

Gay Liberation and Lesbian Feminism



Today many young lesbians and gay men will call themselves 'queer' without a second thought. But this is a term which became fashionable to describe lesbians and gays only in the last decade, and many lesbians still find the term abhorrent. Queer politics and theory emerged at a particular point in the history of the development of lesbian and gay movements. Proponents may well see queer politics as the apogee of this development. Many lesbian feminist critics see queer politics as constituting a backlash against the interests of women and lesbians. To understand the queer politics of today, we need to see how the ideas and practices develop from, or are a reaction to, what has gone before. In this chapter I will look at gay liberation and lesbian feminism as a context for understanding queer politics.

The ideas and strategies of gay liberation came out of the same crucible that gave birth to the other 'new' social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These new movements were feminism, youth liberation, black liberation, Paris 1968 and the student movement. Socialist and feminist ideas infused gay liberation from the outset. Gay liberation's birth is commonly dated to the June 1969 so-called Stonewall rebellion in Greenwich Village, when lesbians, gay men and drag queens for the first time fought back in fierce street battles against the routine harassment of police raids on gay clubs. In fact, it needs to be understood as arising from a gradually intensifying mood of frustration and resistance which had been growing in and outside the earlier lesbian and gay organizations of the 1960s. These

earlier organizations had laid the groundwork which allowed gay liberation to develop so swiftly (D'Emilio 1998, 1st published 1983). Stonewall was a catalyst, and well suited to symbolize the mood of the times, but it could not have ignited a political movement if the ground had not been well prepared.

What have been called 'homophile' organizations were set up in the 1950s and 1960s and pre-dated gay liberation. These organizations have been characterized by historians as 'assimilationist', aimed at gaining integration for homosexuals and ending legal penalties. What was different about gay liberation is that assimilation was repudiated in favour of 'coming out', 'gay pride' and demanding the dramatic social changes that were considered necessary for the freedom of women and lesbians and gays. Gay liberation activists, fuelled by the confidence gained from the spirit of the age, in which so many social groups were protesting, theorizing, demanding radical change, claimed their gayness and performed dramatic and fun protests in public places.

Gay liberation was originally conceived as the Gay Liberation Front. The word 'Front' suggests the socialist foundations of gay liberation. GLF was modelled on the liberation struggles conducted by colonized peoples around the world against imperialism, as in Vietnam. Lisa Power, in her history of GLF in London, comments that 'GLF London attracted, amongst others, people with a background in resistance to the Vietnam war, black rights, women's liberation, the underground press, the White Panthers (a support group to the Black Panthers), the International Marxist Group, the Communist Party, a wide variety of other leftist groups including Maoists, the drugs culture, transsexuals and rent boys' (Power 1995: 16).

The socialist analysis was applied to the situation of lesbians and gay men. There was a critique on the left at this time of what was seen as the 'general distortion of all sexuality in this society' for the purpose of social control and 'to sell the surfeit of consumer goods the economic system grinds out' (GLF 1971, quoted in Power 1995: 53). Gay liberation theorists engaged in a swingeing critique of the capitalist forces, exemplified by the gay sex industry and owners of gay clubs, which created the exploitation of gay men. They argued: 'GLF hopes to provide a desperately-needed escape for people who are tired of the alienated and exploitative 'gay' world, furtive sex in public loos, and dangerous excursions to Hampstead Heath. We want

to provide a better scene for gay people' (p. 53). Gay liberation activists rejected the medical model of homosexuality as sickness. They campaigned, successfully, to have homosexuality removed from the US list of mental illness diagnoses, the DSM 3. They proclaimed that 'gay is good'. They believed that homosexual oppression was the result of male dominance, and that women's liberation and gay liberation were inevitably connected, such that one could not be achieved without the other.

Homosexual oppression and the oppression of women were both seen to result from the imposition of what were called 'sex roles'. Political activists of the left in this period were profoundly social-constructionist in their approach. Thus both gay liberationists and feminists saw sex roles, which would probably now be called 'gender roles', as being politically constructed to ensure male dominance. Women were relegated to the female sex role of the private sphere, nurturing and being concerned with beautifying the body in order to be an appropriate sex object. Lesbians were persecuted because they challenged the female sex role of sexual passivity and the servicing of men. Gay men were persecuted because they challenged the male sex role, which, as well as requiring masculine behaviour, was founded upon heterosexuality and sexual intercourse with women.

