see it, there are two key ingredients: an analysis of the world as made up of a fixed hierarchy of oppressions (or a select collection of oppressions) around gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, age and ability; and notions of the

'authenticity' of subjective experience – experience which can be understood only with reference to the hierarchy. So, to say, 'I am a lesbian mother' within this mode of politics during the LLGC struggle was to allude to a whole set of oppressions as a way of validating the speaker's current political position. (A number of other things were going on too, but here we want to get to the root of the tone of self-righteousness we often heard.) Within these politics, there is little room for distinguishing between politics and those who speak them, little space for such things as evaluation of strategies, or criticism, or making mistakes.

Somehow, the radical power of uncovering by describing, creating language for experiences that have previously gone unarticulated, just becomes labelling, slotting things neatly into place. In this value system 'naming' and 'experience' are privileged – but there is little room for movement once the words are out. To speak experiences, to claim identities, is to be tied into positions, and everything is assumed to follow on from them. A lesbian mother, then, will automatically have certain positions on men, women, money ... sex.

The inherent problem with taking subjective experience as the main key to political action is that people have differing experiences. Not only that, they may also interpret the same experience in differing ways. The solution of some feminists, be they revolutionary feminists, cultural feminists or socialist-feminists, is to fall back on their own particular hierarchy model; those more towards the bottom bear more of the weight so our/their experiences must speak more 'truthfully' of oppression. In this context, any clash, whether between groups or individuals, becomes a matter of rank determining righteousness. While this hierarchy model has developed partly as a response to difference, and conflict, it does not do particularly well with diversity or contradiction. It too easily lends itself to a politics of 'truth'. Taken to extremes, if there are divisions within the same 'rank' or group, suppression becomes necessary, so as to protect the 'official' version's claim to define and describe the oppression.

These basic premises, with their reliance on the truth of the hierarchy or the sacrosanct nature of a collection of oppressions, and the claiming of identities, have increasingly become an implicit part of much feminist politics. They act as the framework, the supports, for political positions around the different issues.

Feminists' ideas about lesbianism have formed and changed over time. In the last few years one ideology of lesbian feminism became dominant and claimed feminism for itself. This ideology operates within the framework we have just outlined. 'Anger', 'identity', 'experience' have become the hallowed passwords among large numbers of lesbian feminists.

Imagine their consternation, then, if another group of lesbians pops up – who are *angry* and who want to *identify* around a different *experience* and *interpretation* of it. But this interpretation, in the realm of sexuality (that most subjectively experienced area), upsets the whole previous appellation of lesbian feminist



French postcard-reading things into it.

assumptions about who lesbians are. It is this fundamental clash which forms the basis of the entanglements over SM, and because it's a struggle over definitions

and the power to define, now at the crux of some political positions, emotions ran high. Unravelling the tangles at the roots of the bitterness that fuelled the LLGC SM debate has been emotionally fraught for us as participants, and difficult to do. But ultimately that unravelling exposes many of the underpinnings of the various politics involved. It presents possibilities for stating differences and divisions while working to change and challenge exploiting power. And, in the course of the struggle at the LLGC, it is just possible there started a fracture which could impede the ascendancy of a brand of lesbian feminist politics, which has been prevalent in this country for long enough.

the premise of the premises

The London Lesbian and Gay Centre is the result of certain possibilities meeting certain perceived needs. It would not exist in the form it does today without the politics which the radical Labour GLC embraced and propagated. It wouldn't exist as it does now if a particular cross-section of gay men and lesbians had not come together with an understanding of all this and with a vision of a centre.

The centre, an old four-storey building, almost across from London's Farringdon tube, opened unofficially and unfinished in late December 1984. The plans were for stylish and well-appointed premises which would meet the needs of a wide variety of London's gay and lesbian population. Included were the inevitable disco/bar/theatre space, a café and kitchen, another bar, a bookshop run by Gays the Word, a creche, a large lounge and meeting room for lesbians, a media resource floor, various centre offices and a number of spaces for rent to gay and lesbian projects and enterprises.

By the time of the 'official' opening in March 1985 the centre was being booked for meeting space by a number of different groups. The co-opted management committee (MC) had already discussed the issues which would soon break out into bitter fighting between users or potential users of the centre. Wendy Martin, one of the co-opted MC members told us, 'We knew from the women's movement what some of the issues would be and that sometimes clashed with some of the views that the men held.'¹

Bisexuality, paedophilia, sadomasochism, transsexuality, dress codes – all came up in MC discussions about who could or should be welcomed into the centre. At the same time the MC, an all-white group of men and women, discussed making the centre accessible to more black and working-class gay men and lesbians.

Wendy Martin maintains that the majority of the women on the MC were antagonistic to the SM groups who wanted to hold meetings in the centre, and in particular they were not keen about the men. Yet the centre's ideological underpinning was a liberal tolerance which incorporated the 'wide diversity of the gay community'. This contradiction was not fully faced, until it hit them in the face.

1 From a very helpful interview we did with Wendy Martin in September 1985.

zoning in on the center

It was in this context that the first stirrings of a more public debate about SM and the centre occurred. Different eddies and currents, already swirling elsewhere in the WLM, settled on the centre with histories already in the process of gelling, with scuffles recorded and bad and good guys named. A coalition of lesbian feminists saw that the centre was (unenthusiastically) giving a place for SM groups to meet. Already they had managed to trounce the possibility of any of this ugly business happening at A Woman's Place (the central London women's centre) or of SM being discussed in the central London women's newsletter. Letters arrived at the centre from these women demanding that SM groups be forthwith excluded. They declared with their usual confidence that they represented *the* lesbian feminist position on the subject.

By the time the centre opened officially, the 'debate' was underway, particularly within the weekly meetings of lesbians who were trying to co-ordinate events in the lesbian-only lounge and work out the relationship that space had to the rest of the centre.

It was not a new debate – only the instance and place made a difference. Political positions over the SM issue by no means followed a clear-cut path. But certain trends could be discerned.

sexuality and feminism

In the mid-1970s lesbianism and/or separatism were first presented within the women's liberation movement as possibilities for all women to take up as part of their political struggle. For many feminists the printing of the CLIT statement from the USA in issue after issue of the London Women's Liberation Workshop newsletter was shocking, frightening and led to the first significant withdrawal of women from under the umbrella of sisterhood. (We're aware that many, particularly black and working-class women never got under it in the first place.) In the CLIT statement all heterosexual women were named as untrustworthy dupes at best, or, at worst, as active collaborators with the enemy. Given that, the only feminist choice was withdrawal from men and bonding with women.

In London there was no sustained political rebuttal of CLIT – only the outraged cries of wounded and angry heterosexual feminists. In this instance, heterosexuality was attacked on moral/political grounds and the response was moral/personal outrage. No one spoke directly about sex; there was no ongoing discussion about desire or sexuality. But after this, the earlier possibilities for heterosexual feminists to explore their relations with men didn't exist in the same way. Being a heterosexual feminist, even an angry-with-men one, was not enough any more.

However, from then until the emergence of revolutionary feminism, and in particular the Leeds revolutionary feminist writing on political lesbianism in 1979, heterosexuality was still the assumed sexual identity of most, if not all, women in most feminist circles. Lesbians had certainly made their presence known inside the WLM, but often they still had to assert their presence in order to avoid being incorporated back into the assumed heterosexuality of all women. This was true even on *Spare Rib*, a magazine of women's liberation. Continued sorties against that assumption were made by lesbians and/or separatists. Often the basis of the criticism was confused. In some cases it veered towards biological determinism, as in the then-infamous 'boy children' debate in London, where the presence of the boys of feminists at women's centres created a furore. In other instances the argument tended to be couched in terms of lesbianism's 'natural' subversive and revolutionary character in relation to the patriarchy.

Revolutionary feminism, as distinct from radical feminism or socialist-feminism, is the forerunner of a particular English feminist politics which six years later ended up fighting SM at the LLGC in the garb of Lesbians Against Sodomasochism (LASM). LASM had links, through particular women and, more importantly, through its political opposition to SM, with the early political lesbianism of the Leeds revolutionary feminists, and with the anti-porn politics of Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW): 'Porn's the Theory, Rape's the Practice.' But other lesbian feminist political positions were also present in the anti-SM grouping.

Radical feminists, even if in relationships with men, tended to say that they rejected male sexuality as it is now, totally. But on *Spare Rib* magazine, the early years produced confident articles on sexuality; articles which were going to teach women how to have orgasms, how to demand what they wanted from men. By the late 1970s that confidence had gone.

Spare Rib spent much of 1980 tearing itself apart over the issue of sexuality. The collective was split over whether a submitted article claiming that lesbians had silenced heterosexuals in the women's movement was anti-lesbian and, secondly, whether *Spare Rib* should print it. The lesbians and heterosexuals on *Spare Rib* (all white women at that time) differed over the article and the lesbians differed among themselves. However, the 'naming' and 'claiming' tone was set by those lesbians on the collective who felt that the article was anti-lesbian and that they suffered as a result of it. Because they suffered, their position had to hold sway. The other lesbians, who either did not think the article was anti-lesbian or who felt that the best way to deal with anti-lesbianism among feminists was to bring it out in the open, air it, confront it and struggle with it, did not count. They did not display the requisite pain. The *expression* of anti-lesbianism in whatever form, from whoever, became the *oppression* of lesbians, full stop. The article was not printed and the collective went on in a confused, moralistic and contradictory way to confront and be confronted by racism, Zionism and anti-semitism.

The Politics Of Sexuality Top 20 (June 1985)

- 1 (5) **The Sounds Of Silence - AWP (Artists Unknown)**
- 2 (16) **It's My Party - The Management Committee**
- 3 (NEW) **Two Tribes (Recorded Live At The 1st EGM) - Various**
- 4 (18) **I Heard It Thru The Grapevine - Volunteer Workers**
- 5 (2) **Songs Of Love and Hate (LP) - WLM Newsletter**
- 6 (6) **Baby Love - North London Lesbian Mothers Choir**
- 7 (1) **Stop! In The Name Of Love - Lesbians Against Sodomasochism**
- 8 (NEW) **Hurts So Good - SM Dykes**
- 9 (NEW) **Power To The People - SM Gays**
- 10 (NEW) **Whatever Gets Ya Thru The Night - The Sexual Fringe**
- 11 (19) **Games People Play - Butch and the Femmes**
- 12 (NEW) **Goodbye Sam, Hello Samantha - The Massed Banneds of the
Bisexual and Transexual Communities**
- 13 (11) **Mother and Child Reunion - The Cultural Feminists**
- 14 (3) **Big Girls Don't Cry - Lesbian Co-ordinating Committee**
- 15 (NEW) **Happy Birthday Sweet 16/ When I'm 64 - Peds Under The Bed**
- 16 (NEW) **Can't Buy Me Love - English Collective of Prostitutes**
- 17 (4) **Behind Closed Doors - The Management Committee**
- 18 (NEW) **Torn Between Two Lovers - The Bisexual Group**
- 19 (NEW) **Blowing In The Wind - The Hampstead Heath Gay Men's
Appreciation Society (& Knitting Circle)**
- 20 (20) **Welcome To The Pleasuredome - The LLGC Workers**

Bubbling Under: My Way - The London Lesbian and Gay Community

This chart was prepared by Gaylap Polls, a service dedicated to finding out what the Lesbian and Gay Community really desires...

Leaflet handed out at the LLGC AGM, 1985.

what's that you're grappling with?

The rise of revolutionary feminism in the late 1970s claimed a certain place for sexuality on the feminist agenda – firmly in the centre. Men's sexuality was the key problem, but in a different way from the view of many radical feminists. In revolutionary feminism, male sexuality was, for the foreseeable future, irredeemable. Feminists' struggle was *against* male sexuality, not *with* it; they mobilized against it in WAVAW and anti-pornography groups. Woman's sexuality was the key both to her oppression and her liberation.

Suddenly everyone was grappling with compulsory heterosexuality and political lesbianism, separatism, non-monogamy, lesbian lifestyle, lesbianism as the practice of feminism. Where was socialist-feminism in all this? Despite the brief existence of Lesbian Left, the terrain around lesbianism seems to have been left wide open for revolutionary and radical feminism to claim as their own. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, heterosexual socialist-feminists, confronted with the growing divisions in the autonomous women's movement, not the least of which were accusations of consorting with the enemy, dropped out in droves. And they made a beeline for the mixed organizations of the left – trade unions, the Labour Party, campaigning groups – leaving those socialist-feminist lesbians who remained socially and/or politically active in the grassroots of the WLM not a little

isolated in the face of the now dominant assumptions about lesbianism and feminism.

It is ironic that while many of the best-known socialist-feminist intellectuals are lesbians, over the years socialist-feminism has come to be associated with heterosexuality. It has concentrated on analysing desire in the abstract and has had virtually nothing to say about lesbianism. It has made no significant political intervention in the ongoing messy debates about sexuality, heterosexuality and lesbianism. This is a schematic view, of course, but one which we think accurately describes the relative power (or lack thereof) of socialist-feminism *vis-à-vis* radical/revolutionary feminism in speaking to lesbians about the experience and the politics of sexuality.

tipping the cart

So, 'woman-identified' ruled OK. Then *Sex Heresies* came along, published in the spring of 1981. This issue of an American feminist periodical was an attempt to combat the latent feminist assumptions about how we, hets or dykes, 'should' express sexuality. With a paucity of feminist writings around on sex, and after a few years of *The Joy Of Lesbian Sex* and others of that ilk, it was definitely exciting. And shocking to some – with articles on butch-femme relationships, sadomasochism, masturbation and celibacy, prostitution, fag hags and feminist erotica. Whatever else, *Sex Heresies* signalled a move to put the erotic back into sex. Whereas, the British revolutionary feminists appeared to see sex as a pleasant possibility between women who had withdrawn from men, *Sex Heresies* underlined the deep and confusing currents of desire between women.

In the USA *Sex Heresies* seems to have been the first salvo in a battle over sexuality which has been intense, overt and wide-ranging. A loose coalition of sexual radicals (who include lesbians, heterosexual feminists and gay men) has sprung up, stringing together the unrespectable issues, like paedophilia, SM, promiscuity, willing to dissect, bring into the open and mostly defend all the variations of sexual pleasure and desire. All of these overlapping issues have had specific ramifications among lesbians – but, in the lesbian feminist subculture, SM has become the peg from which all the others have been hung. And it was the SM debate which turned up among lesbians in Britain.