In the context of a current queer politics, which celebrates those who play out precisely these roles in the form of butch/femme, transgenderism and sadomasochism as the transgressive vanguard of the revolution, it is useful to understand how fully a gay liberation strongly influenced by feminism rejected them. The oppression of gay men was seen to be a reflection of the oppression of women, so 'sex roles' were a problem for gay men too. One US gay liberationist expressed it thus:

Sexism is also reflected in the roles homosexuals have copied from straight society. The labels might differ, but it is the same unequal situation, as long as roles are rigidly defined, as long as one person exercises power over another. For straights it is male-female, master/mistress. For gays it is butch/femme, aggressive-passive. And the extreme, in either case, is sadist-masochist. Human beings become objectified, are treated as property, as if one person could own another. (Diaman 1992: 263)

A UK gay liberation activist wrote: 'We have been forced into playing roles based upon straight society, butch and femme, nuclear

“marriages” which continue within the relationship the same oppression that outside society forces onto its women’ (Walter 1980: 59). Another wrote: ‘Playing roles in a society which demands gender definitions, sexual role-playing, masculine versus feminine – what can we do, those whom society dismisses and condemns as half-men? Too often we react by over-playing’ (p. 87).

In the years of gay liberation, no argument was made that role-playing was an ‘authentic’ and uniquely lesbian or gay experience, as has happened in the 1980s and 1990s (Davis and Kennedy 1991). There was no shame in accepting that gays were involved in mimicking straight society when they embarked upon role-playing. Gays were understood to be constructed by the rules of straight society too. Carl Wittman of US Gay Liberation states:

We are children of straight society. We still think straight; that is part of our oppression. One of the worst of straight concepts is inequality . . . male/female, on top/on bottom, spouse/not spouse, heterosexual/homosexual, boss/worker, white/black, and rich/poor. . . . For too long we mimicked these roles to protect ourselves – a survival mechanism. Now we are becoming free enough to shed the roles which we’ve picked up from the institutions which have imprisoned us. (Wittman 1992: 333)

A women’s group that formed part of gay liberation in the USA, the Gay Revolutionary Party Women’s Caucus, rejected firmly the idea of sex role-playing for lesbians, because it holds no advantages for them.

Although none of us has ever been educated in the conduct of relations of roleless equality, lesbians can come closer to this achievement than others because none of the sexist role-playing training everyone receives helps make their relationships work. Role-playing gets them nowhere, because the “butch” gets none of the male sexual, social, or economic rewards while the “fem” does not have a man to bring home a man’s wages or to protect her from other men’s attacks. (Gay Revolutionary Party Women’s Caucus 1992:180)

Such sentiments, from those who would have seen themselves at the time as the vanguard of gay politics, stand in stark contrast to the attitude towards lesbian role-playing that developed later in some areas of the lesbian community. In the late 1980s and 1990s

lesbian writers such as Joan Nestle (1987) built themselves considerable reputations by celebrating and romanticizing role-playing as the most authentic form of lesbianism. Whereas in gay liberation the answer to roles was to 'shed' them, in later decades they were picked up, polished and redeployed for the purposes of sexual excitement (Munt 1998; Halberstam 1998a; Newman 1995).

Another common current between gay liberation and women's liberation at this time was the challenge to marriage and the nuclear family. Marriage was considered by both to be a contract of exploitation and male dominance, which necessitated precisely the 'sex roles' which were seen to be so oppressive. So fundamental was the opposition to marriage that it was emphasized by Jill Tweedie, an influential *Guardian* opinion columnist, in a positive piece about gay liberation: 'Gay Lib does not plead for the right of homosexuals to marry. Gay Lib questions marriage' (quoted in Power 1995: 64).

Two aspects of gay liberation theorizing distinguish it dramatically from queer politics. One is the understanding that the oppression of gay men stems from the oppression of women. Another is that many forms of gay male behaviour, which today are lauded in queer politics, are the result of gay oppression, and cannot be ended without ending the oppression of women. Forms of behaviour which historically were part of the behaviour of men who had sex with men, such as cruising and effeminacy, were seen by GLF activists to be the result of oppression, rather than inevitable and authentic forms of gay behaviour.

The original political excitement of gay liberation lasted only a few years in the UK and the USA. In the UK some men returned to practices that they had criticized when gay liberation was at its height, such as cruising (Shiers 1980). Now that an out gay community existed as a market, new gay businesses became involved in the exploitation of gay men in the same way that straight and mafia businesses had done in earlier times: gay capitalism was born. Gay masculinity became the fashion, whereas gay liberation politics had eschewed masculinity as the behaviour of male dominance (Humphries 1985). A politics of gay equal rights activism began to develop, which some gay liberationists saw as deradicalizing and undermining the movement for radical social change. Why, then, was the radical challenge of gay liberation not sustained?

Why did gay liberation fail?

John D'Emilio, in the new preface to the reissue of the US collection of GLF writings, *Out of the Closets*, argues that gay liberation was superseded by a more mainstream gay rights activism in the later 1970s. This new gay rights movement no longer saw itself as one amongst other movements of liberation working for fundamental social change. The agenda was narrower, and bought into the liberal politics of equal rights.