SM's shifty meanings

Why do we keep naming it 'the SM debate'? One of the most difficult aspects of this ideological struggle around sexuality has been sifting through a quagmire of shifting definitions. A simple description of SM might be the sexual dramatization or acting-out of power relations, with its own history of codes and meanings, of ritual and paraphernalia. But is SM a clearly delineated physical practice which

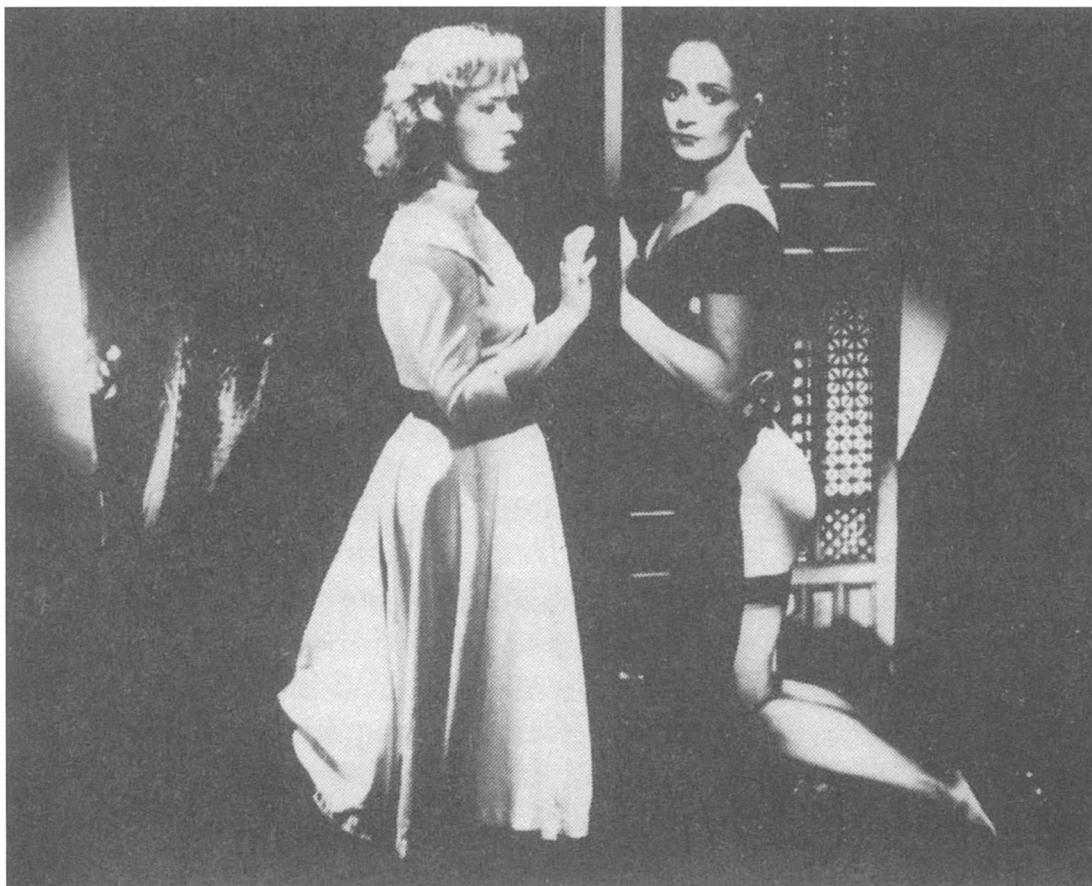
only a certain percentage of lesbians will ever be into? Is it therefore of limited relevance to most lesbians? Or is SM the crystallization of the most vital components of *all* erotic tension: teasing, titillation, compulsion and denial, control and struggle, pleasure and pain. Alternatively it could just be that, in the vacuum of lesbians speaking and writing about sex, the language of sexual excitement used in, for example, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian SM*, resonates with a great many women who are not, technically speaking, into SM (Samois, 1981).

Debates specifically around lesbian SM *have* taken place in the context of a general challenge to feminist sexual orthodoxy. SMers indeed have aligned themselves with other self-defined 'sexual outlaws' – prostitutes, butch and femme lesbians, bisexuals. Several things seem to have been happening at once, and at times it is hard to keep a grasp on exactly what it is at any given moment.

SM lesbians have been engaged in a struggle to 'come out SM', to be open and proud of their sexual practices. Because of the negative connotations of sadism and masochism (linked to actual torture, cruelty and emotional suffering), and the hegemony of political lesbianism, they have been come down on – hard – by large sections of lesbian feminists. Other lesbians, including many socialist lesbians like ourselves, have acted in defence of SM dykes around issues of censorship and exclusion. This defence has necessarily broadened into an intense struggle over definitions of feminism and lesbianism, the rights and wrongs of lesbian sexual practice, desires and fantasies in general.

In participating in these struggles, we've become aware of the absence of language that can deal with different lesbian sexualities. To some extent, SMers have captured the market of sexual description. However, it is plainly no use dividing all lesbians (as some SMers do) into SM and vanilla dykes. During the last year we've been dismissed as liberals (from both sides) because we've appeared to be just tolerantly defending the rights of others. However, we don't disavow our own interest or involvement in some aspects of SM. We do think, though, that a socialist-feminist critique of SM as a political theory and pleasure as a supposedly neutral playground is needed.

In Britain, the struggle around lesbian sexuality has been muted and spasmodic, though accompanied by often violently intense reactions. This struggle to retrieve eroticism in the face of, among other things, the political desexualization of lesbianism, has been characterized here by an alicious complete absence of talking or writing about sex. A magazine like the explicit Californian *On Our Backs* seems unthinkable in London. Even the sexual liberationists, in discussions about 'Pleasure and Danger' in the avant-garde *Square Peg* (No. 10, 1985), resort to allusions to 'tops' and 'bottoms' and various interpersonal dynamics. Having bought their under-the-counter (yes – from Sisterwrite in London) copies of *Coming to Power*, lesbians might make either covert references to their 'favourite



Film still from 'The Cruel Woman' (1985). Directed by Elfi Mikesch.

article', or disdainful jokes. The possibility of having, for example, a frank and public discussion on the lesbian gang 'rape' fantasy ('Girl Gang' by Crystal Bailey) seems out of the question in London – and yet one of us has been in on a discussion on that, and many others like it, in Australia. We are forced to fall back on the suspicion that sex itself is relatively more hidden in British society, and that goes for the women's movement too.

reactions

The reaction against *Sex Heresies* and all it stood for was well under way by late 1981. Articles in the internally published *Revolutionary and Radical Feminist Newsletter* posed a dichotomy between sexual Liberation and women's liberation reminiscent of the early 1970s – only this time it was some forms of lesbianism, not just heterosexuality, that were under attack. Revolutionary feminists and some radical feminists sought to set the terms of the discussion: political lesbianism (lesbianism as a political strategy for fighting male power) was such a central



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tenet of their politics that any challenge to the orthodoxy of lesbian sex was a challenge to the entirety of their feminism. Anyone mounting such a challenge was not a 'true' feminist.

But the sexual pleasure brigade continued to make inroads, in books, conferences, discussions. By late 1982 articles in the *Revolutionary and Radical Feminist Newsletter* had to take some of the issues on board, though still with a completely hardline rejection of SM. They were obviously worried that talk of sexual fantasy, masochistic feelings and erotic pleasure was ringing a few bells among lesbians. They felt the 'SM lobby' was capitalizing on the silence of its opponents, so their strategy became one of talking about sexuality. They wanted to demonstrate that most lesbian feminists had perfectly reasonable non-oppressive sex lives (and thus didn't need SM). They acknowledged that many women had masochistic (even sadistic) fantasies. However, if feminists were 'afflicted' with the 'internalization of the male (hetero) sexual model', change was possible and *necessary* for feminism.

With this strategy in mind, revolutionary feminists organized the Lesbian Sex Conference in London in April 1983. However, although they planned it and wrote

all the pre-distributed papers, the conference ended up having a non-specific atmosphere. Attended by hundreds of women, with workshop titles ranging from 'Lesbians and Fashion' to 'Monogamy' to 'Heterosexism', there was a general air of waiting to see what would happen. With no organized speakers in workshops, and no plenary session, complete pot luck determined any individual's experience of the weekend (see Egerton, 1983). There was the odd rumour of disagreement from the SM workshops, and there were conflicts involving the felt exclusion of some working-class women and the physical exclusion of women with disabilities. But in general nothing much seemed to happen. If there were few open discussions about sex, neither was revolutionary feminism much in evidence. It was a diffuse and defused occasion.

In the following two years, questions of sex and sexuality went slightly out of focus, as struggles and eruptions, especially around racism and anti-semitism, took centre stage in the WLM. The 'sex' debate had been, in Britain, primarily conducted between two (or more) camps of white women, with individual contributions by some Black lesbian feminists (Bellos, 1984). This, we think, is unlike in the USA where the concerns and theories around sex of Black women and women of colour had a strong voice among the pro-pleasure groupings, though not without hard criticism of the racist elements of much white theory. Here, the increasingly organized and powerful presence of Black lesbians has had a gradual impact on the terms of reference of the SM debate. Some Black lesbians have made it clear they do not want anti-racist rhetoric used in an opportunistic way to bolster up *either* side of the debate, particularly as it has remained a white-dominated discussion. Racism in sexuality remains largely unacknowledged on the white lesbian political agenda.

it's getting closer

On to the next round of skirmishes. During the winter of 1983–84, the *London Women's Liberation Newsletter* refused to carry a notice about a meeting called by SM Dykes to discuss sadomasochism. The few individuals (including members of a lesbian sexuality discussion group we were in) who raised voices in protest at the censorship were shot down in a barrage of abuse and condemnation.

At the 1984 Lesbian Strength March the storm in a teacup blew up again when SM Dykes appeared with a provocative banner (lesbian symbol intertwined in chains). Newsletter writers raged at the shame and horror of it all. SM Dykes, having been silenced, kept silent in feminist circles.

Less than a year later, the LLGC opened its doors and the anti-SM lesbians were busily writing letters to the MC protesting about any SM presence there. A few of these women started to attend the weekly meetings of the Lesbian Co-ordinating Committee, set up as an open voluntary group to plan and organize the lesbian-

only space. Instead the meetings (in which we took part) spent a lot of time skirmishing, fighting, going over and over the subjects of SM, lesbian identity, political acceptability and the role of the centre. No one talked about SM sex or whether anyone should do it. We were talking about the presence of small groups of women and men who might use the centre for meetings on the same basis as many other lesbian or gay groups. No one defended the 'right' of any fascist or racist group to meet at the centre, no matter how 'well' they might behave, in fact the centre's constitution clearly excluded any such groups from meeting in it. The argument remained one about definitions of SM, and the supposed behaviour of SMers.

Because no one really believed SMers were going to do 'it' in the centre, the focus was on their presence – how they looked became all-important. The practice of lesbian SM was, on both sides of the debate, described with dualistic pairings of words: power and submission; pleasure and pain; dominance and subordination; passive and active; top and bottom. Alongside these went the apparel and (optional!) accessories: whips, chains, dog collars, caps, leather, studs, handcuffs. The 'look' (often indistinguishable from punk) became overloaded with meaning, and as threatening as the acts themselves. The question of women who might take part in SM sex without dressing the part was never dealt with. An extreme image was set up to be knocked down.

SM acts were, in the eyes of LASM women, irredeemably connected to heterosexuality. As most heterosexuality was considered violence *to* women, the added ritualization in SM sex made it more horrific and dangerous. In lesbian SM the fact that the oppressor (man) wasn't actually doing it made it even more reprehensible.

The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group had written their paper 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality' in 1979. In it they said '... it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained' (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981). The Leeds group stated it very directly. In 1979 they wrote as if class, race and disability didn't exist, even if they were heavily criticized for this at the time. Now the same revolutionary feminist analysis came shored up with the opportunistic use of race, class, anti-semitism and disability. In a sense these become the stage props of the central drama which, for them, is still the determining division between men and women. But this is our interpretation and lies beneath the surface of the politics we are describing. The debate over lesbian SM was carried out by using their hierarchies of oppression, their collections of 'most oppressed', and attaching them to the practice of SM sex – thereby 'proving' how dangerous, disgusting and politically incorrect SM is. SM Dykes became the walking repositories of racism, fascism and male violence.

mixing it up

It seems, in retrospect, no coincidence that this long-running drama in lesbian feminist circles finally came to a head in a mixed centre, though at first glance it might seem strange that women whose political position tends towards separatism even bothered to care about what would go on there. After years of separation, the LLGC marked an auspicious attempt for lesbians and gays to bridge the gap. A whole generation of lesbian feminists had gained their political experience in women-only centres and groups. It may have been a shock, even an affront to some that an attractive, well-equipped centre was opening outside of their assumed sole claim to lesbian politics.

Lesbian SM, and SM Dykes themselves, had been fairly easily squeezed out of the increasingly prescriptive feminist channels of organization and communication. (Long gone are the days when a feminist cabaret act could call itself the Sadista Sisters and get away with it!) But owing to the different historical development of gay liberation politics, a mixed gay centre potentially offered them a home. Confirmation to its opponents, perhaps, that SM *is* an essentially 'male' practice, and that the struggle against it is part and parcel of the larger feminist struggle.

At most points during this struggle, LASM's main argument was against the contamination of lesbianism *and* the center with a violent 'male' ideology. At other times it seemed that some anti-SM women were in complete opposition to any alliances or solidarity with (gay) men at all, and that was really the basis for their involvement at the LLGC. It was when this fundamentally destruction-minded position seemed to be gaining the upper hand that some of the group of women we were working with gave ourselves the somewhat dull title of Lesbian Feminists for the Centre.