[A]s the 1970s wore on, the gay and lesbian movement began to travel along many different paths. One of these might be labeled a gay rights movement. Composed mostly of white, middle-class, gay men, though with some lesbians and people of color as well, this reform-orientated politics focused on gay issues only and largely abandoned the broad analysis of oppression that animated gay liberation. These activists, many of whom were quite militant in the tactics they espoused, sought entry into the system on terms of equality. (D'Emilio 1992: p. xxv)

In particular, D'Emilio argues, these equal rights activists lost the gay liberation understanding that the oppression of gays was the result of sexism, and that gay men therefore needed to fight sexism alongside women. 'Unlike the gay men in *Out of the Closets*, who saw sexism as the root of gay male oppression, now sexism is perceived as being about "them"' (p. xxvi). Gay rights activists, D'Emilio explains, also lost the gay liberation understanding that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, was socially constructed. Gay and lesbian identities, he says, came to be seen once again, as in the pre-Stonewall period, as 'fixed identities, determined early in life (if not at birth), but natural, good, and healthy rather than unnatural, bad, or sick' (p. xxvi).

But D'Emilio is critical of the breadth of social criticism engaged in by gay liberationists. He sees the radicalism of their agenda as being one of the reasons for their failure. He has taken on board the arguments made by sexual libertarians in the 1980s and 1990s that gay liberationists, like radical feminists who were similarly attacked, were, in his words, 'moralistic and condescending'. In their attacks on 'roles, anonymous sex, objectification, and bar culture, they ended up constructing a prescriptive sexual politics... [T]hey teetered on

the edge of becoming a new vice squad' (p. xxvii). It is interesting to see how close these accusations are to those flung at radical feminists in the so-called feminist sexuality debates of the 1980s (Vance 1984). In those 'debates' radical feminist criticism of pornography and prostitution was also attacked for being right wing and moralistic. Whilst in male gay communities and politics there was no fierce debate, and the gay liberation understandings simply wilted away, amongst lesbians and feminists the battle to vanquish the radical feminist critique was furious (see discussion of these 'debates' in Jeffreys 1990a).

D'Emilio says that the problem of gay liberationists was that they had a 'naivete about the dynamics of sexual desire; change was assumed to be easier than it was' (D'Emilio 1992: p. xxvii). He remains critical of the sexual liberalism that has replaced the gay liberation critique: 'Yet, in reacting against that, it often seems as if we have given up any possibility of thinking critically about sexuality. Our sexual politics often reduces to a campaign against prohibitions' (p. xxviii). But he appears too tired and too disillusioned to try to maintain the critique of the construction of sexuality that was so vital in earlier years. 'In a culture in which sexuality has come to define the truth about the self and in which sexual desire appears coterminous with who we are, perhaps it is too divisive, too volatile, to subject something so personal to political scrutiny' (p. xxviii). This resignation comes less easily to feminist campaigners, since it is women who suffer so directly from the exercise of a male sexuality constructed around objectification and aggression, in the form of rape, murder, sexual harassment, pornography and prostitution. D'Emilio's resignation is a luxury which those of us who continue to seek an end to male violence cannot afford.

Karla Jay and Allan Young, in their new introduction to the *Out of the Closets* collection, explain that they have abandoned their dreams of revolution as simply impractical, because they do not have enough popular appeal.

Like our straight counterparts in the New Left, we were infatuated by the slogan "Revolution in our lifetime." But we were oblivious to the fact that such far-reaching goals had little meaning for the great masses of American people – even most gay and lesbian Americans – encumbered as they were with jobs, homes, children, and other responsibilities. As for the insistence on linking the personal and the political, it could be very rewarding, and served as cheap therapy for many, but its

extreme application made life rather difficult. (Jay and Young 1992: p. xxxvii)

They ask: 'So, what is the "real" gay liberation? Is it the assimilation of gay people into every stitch of the fabric of existing American life? Or is it the total revolutionary movement that motivated the writers of *Out of the Closets?*' (p. xlv).