Not that our support for the centre, or for working with men, was unproblematic, but then, we had entered into it anticipating that. When the SM debate came along, the primary aspect for us two was the struggle over ideologies of sexuality and lesbianism. The playing out of antagonisms between lesbians in front of men obviously posed difficulties. We had to be very wary of colluding with the view of feminists as spoilsport puritans perpetrated by some gay men (and women). One of us was disturbed by the anti-feminist tone of some statements at the first meeting of the Sexual Fringe (a coalition of women and men who defined themselves as sexual radicals). On the other hand, we would have liked to know how to protest openly at some lesbian behaviour towards men at the mass meetings, without swelling male egos. Too often we found ourselves silent, loyalties and politics pulling us all ways at once. Our main concern was to focus on the other lesbians involved, and to mobilize more lesbians to get involved. So, throughout the struggle we organized in an autonomous group of women. We wanted to keep distinct from the LLGC, and from men, in order to engage fully with the LASM women within a feminist framework. But at no time did we consider the presence of

men as incidental, or something we'd rather have done without. When it became apparent that we'd struck, and were up against, a deep anti-coalition vein within feminism, our commitment to this mixed centre clarified. It became, then, partly also a struggle to maintain the right to political optimism; to retain a sense of the possibilities for new things which the centre stood for.

putting the extraordinary into EGM

In April 1985, the first extraordinary general meeting (EGM) was held at the newly opened LLGC. Most women and men came thinking that they were there to discuss and resolve the issue of SM at the centre. The management committee, after its initial acceptance of SM groups meeting at the centre, had reversed that decision. After receiving letters and protests from LASM women and their supporters, they changed their minds. Wendy Clark says, 'So we took an interim decision that as a group they couldn't meet until there had been an open meeting or the first general meeting of the centre members and ask them to decide.' In fact SM groups took legal advice, consulted the constitution and called the first EGM.

It was a packed, tense meeting. Nothing was resolved. For constitutional reasons we were unable to take a vote on the proposed ban. For us the tension arose from our own silence and inability to support SM groups meeting in the centre in the face of the emotive presence of LASM women and their supporters, some of whom had never set foot in the centre before. Immediately after some angry scenes, *lesbians* were invited upstairs to a meeting in the lesbian meeting room. When some of us went our presence was challenged because we were 'pro-SM'. By this point feminism and lesbianism were claimed as LASM's own.

LASM's reports of the meeting were outraged. In newsletters and on the grapevine came news of a meeting packed out by SM men and women dressed in fascist gear who, by displaying continuous misogyny and hatred of children, oppressed the LASM women. The act of opposing their demand for exclusion of SM groups was, they claimed, an SM act in itself. (As far as dress goes, some strange outfits were worn, some leather and a few studded collars and leather caps. We saw no fascist gear.) The North London Lesbian Mothers Group, supporters of LASM, produced a leaflet for the EGM which illustrates some of their politics. 'For those of you who claim to oppose censorship of any kind, ask yourselves if you would allow a group calling itself "Gay Fascists" to organize in the Centre. There have to be *limits* in order to *prevent oppression* of all kinds' (our emphasis).

Here is the usual equation of SM with fascism. But we are interested in other aspects of the quote. So, oppression of all kinds can be prevented by imposing limits! Well, unfortunately, oppression is not the product of 'no limits'. It comes, in however devious a route, from particular social systems and from particular sets of relationships which are part and parcel of those social, economic and cultural

systems. To propose setting 'limits' as if that could take care of oppression and exploitation in our society is a travesty of the sort of changes we need to go through in order to transform anything. Our criticism of the lesbian mothers' leaflet is on this basis, not about whether or not 'limits' are sometimes necessary or a good thing.

The static moralism of this political position is ripe for reformism too. It's been noted often enough how many socialist-feminists have been drawn into municipal socialism and the Labour Party. What has not been noticed at all is the number of revolutionary feminists and those influenced by them now working in the same institutions, usually around women's issues. It would be interesting to trace out the reception their politics are getting in the Labour Party, and the influence they are having.

an extraordinary repeat

After the April EGM many centre users became more organized. Spurred on by LASM's tactics at the first EGM and ashamed of our inertia around that event, Lesbians for the Centre began to meet independently to formulate a proposal for the next EGM (on 9 June at Conway Hall) and to discuss how we should go about trying to engage with LASM in order to defeat it. Our politics were diverse; we were not a group of SMers, nor were we all socialist-feminists. We lacked a common theoretical base, but shared general agreement in practice about the centre. We knew that LASM would propose an outright ban on SM groups, and that the Sexual Fringe wanted a completely 'anything goes' situation. We wanted to defend strongly the rights of the SM groups, while raising questions about what *could* be problems in such a centre in terms of dress and behaviour.

stuck in dilemmas

This led us into hours of debate over a dress code. Our proposal reflected the compromises we all made. Tagged on to the end is the one dress ban we all agreed on (the swastika, in the west a symbol of fascism past *and* present) and the one we compromised on: that no one should be led around the centre on a leash or chain. (Yes, we know it sounds ridiculous.)

No one in our group questioned that certain clothing or equipment evoked images of reaction and oppression. What we divided over was whether some styles or equipment – handcuffs, for instance – were in themselves symbols of oppression and therefore in themselves racist, fascist or anti-semitic. The two of us agreed that meanings of objects are socially and culturally constructed. That did not mean that certain dress or behaviour could not be contested or even banned, but it should be on the basis of political discussion about the relationships

between people in the centre and between the centre and the outside. Our motion said:

The LLGC is a centre for a wide variety of lesbians and gay men who have different political perspectives. We are committed to an outreach programme to actively encourage the participation of black and ethnic minority lesbians and gay men, disabled lesbians and gay men, and younger gay people. In order to ensure participation, the centre holds a firm policy of anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, and an opposition to anti-semitism and aggressive behaviour. The centre is closed to any group that advocates fascism, racism, anti-semitism, or sexism as any part of their stated aims or philosophy.

Lesbians and gay men have a diverse range of 'sexualities'. We advocate no *one* sexuality for lesbians and gay men, understanding that sexuality is very complex, but we do recognize that the centre should be a place for constructive discussion around all aspects of our sexuality.

Certain symbols and actions will not be permitted in the centre, namely the wearing and displaying of swastikas, and the leading around of individuals by means of chains or leads.

Of course this was seen as the very life blood of liberalism by LASM. Our aim neither to identify with a simplistic pro-SM stance which absolved anyone of critically looking at *that* sexual practice nor to dismiss the fears of LASM was not particularly appreciated by anyone.

In any case the second EGM was beset by similar constitutional problems as the first, and the few motions or proposals discussed could be voted on only in order to ascertain the sense of the meeting. A large group of LASM women and their supporters demanded and got separate votes for men and women, obviously in order to *prove* the connexion between 'male values' and pro-SM politics. Finally, at the end of the day, about one-third of the women present and three-fifths of the men voted to allow SM groups to meet in the center.

The meeting was as acrimonious as the first, at times disintegrating into shouting matches. When a small group of women (about twelve of us) who sat together on one side of the hall raised our hands to oppose a ban, women on the other side of the room, LASM supporters, stood up to stare at us. The divide by the aisle was as literal as the divide between our politics.

gathering forces

All during the spring other groups had been meeting and politicking around the centre. The Sexual Fringe included SM lesbians and men as well as bisexuals, transsexuals and celibates. They saw themselves romantically as sexual outlaws, wherein the very fact of 'difference' put them in the same political position. They produced several leaflets which took on what they called prescriptive feminism.

WHAT IS THIS BIG FUSS ABOUT SADO-MASOCHISM ?

WHAT IS SANDOMASOCHISM ANYWAY ?