One development that is likely to have hastened the abandonment of feminist insights by many gay activists is the withdrawal of lesbians in large numbers from gay liberation, in order to concentrate their energies on lesbian feminism. Lesbians had always been a minority in gay liberation, and in the UK quite a small minority. Their withdrawal in the USA, the UK and Australia was occasioned by the developing strength of feminism, which led the lesbians to concentrate on their interests as women, and to be sensitive to the sexism of their male colleagues. One issue which was a source of serious schism between men and women in gay liberation was sexual practice. Denise Thompson describes the lesbians' disenchantment in Australia thus: 'The model of "sexual freedom" espoused by gay liberation was and remained intransigently masculine – fucking for fucking's sake, erotic stimulation confined to the genitals and a few selected erogenous zones, anonymous sex at the beats (public pickup places), bars, clubs, and bath houses' (Thompson 1985: 70). Gregg Blatchford of Sydney Gay Liberation reflects on the casual misogyny in what he calls 'homosexual subculture' thus:

[W]omen are often referred to by their sexual organs; 'ish' is a common term for a woman and 'cunty' is used as an adjective referring to something that possesses the qualities of a woman. The derogatory term 'fag hag' is used to describe a woman who enjoys the company of gay men. Besides these peculiarly gay male expressions, most references to women are similar to the way heterosexual men can be seen to respond to women: 'cow', 'old woman', 'slag', 'tart', 'cheap', 'scrubber'. (Quoted in Thompson 1985: 56)

Men in gay liberation had to make an effort to overcome this element of gay culture, and were not always successful.

The majority of lesbians involved in Gay Liberation in the UK walked out *en masse*. As Nettie Pollard, one of those who stayed, describes it: 'Four or five of us stayed and the rest, thirty or so, walked out' (Power 1995: 241). Lisa Power offers several explanations.

For her oral history of the London GLF she interviewed men and women who had been involved in early 1970s gay liberation. One man, Tim Clark, explained that the men were united by all the sexual activity that took place between them. 'And by and large they were excluded from the mass sex that the men were having, which acted as a bond' (p. 240). One lesbian interviewee supported the idea that the men and women divided over the men's determination to see their sexual practice as the very stuff of liberation: 'What caused trouble between the men and women was that so many of the men wanted to talk about cottaging [sex in public toilets] in the meetings' (Carla Toney, quoted in Power 1995: 242).

Another issue that angered the lesbians was the adoption by some men in gay liberation of drag. The understanding that sex roles were at the root of women's and gay oppression was sometimes expressed by gay men in ways that lesbian activists found troubling. In the UK, for instance, some gay liberation men chose to wear frocks on the underground, in the street, and in everyday life. They chose to engage in traditionally feminine practices, including knitting, during meetings. The lesbians present were unlikely to wear frocks, and some found this imitation of stereotypes of women offensive. As Power explains: 'Drag... increasingly fuelled the anger of many GLF women who saw it not as men breaking down their own inhibitions and machismo, but as a guying of traditional womanhood' (p. 242). One ex-GLF man gave Power a graphic description of what this 'guying' entailed. At one GLF gathering a drag queen 'had this white dress on with two splits up the side and he had no knickers on and he was showing it all. ... The women had trousers on' (Harry Beck, quoted in Power 1995: 242). Mary McIntosh, the lesbian sociologist, who was also involved in GLF, explained: 'I remember one Ball where some men were wearing what felt like very mocking radical drag and others were doing a striptease. None of it had been thought through' (Mary McIntosh, quoted in Power 1995: 243). The GLF women were under pressure to accept pre-operative male-to-female transsexuals as women and allow them into the women's groups. This made the women's group 'like a mixed group', because 'there might be ten transsexuals and about twelve women', and 'Some of the women felt that these people had very male attitudes and were very patronizing to women and trying to steal women's oppression while not giving up their prick power' (Power 1995: 244).

But the gay men who were into drag considered that masculinity was the sex role in need of challenge, and that by their imitations of traditional women's clothing they were helping to destroy masculinity. They were doing what might now be called 'gender as performance' (Butler 1990) in a very direct and politically motivated way. What was absent from gay liberation was any 'performance' of masculinity by men or women as a good thing. Masculinity was generally understood to be problematic. This was to change in the late 1970s and early 1980s when gay masculinity in the form of sadomasochism and other manifestations, such as the group Village People, became fashionable once again.

The US lesbian Del Martin, when bidding farewell to gay liberation in favour of women's liberation, described herself as 'pregnant with rage' as she bitterly decried a 'brotherhood' whose preoccupation with bars, camp, pornography, drag and role playing had resulted in homosexuals becoming the 'laughing stock' of the public' (quoted in Heller 1997: 7). Two male stalwarts of UK GLF wrote a pamphlet in support of the women's walk-out and addressing a male gay liberation. They accused gay liberation of having degenerated into simply a gay activism in which 'gay males seek their full share of male privilege' by striving for social equality with heterosexual males whilst male supremacy remains in place. They seem to have a very good understanding of the women's concerns.

In their eyes a gay male is simply a man who likes sex with men, and where they're at in their heads is very visible from a look at their literature, full of bulging cocks, motorbikes and muscles, exactly the symbols of male supremacy and the oppression of women, supporting the gender-role system that is the basis of their own oppression. (David Fernbach and Aubrey Walters, quoted in Power 1995: 24)

Considering the cult of masculinity that was to burgeon within male gay culture through leather clubs and sadomasochism over the next thirty years, their argument seems prescient.

Lesbian feminism

The Women's Liberation Movement which got underway in the UK and the USA in the late Sixties was full of lesbians (see Abbott and

Love 1972). But these lesbians were not immediately able to place their concerns on the movement agenda. Betty Friedan famously referred to lesbian politics in the National Organization of Women in the USA as the 'lavender herring' (Abbott and Love 1972). Lesbian feminism emerged as a result of two developments: lesbians within the WLM began to create a new, distinctively feminist lesbian politics, and lesbians in the GLF left to join up with their sisters. Since the 1950s in the UK and the USA there had been lesbian organizations which were determinedly separate from organizations of men, which identified their own goals separately from the domination of male interests and criticized the sexism of male gay groups (see D'Emilio 1998). Some of these earlier organizers, such as Phyllis Martin and Del Lyon of Daughters of Bilitis in the USA, became influential activists and theorists within the new movement.

Lesbian feminism starts from the understanding that the interests of lesbians and gay men are in many respects very different, because lesbians are members of the political class of women. Lesbian liberation thus requires the destruction of men's power over women. It is not possible here to describe the politics and practice of lesbian feminism in any detail. I cannot do justice to all the groups, activities and ideas. It is important, however, to describe those principles which inspired lesbian feminism from the beginning, and which distinguish it from subsequent forms of politics that lesbians have adopted, particularly in queer politics. The principles of lesbian feminism, which distinguish it quite clearly from the queer politics of today, are woman-loving; separatist organization, community and ideas; the idea that lesbianism is about choice and resistance; the idea that the personal is political; a rejection of hierarchy in the form of role-playing and sadomasochism; a critique of the sexuality of male supremacy which eroticizes inequality.

Woman-loving

The basis of lesbian feminism, as of the radical feminism of this period, was woman-loving. Lesbian feminists understood woman-loving to be fundamental to feminism. As Charlotte Bunch expressed it in 1972: 'We say that a lesbian is a woman whose sense of self and energies, including sexual energies, center around women – she is

woman-identified. The woman-identified woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support. Women are important to her. She is important to herself (Bunch 2000: 332). As feminist philosophers have pointed out, male supremacist philosophy and culture are hostile to women's love and friendship towards other women. Janice Raymond explains, 'In a woman-hating society, female friendship has been tabooed to the extent that there are women who hate their original Selves' (Raymond 1986: 6). The creation of woman-loving was a task necessary for the very survival of feminism. If women did not love themselves and each other, then they had no basis on which to identify and reject atrocities against women. For a feminist movement solidarity of the oppressed was a necessary basis for organizing. But woman-loving was always seen as constituting more than a woman's version of comradeship.

Raymond invented the term 'Gyn/affection' to describe the woman-loving that is the foundation of feminism. Gyn/affection 'connotes the passion that women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other vital women' (p. 7). Feminist politics needed to be 'based on friendship . . . Thus, the basic meaning of Gyn/affection is that women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power' (p. 9). For many feminists the obvious conclusion of woman-loving was lesbianism (Radicalesbians 1999). Raymond explains that though her concept of Gyn/affection is not limited to lesbianism, she does not understand why any woman-loving women would stop short of lesbianism.

If Gyn/affection embraces the totality of a woman's existence with and for her Self and other women, if Gyn/affection means putting one's vital Self and other women first, and if Gyn/affection is movement toward other women, then many women would expect that women who are Gyn/affectionate and Gyn/affectionive would be Lesbians. . . . I do not understand why Gyn/affection does not translate into Lesbian love for many women. (Raymond 1986: 14).

The bonding of women that is woman-loving, or Gyn/affection, is very different from male bonding. Male bonding has been the glue of male dominance. It has been based upon recognition of the difference men see between themselves and women, and is a form of the behaviour, masculinity, that creates and maintains male power.

Mary Daly characterized bonding between woman-loving women as 'biophilic (lifeloving) bonding', to distinguish it from other forms of bonding in the male dominant 'sadosociety'. She emphasized the difference: 'bonding, as it applies to Hags/Harpies/Furies/Crones is as thoroughly Other from "male bonding" as Hags are the Other in relation to patriarchy. Male comradeship/bonding depends upon energy drained from women' (Daly 1979: 319). Marilyn Frye, the US lesbian philosopher, in her essay on the differences between gay male and lesbian politics sees male homosexuality as the apogee of the masculine bonding that forms the cement of male supremacy. The bonding of lesbian feminists, however, is heretical: 'If man-loving is the rule of phallogocratic culture, as I think it is, and if, therefore, male homoeroticism is compulsory, then gay men should be numbered among the faithful, or the loyal and law-abiding citizens, and lesbian feminists are sinners and criminals, or, if perceived politically, insurgents and traitors.' (Frye 1983: 135–6).