Sado-masochistic sex is the eroticisation of power, pain and humiliation in a relationship based on domination and submission. It glorifies the very oppressions many people are trying to struggle against. S/M can involve dangerous, violent activities. S/Ms often wear clothes expressing real power, pain and humiliation, e.g. Nazi-style caps, dog collars, chains. This is racist, anti-semitic, and offensive to all oppressed people.

BUT IT'S CONSENSUAL SO WHY IS IT ANYONE ELSE'S BUSINESS?

So, masochism: the oppressed have often been told to accept and enjoy their oppression, to be submissive. So, sadism: do you agree that it's O.K. to cause pain, humiliation, exert power over someone else? Sex isn't separate from "real life" - surely we want mutual respect both in and outside the bedroom. How can S/M foster this? And how can we be sure these attitudes will stop at the bedroom door? Anyway, Pat Califia in 'Coming to Power' says a good sadist goes as far as the masochist wants, "and a little bit further" - (consensual?)

BUT YOU'RE JUST BEING PRUDISH - ISN'T 'VAPILLA' (NOW-S/M) SEX RATHER BLAME?

No, it's our experience! We're not anti-sex, we're anti sado-masochism. Emotional warmth, sexual passion in a respectful relationship is exciting. We do not want murder, rape, queer-bashing - they're not bland.

BUT ISN'T LESBIAN AND GAY LIBERATION ABOUT FREEDOM, NOT MORE LIMITATIONS?

Total freedom is the freedom of the powerful to oppress - do you condone racism, anti-semitism, heterosexism?

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE TRUST INVOLVED IN AN S/M RELATIONSHIP?

If you really trust someone, why put yourself in such a vulnerable position to prove it? (See also Pat Califia above).

BUT EVERYONE HAS S/M IN THEM - IT'S NATURAL.

What's "natural"? Is it natural to rape, to murder? This unequal society encourages S/M feelings but we want to get rid of power imbalances, not perpetuate them.

BUT THE SAME IS SAID OF LESBIAN/GAY FEELINGS - GET RID OF THEM, DON'T ENCOURAGE THEM.

Yes, but there is a difference. We make a moral decision that lesbianism/being gay is good, that racism, rape is not. Is S/M somehow outside of moral considerations?

BUT CAN'T IT ACT AS A KIND OF RELEASE OF THESE OPPRESSIVE FEELINGS?

Well, men have been acting out their aggressions for centuries and where has it got us?

AREN'T YOU DIVIDING THE LESBIAN/GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT UNNECESSARILY?

What sort of liberation do we want? If we don't work towards breaking down power imbalances it's a very partial liberation. (Socialists tell women to wait until after the revolution for their rights - whose revolution?)

ABOUT WHAT YOU CALL 'FASCIST GEAR' - CAN'T WE RECLAIM THESE SYMBOLS?

You cannot change their wider meaning. Wearing Nazi-style caps and dog collars is an act of contempt to Jews, Black people, Gypsies, many Gays and Lesbians, and others. They may be seen by racists and anti-semites etc. as support for the perpetuation of oppression.

BUT I LIKE WEARING LONG SPIKED BELTS AND DOG COLLARS - AND I'M NOT INTO S/M.

So what. If you don't care that others see them as racist, anti-semitic, etc. then you are being racist, anti-semitic, fascist.

Lesbians Against Sado-Masochism

Leaflet produced by Lesbians Against Sado-Masochism.

When LASM put out a leaflet headed 'What Is This Big Fuss About Sado-Masochism?' it sparked off a number of responses. The LASM leaflet itself is interesting. Its pompous question-and-answer format compares very closely with the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist paper of 1979 on political lesbianism. There, the same irritating, moralistic question-and-answer format places the authors in the superior, vanguardist position of explaining it all to backward children. For instance:

Q: But we don't do penetration, my boyfriend and me.

A: If you engage in any form of sexual activity with a man you are reinforcing his class power.

Q: But I like fucking.

A: Giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously.

Q: Are all lesbian feminists political lesbians?

A: No. Some women who are lesbians and feminists work closely with men in the male left (either in their groups or in women's caucuses within them), or provide mouthpieces within the women's liberation movement for men's ideas even when non-aligned.

The 1986 LASM leaflet, 'What is This Big Fuss...', includes 'answers' too:

S/Ms often wear clothes expressing real power, pain and humiliation, eg Nazi style caps, dog collars, chains. This is racist, anti-semitic, and offensive to all oppressed people.

A pathetic questioner goes on to ask:

Q: But isn't Lesbian and Gay Liberation about freedom, not more limitations?

A: Total freedom is the freedom of the powerful to oppress - do you condone racism, anti-semitism, heterosexism?

Q: But I like wearing long spiked belts and dog collars - and I'm not into S/M.

A: So what. If you don't care that others see them as racist, anti-semitic etc then you are being racist, anti-semitic, fascist.

In that leaflet and in another called 'Sado-Masochism - the Reality', which was produced after the second EGM in June, SM takes on vast meaning: 'Remember that SM was a significant part of the "decadent" social scene in 1930s Berlin - part of the political climate of the day. People acclimatized to SM brutality would have failed to notice the threat of the "real Nazis" approaching.' Not only is SM equated with racism, fascism and anti-semitism, but it also appears now to have allowed the rise of fascism in Germany! A view of 'decadent homosexuality' which is uncomfortably similar to the Moral Right's. The leaflet goes on to say: 'Similarly, we are all brought up to have racist feelings, otherwise the institution of racism could not survive.' These are the sentiments which fuel much of the racism and heterosexism awareness training industry: it is feelings which allow the institutions to survive.

The Sexual Fringe members responded to these lectures with some wit and precision, though their libertarian outlook sometimes weakened their insights. However, one of their leaflets which appeared before the second EGM was more sophisticated and responded to LASM's equation of SM and fascism, In 'Who Are the Real Fascists?' they say:

To label SM fascist is to trivialise the real fight against fascism. To throw the word fascism about with no reference to what it means is to make the real fight more difficult. To use people's sexual revulsion as a scare tactic against sexual freedom is a real insult to fascism's victims.

In an unpublished letter to *Feminist Review* last summer, four women members of the Sexual Fringe wrote:

We feel that the women's movement has become more concerned with constructing and policing its own categories of sexual identity than with attempting to understand the complex and often contradictory construction of women's sexuality in a male-dominated, capitalist society.

All of these positions and arguments circulated in the weeks leading up to the second EGM and afterwards before the Lesbian Strength March and the July AGM. The LASM women were furious and disgusted when they lost. The fallout was heavy. Various lesbian groups had to decide what to do after the defeat. Some decided not to hold any meetings at the centre - fair enough. But at least two or three groups wrote letters to the GLC claiming that the centre was racist, fascist and

excluded lesbians. They wanted the GLC to chop its financial support. A few LASM supporters inside the GLC even attempted to represent LASM's position on SM and the centre as the one and only true feminist one. It's quite a turn-up when lesbian feminists, some of whom advocate withdrawal from men on an individual sexual basis as a political stance, run to a male-dominated bureaucracy to denounce other lesbians and gay men. All that was quite shocking and indicative of the bankruptcy of their politics.