Woman-loving does not survive well in male-dominated queer politics. In a mixed movement the resources, influence and just sheer numbers of men give them the power to create cultural norms. As a result, some lesbians became so disenchanted with their lesbianism, and even their femaleness, that there are presently hundreds, if not thousands, of lesbians in the UK and the USA who have 'transitioned' – i.e. adopted the identity not just of males but of gay males with the help of testosterone and mutilating operations (Devor 1999).

Lesbianism as choice and resistance

The lesbian of lesbian feminism is a different creature from the female homosexual or female invert of sexology or earlier assimilationist movements. She is very different, too, from the gay man of gay liberation. Whilst gay liberation recognized that sexual orientation was socially constructed, there was no suggestion that gayness might be subject to voluntary choice, and might be chosen as a form of resistance to the oppressive political system. The lesbian feminist sees her lesbianism as something that can be chosen, and as political resistance in action (Clarke 1999). Whereas gay liberation men may say 'I am proud', lesbian feminists have gone so far as to say 'I choose'. Raymond expresses it thus: 'women are not born Lesbians. Women

become Lesbians out of choice' (Raymond 1986: 14). This does not mean that all those who chose to identify as lesbian feminists consciously chose their lesbianism. Many had been lesbians before lesbian feminism was first thought of. But they still adopted an understanding of their lesbianism as what Cheryl Clarke, in *This Bridge Called my Back*, the historic anthology by US 'women of colour', has called 'An Act of Resistance'. Clarke explains, 'No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism... she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy' (Clarke 1999: 565).

Genital connection was not always seen as the foundation of a lesbian identity. Lillian Faderman, the US lesbian historian, explains that lesbian feminists of the 1970s resembled the 'romantic friends' of the nineteenth century whom she writes about, who emphasized love and companionship, and would not necessarily include genital connection in their relationships (Faderman 1984). Lesbian feminist identity regularly included such ingredients as putting women foremost in one's life and affections, and not being sexually involved with men. Though genital connection might not, for some, have formed the basis of their identity, an enthusiasm for passionate sexual relationships certainly marked the lesbian feminism of the period. Sex was not absent, but it did not have the significance that it has for 'queer' lesbians who excoriate lesbian feminists for being 'anti-sex'. Mary Daly, the US lesbian feminist philosopher whose writings provided an inspiration for the movement of the 1970s and 1980s and continue to do so, expresses the role of sex in relationships thus: 'For female-identified erotic love is not dichotomized from radical female friendship, but rather is one important expression/manifestation of friendship' (Daly 1979: 373).

Separatism

Lesbian feminism is distinguished from other varieties of lesbian politics by its emphasis on the need for some degree of separation from the politics, institutions and culture of men. Such separation is necessary because lesbian feminism, like its foremother, radical feminism, is based on the understanding that women live, as Mary Daly describes it, in the 'state of atrocity' (Daly 1979). The state of

atrocities is the condition in which women have, for centuries, in different parts of the world, survived terrible violence and torture. These eras include witch-burning, for instance, the epidemic of domestic violence that is now destroying women's lives in both the rich and the poor worlds, and the sex industry and its current variant of a massive, vicious international industry of sex trafficking. As Daly puts it:

Patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet, and its essential message is necrophilia. All of the so-called religions legitimating patriarchy are mere sects subsumed under its vast umbrella/canopy. All – from buddhism and hinduism to islam, judaism, christianity, to secular derivatives such as freudianism, jungianism, marxism, and maoism – are infrastructures of the edifice of patriarchy. (Daly 1979: 39).

This condition in which women live is created out of, and defended by, a system of ideas represented by the world's religions, by psychoanalysis, by pornography, by sexology, by science and medicine and the social sciences. All these systems of thought are founded upon what Monique Wittig calls 'the straight mind' – i.e. framed by heterosexuality and its dynamics of dominance and submission (Wittig 1992). This 'straight mind' in the eyes of radical lesbian feminists is all-pervasive in the systems of thought of male supremacy.

The lesbian feminist critique of this whole system of male supremacist thought is far reaching in its vision and originality, its courage and creativity. When I speak of radical feminism and lesbian feminism in the same breath, that is because most often the leading thinkers of radical feminism have also been lesbians (Millett 1977; Daly 1979; Dworkin 1981), and lesbian feminism grew from a radical feminist foundation. The visionary thinking required to create the new world-view of lesbian feminism could not easily be developed from within a mixed gay liberation movement. In the mixed movement it was the traditional masculine ideas of Freudianism, for instance, that dominated discussion. The critical analysis and swingeing rejection of Freudianism as an anti-woman philosophy *par excellence*, formed a crucial building block in the creation of feminist theory. Freudianism was taken apart as early as 1946, by Viola Klein in *The Feminine Character*, and then, when feminism resurfaced in the late Sixties, was once again subjected to swingeing critiques in Kate

Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (Klein 1971; Millett 1977; Figes 1970).