In the weeks leading up to the Lesbian Strength and Gay Pride March in June and before the AGM at the end of July, leaflets attacking the centre were distributed at women's venues, clubs and discos. Immediately before Lesbian Strength March, when the centre served as a meeting point and the evening celebrations were in the lesbian lounge, a warning was handed out to women in London: 'Warning. Do not go to the London Lesbian and Gay Centre unless you are prepared to be in an environment that is rife with fascists, racists, misogynists and sadomasochists.' It offered an alternative social event after the march at Tindlemoor, a women's centre. Hundreds of women ignored this, and a fantastic evening followed. The centre was claimed as a place for many of London's lesbians.

opening up the space explore

So what were the consequences of all this fighting? The centre doesn't appear to have been overrun with whips and chains – at times it's a positively tame place to be. A large number of lesbian feminists undoubtedly stay away. But many others do come. Most significantly, for us, a politics founded on an apocalyptic vision of what would happen if SM groups merely met at the LLGC has been publicly defeated and proven wrong. We definitely get a sense that LASM's ideology has suffered quite a big dent, and that some space has opened up for more discussion about lesbian sexuality. For, if anything, this debate showed that we are hardly at the beginning of being able to talk about it.

SM literature has said much about sexual daring, openness and excitement. It has said a lot to verify our own experiences, to incite us to further fantasies and possibilities. It has brought into the open naked desires. But it hasn't said much about situations where desire is absent or fantasies won't come; much less about, for example, the mundanities of a fetish-less long-term relationship.

We don't want to fall into the trap of posing these as opposites of each other (cruising *v* monogamy!). We're not saying that SM Dykes are responsible for articulating all sexual possibilities. The struggle around the rights of SMers has made space for more writing about sex – some great, some awful – though there's still far too little of the good stuff about. However, we do think that the Sexual Fringe (not an SM group, but from within the same political stream), during the LLGC struggle, *failed to acknowledge* that 'vanilla' sex can be exciting or that sexuality can be problematic (and not just because of 'repression'). By default,

their position seemed to amount to one of 'uninhibited pursuit of the sexual high' – which leaves a lot to be desired!

Ultimately the Sexual Fringe's libertarianism ended up glorifying a kind of individualism. They romanticized categories of 'deviant' sexual practice – if you can't claim one of their identities, well, frankly, you're boring.

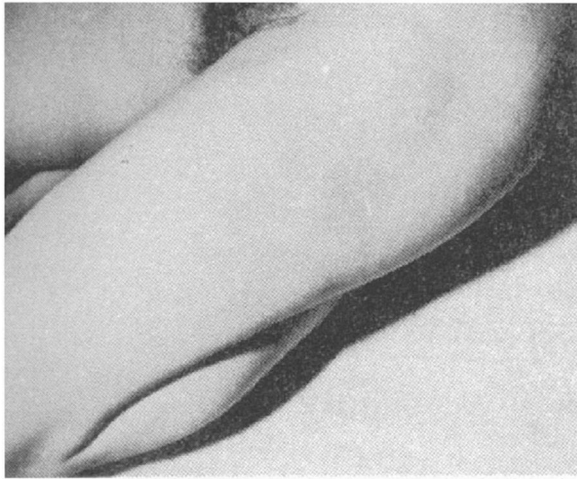
Boring equals vanilla sex, which is what? For lesbian SMers and for us, the ritual of the sexual interchange is very important. But for us an SM interchange can be as much about finding pleasure in the unplanned holding down of one lover by the other. 'The way we think about sex fashions the way we live it' (Weeks, 1985). Our own political position on SM is that we are all on a continuum. (We refuse the label liberal over this – stuff it.) Is the thrill of deliberate touch on muscle, a pressure on shoulders, done with a sense of dominance, accepted with a sense of submission, any less exciting than tying someone up? We suspect most of our sex lives and sexual histories are very uneven: cuddly sex, bondage, kisses and affection, one-night stands, dressing up – any of these can be what we crave or pursue at any given time.

We should make it clear that, issue by issue, we would line up with the Sexual Fringe in defence and support of a radical sexual politics and practice. The question of desire is crucial to our understanding of sexuality. Where we disagree is over the context for those politics.

The centre's 'Fringe' and the SM groups saw their rebellion against society's 'norms' and, further, against the 'norms' of what constitutes 'acceptable' sexual practice according to certain groups of lesbians, as a radical act with political significance. In denying that playing out society's power roles in bed had any causal connection to the continuance or development of such relationships in the big wide world, they tended to exclude any discussion about the ways in which sexual relations *are* related to the rest of our lives. For instance, around housing, work, family – as well as state institutions. Lesbian SM literature suggests that organizing around oppositional sexual difference constitutes not just a political practice but a whole political perspective. It's here that SMers come unstuck. By failing to situate themselves as within particular subcultures, linked to certain lifestyle requirements, they inflate their sexual politics with a universality it almost certainly does not have.

The most absurd extension of the SM political position is the implication that if we all played out our SM fantasies in bed, the world would be a better place. The connecting line between this mode of thinking and the LASM one is striking, even if they draw the opposite conclusions.

LASM women claim that they have no real interest in the acts of SM sex except as they represent and become all of the pain, horror and degradation of women, Black people, Jewish people, mothers, disabled people, and so on. Unlike the SMers



French postcard. Photograph: Tom Evans



American 'Greeting Card'. Photograph: Linda Stalter

who deny any harmful reality of sexism, fascism and racism in SM sex roles or rituals, LASM goes to the opposite extreme and claims that things like tying up, spanking, whipping, and wearing collars or belts with studs are in themselves violence against all the oppressed peoples of the world. LASM say they 'do not consent to being terrorised by the presence of the symbols of brutality, which are *just* as threatening as the presence of the real thing' (our emphasis). They deny any possibility of consensual agreement or equality in SM sex, just as the political lesbians do to women in 'ordinary' heterosexual sex. In an unquestioning SM view, we can choose our stage and role. In LASM's view we are acted *upon*; we are permanent victims (or bearers of oppression) except when we refuse the acts, deny the feelings which make us victims. We are implicated in our own victim status if we refuse to do that. This is where morality makes its entrance. (It's a remarkably religious scenario.)

Neither of these views sees the world in movement, in tension, dialectically. Still, is any of this SM debate/struggle really important enough to go on about? Why do we care so much?

taking a stand

Sexuality in Britain in the 1980s sits uneasily in the political domain, with other matters such as class despair, racist attacks and economic depression demanding feminist attention. They demand our attention too, but we don't want to loosen our claim to the sexual as political and as important to our everyday lives. The thoroughgoing heterosexism of this society makes the struggle around sexuality an especially crucial one for us as lesbians.

Both of us live out our lives at least partially within the lesbian subcultures – socially and politically. We have no intention of quitting that world, and every intention of standing our ground there as lesbian feminists. As lesbians we have chosen to criticize the words and actions of other lesbians, we hope in a way consistent with our politics. A LASM leaflet said about *us*:

SM Dykes have in fact never spoken up at any of these meetings, leaving the shouting to SM Gays and a group of 'liberal' women—none of whom are interested in defending any 'minority groups' other than the so-called 'sexual fringe' groups. The 'rights' of SMs, paedophiles and transsexuals are given priority over the right of women who are Black/Jewish/Irish/of Colour/disabled – and all other women who are threatened by male violence and are therefore excluded from the centre.