The ideas of Foucault, also based upon the traditions of male supremacy, and thus on the erasure or degradation of women, became central to the gay men's movement in the late 1970s. Raymond shows how Foucault revered the Marquis de Sade, saying, 'A dead God and sodomy are the thresholds of the new metaphysical ellipse... Sade and Bataille' (quoted in Raymond 1986: 45). Sade's claim to fame, it has been pointed out by many feminist commentators (Dworkin 1981), was the brutalization of women in newly extreme ways.

The setting up of space to create the new world-view was one crucial reason for lesbian separatism. Lesbian separatism is the separation of lesbians from mixed gay organizing, and in some cases, in the USA in particular, from the women's liberation movement. Lesbians separated to form their own groups, bookstores, cafes and publishing companies. Most often the separate spaces that lesbians set up were for women in general, rather than specifically for lesbian women. It was the energy of lesbians that underpinned most separate women's spaces, including refuges from domestic violence.

There are two rather different ways in which lesbians separate. Some separate to create a lesbian culture, space and community in which they can live as separately as possible from the mainstream world. That is the goal. This form of separatism can hold dangers for the feminism that such lesbians espouse. It can become a dissociation from the world, such that the context in which certain practices and ideas originated in male supremacy is forgotten, and anything done or thought by a lesbian can be supported. Janice Raymond explains:

Even radical and voluntary dissociation from the world, originally undertaken as a necessary and daring feminist political stance, can produce a worm's-eye view of the world that exposes women to attack. A major consequence of dissociation is that women can become ignorant of conditions in the "real" world, conditions that may militate against their very survival. (Raymond 1986: 153)

Thus sadomasochism created by lesbians, or butch/femme role-playing, can seem to be practices invented by lesbians instead of having emerged from male dominance. Raymond explains that 'Although

lesbian sadomasochism may arise in a context where women are dissociated politically from the wider world, at the same time it assimilates women very forcefully into a leftist and gay male world of sexuality' (p. 167).

Raymond recommends a different kind of separatism, in which the 'inside outsider' manages to live in the world men have made, whilst working to change it from a separate base in women's friendship and culture. 'The dissociation that I criticize is not that of women coming together separately to then affect the "real" world. Rather it is a dissociation that proclaims a withdrawal from that world' (p. 154). In this form of separatism, which revolutionary feminists in the UK in the 1970s called 'tactical separatism' rather than separatism as an end in itself, lesbian feminists are able to develop ideas and practices against a background of the reality of the lives of most women. They are aware of the state of emergency and work to end it; thus sadomasochism, for instance, must be evaluated as to its origins in male supremacist culture, what it means for the lives of women, and whether it is well suited to the collective survival of women. The basis of lesbian feminism has always been a separate lesbian feminist culture and institutions.

The personal is political

Lesbian feminists took from radical feminism the understanding that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970). This phrase sums up the important revelation of the feminism of the late 1960s and the 1970s that equality in the public sphere with men was an insufficient, if not a nonsensical, aim. Some feminists simply said that women who wanted to be equal with men lacked ambition. Others analysed the limitations of the strategy in more detail, pointing out that it was the dynamics of personal heterosexual life which imprisoned women and limited their engagement in public life, and that the very notion of public life itself, including its forms and content, derived precisely from men's possession of a servicing 'angel in the house'. Bat-Ami Bar On explains that this principle of radical feminism emerged from the deprivatizing and politicizing of personal life that was begun by the New Left in the 1960s (Bar On 1994). Hierarchy had to be eliminated from personal life if the face of public

life was to change, and if the barriers between public and private were to be broken down.

Thus lesbian feminists, like many gay liberationists before them, rejected role-playing and any manifestation of inequality in lesbian relationships. They saw lesbians who engaged in role-playing as imitating the noxious patterns of heterosexuality and standing as obstacles in the path of lesbian liberation (Abbott and Love 1972). The lesbian feminist vision of the future did not consist of a public world of official equal opportunity based upon a private world in which inequality could be eroticized and milked for excitement. The public and private were to be all of a piece, and to be shaped to represent a new ethic.