That leaflet exemplifies the sort of intimidatory tactic, which has fuelled our anger during this struggle. We think this sort of tactic has serious implications for lesbians and for feminism. We know of many individual lesbians who have taken up the LASM position on the centre because it was presented so heavily as the 'correct line'. This represents a wider trend. Doubts, ambiguities, confusions are shoved

under the carpet under this sort of pressure. The mere expression of dissenting ideas has become synonymous with endorsing oppression. There is no room in the LASM view for struggle, for admitting that we all can harbour reactionary ideas at the same time that we hold on to progressive ones.

Exploring complexities within the framework of the need for socialist-feminist change is a way of understanding where we are now – alone, together, in different groups. As lesbians, we do not want to be restrictively told what we are, or should be. As women, we do not want to be presented with a feminism predicated on a false portrayal of ourselves. That will not take us anywhere.

to sum up, then

The fight between feminists about SM groups meeting at the LLGC represented a lot more than that. It was the location, for a brief and tumultuous time, of a battle around particular feminist politics. It was ostensibly about sexuality and yet sexuality was hardly mentioned in detail. For us it was largely a political struggle between different groups of lesbians. We don't believe for a moment that many of the LASM women gave two hoots about the centre. In that way it was a symbolic occasion for the anti-SM women and, even though we were very involved in the centre, for us too.

Where Abouts Do They Lie?

<p>The Sexual Fringe</p>	<p>The 'Respectable' Centre-Of-The-Road Lesbian and Gay Movement</p>	<p>The Prescriptive Feminists & Their Male Supporters</p>
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ATTITUDES TO SEXUAL POLITICS

<p>The Sexual Politics movement is potentially a broad-based campaign made up of an alliance of groups with proscribed sexualities or seeking self-determination for our bodies. Not only lesbians and gay men, but also: sadomasochists, bisexuals, transsexuals, pedofiles, young people, transvestites, sex workers, fetishists, porn users, cottagers, pro-abortionists, etc.</p>	<p>Everyone else is an 'extremist'. We look at both sides of the arguments. We have 'open minds'. We're above it all really (i.e. our ideas are more balanced, sensible - and safe!)</p>	<p>Sadomasochists are fascist. Pedofiles oppress kids. Using porn or sex toys is bad (i.e. 'male-identified'). Bisexuals fuck with the enemy. Sadomasochists fuck like the enemy. Transsexuals are men infiltrating the women's movement. Dressing up in drag insults women. The only acceptable sexual practice is penisless, painless and pornless.</p>
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ATTITUDES TO THE LONDON LESBIAN AND GAY CENTRE

<p>The Centre should be open to all groups and individuals who support its fundamental principles - i.e. are anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-fascist.</p>	<p>We should debate the issues and democratically decide direction. The rule of the majority will be supreme.</p>	<p>The Centre should ban certain groups of people (bisexuals, sadomasochists, skinheads, peds, leather queens, etc.) and dictate that certain clothing is not acceptable.</p>
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PLACE THEM ON THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Leaflet produced by The Sexual Fringe about the LLGC.

History, in the short and long term, while open to analysis, has a messy daily life. It's a sad if not unsurprising irony that a socialist understanding, one which could help explain at least some of the reasons behind the exploiting divisions between particular groups of people, has not 'fitted' in a lasting way with the development of the women's liberation movement here. All through the 1970s the voices of excluded, ignored or patronized women sang angrily, accusingly about class, about race, about sexuality. Yet the practice of the white-dominated women's movement, with a large and vital socialist-feminist presence in it, was unable to answer those voices.

Whether this says more about British socialist history, contesting Marxist analyses of the 1970s, or about women's attempts to merge socialism and feminism, is open to debate. In any case, by the late 1970s and early 1980s those different voices finally resonated in many of the organizations, structures and publications of feminism. 'Difference', so long acknowledged but not dealt with, came home to roost, at the same time that socialist confidence in affecting social change was waning. It was then that the whole reality of unequal power relations between feminists and in the world was taken on board by an increasingly dispersed WLM. In some instances, the resulting lessons and achievements offer exciting possibilities for really radical change. But, for some, 'difference' became *in itself* an explanation, an organizing method, a static and moralistic world view. The anxieties about differences between women provided fertile ground for the rise of a simplistic politics within lesbian feminism which grasped for the seemingly easy answer of 'authentic experience'.

The possibility socialist—feminism had of pushing forward a historical and dialectical analysis of difference between feminists and women in general which could produce a politics that could move, embrace, challenge yet forgive, had been overtaken by a rigid feminist politics which elevated some differences to the basic underpinning of political organization. What any one individual 'makes' of what she undeniably feels is open to many possibilities. The 'truthfulness' of the experience of the individual is not what we would question. Nor the reality of conditions which give rise to the experience. But the fact that there is no one unifying response to sexism, to racism, to class exploitation, to heterosexism, forces us to examine the *place* that individual experience should hold in the development of theory and practice.

The contradictory responses of people to their particular oppression and/or situations alerts us to the often contradictory and complicated intertwining of the forces which course through the body politic. Far from making us throw up our hands in despair, we believe feminists can use that reality to develop an analysis and practice which takes into account the messiness of real life, the hopes, fears, angers and acquiescences.

The 'things which divide us' are as hard to discern as a sliver of glass and as huge as a boulder. The individual experience, however subjective, is an engagement with a force with a half life of its own and another half owned by other social forces. Racism exists. Sexism exists. Class exploitation exists. Imperialism exists. But each tangles with the other, feeds from or subtracts, adds to or bloats up another.

The way we 'feel' or experience any of these forces, either directly or indirectly, either one or the other or all, cannot be claimed as the only authentic one. In the first place that totally individualizes the effects of social forces. The social construction of an individual neither means 'free will' nor victim status. And secondly it removes individual constructions of feeling or experience from the impact of historical, economic and cultural forces. Thirdly, it proposes that there is a straight, short line from experience, to consciousness, to understanding and, finally, to political action.

What, we feel as women from a thousand different realities, as oppressed and oppressor, actor and object, is a vital *part* of what goes into our political analysis as feminists. Often it is the key to our political awareness, or our awakening. But we don't base our understanding of women's continuing oppression and exploitation on it. No white person can claim to define a Black person's experience, nor a man a woman's, nor a heterosexual a homosexual's. Any of us must be able to develop politics which make us sensitive and open to learning from the experience of others *and* provide us with the tools and a framework for critically assessing theoretical analyses and daily political life.

It is the absence of discerning, exciting and accessible feminist and left political theory and practice at this particular point which makes it so difficult to stand up against the politics of experience or 'identity' politics. It's one of the elements which has swept through so many of the bitter eruptions in British feminist politics during the past five years in particular. It's what we falteringly and finally tried to come to grips with at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre.

acknowledgements

We thank *Feminist Review* members who responded quickly to our very late copy with helpful notes and reactions. We would both like to thank the women with whom we worked politically during this debate. As well, Susan would like to thank Penny, Gerri, Anne and Paula for comments on the article, and Norie and Kim for thought-provoking discussions about sexual politics while writing it. Sue would like to thank Ruthie, Jill and Diane for long discussions on sexual politics over the years.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400223