Lesbian feminist theorists extended the understanding that the personal is political into a critique, not just of some oppressive aspects of heterosexuality, but of heterosexuality itself. They argued that heterosexuality is a political institution rather than the result of biology or individual preference. Adrienne Rich, for instance, says that heterosexuality needs to be analysed as a political system which is as influential as capitalism and the caste system (Rich 1993). In the caste system of heterosexuality women are constrained to the role of servicing men sexually and in other forms of labour. The labour is extracted through women's subordinate position in the 'family' and justified by romantic love or cultural expectations. The system is enforced by what Rich calls the 'erasure of lesbian existence', male violence, family pressures, economic constraints, the desire to 'fit in' and to avoid ostracism and discrimination. Lesbian feminist analysis of heterosexuality requires new language. Janice Raymond has supplied some words for analysing the way in which heterosexuality as a political institution works, such as 'heteroreality' and 'heterorelations' (Raymond 1986). I have suggested that the term 'heterosexual' be used to denote sexual practice which originates in male power and female subordination and eroticizes power differentials, and that the word 'homosexual' is more suited to desire which eroticizes sameness of power or equality (Jeffreys 1990b). Such language gives a new value to the term 'homosexual' as opposed to the favoured sexuality of male dominance which is 'heterosexual'. In the 1990s UK lesbian feminists edited volumes which took the discussion forward by encouraging both lesbian and heterosexual feminists to analyse heterosexuality and their rejection or embrace of the institution and practice (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993; Richardson 1996). Gay

male theorists have not engaged much with this issue. A deracinated version of the lesbian feminist critique has been carried into queer politics. But the queer version analyses heterosexuality as a problem for those who see themselves as 'queer' rather than an institution which oppresses women.

It was the lesbian feminist and radical feminist critique of sexuality and relationships, the idea that the personal is political and needs to change, that came to be challenged in the 1980s in what have since been called the 'feminist sexuality debates', or 'sex wars'. A new breed of lesbian pornographers and sadomasochists derided lesbian feminist understandings of 'the personal is political' and the importance of equality in sex and love as anti-sex (see my book *The Lesbian Heresy*, Jeffreys 1993).

Eroticizing equality

The creation of a sexuality of equality in opposition to the sexuality of male supremacy, which eroticizes men's dominance and women's subordination, is a vital principle of lesbian feminism. Radical feminists and radical lesbian feminists in the 1970s and 1980s argued that sexuality is both constructed through, and plays a fundamental role in maintaining, the oppression of women (Millett 1977; MacKinnon 1989). Sexuality is socially constructed for men out of their position of dominance, and for women out of their position of subordination. Thus it is the eroticized inequality of women which forms the excitement of sex under male supremacy (Jeffreys 1990a). As a result, radical feminist critics argue, the sexuality of men commonly takes the form of aggression, objectification, the cutting off of sex from emotion, and the centring of sex entirely around penile entry into the body of a woman. For women sexuality takes the form of pleasure in their subordinate position and the eroticizing of men's dominance. This system does not work efficiently. Thus, throughout the twentieth century, a whole army of sexologists and sex advice writers sought to encourage, train and blackmail women into having orgasms, or at least sexual enthusiasm, in penis-in-vagina sexual intercourse with men, preferably in the missionary position so that the man could remain 'on top'. The sexological enforcers have identified women's failure to obtain such pleasure as political resistance, or even a 'threat to civilisation' (Jeffreys 1997b).

The construction of sexuality around the eroticized subordination of women and dominance of men is problematic for other reasons too. This sexuality underpins male sexual violence in all its forms, and creates men's sexual prerogative of using women, who dissociate to survive, in the prostitution and pornography industries. Thus radical feminists and lesbian feminists have understood that sexuality must change. A sexuality of inequality, which makes women's oppression exciting, stands as a direct obstacle to any movement of women towards equality. It is hard to work for equality when realization of that goal would destroy the 'pleasure' of sex. Thus it is important to make equality exciting. Only a sexuality of equality is a goal consonant with women's freedom. In the 'sex wars' of the 1980s this feminist understanding of sex, as being shaped by male dominance and in need of reconstruction, became the object of fierce assault.

The lesbian 'sex wars' developed simultaneously with the feminist 'sex wars', which started as a backlash against the successes of the feminist campaign against pornography of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some feminists and lesbians (Duggan and Hunter 1995; Vance 1984), mainly those from socialist feminist rather than radical feminist roots or those involved in mixed gender politics, campaigned in opposition to the anti-pornography politics developed by radical and lesbian feminists. At that time it looked as if radical feminist critiques of pornography and sexual violence were gaining some recognition in malestream society. It seemed that feminist understandings of pornography as violence against women, for instance, might lead to the introduction of legislation in some states in the USA in the form of the anti-pornography ordinance drawn up by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (see Jeffreys 1990a; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997). The UK group Women Against Violence Against Women was having some success in the early 1980s in getting the then Greater London Council to remove sexually violent advertisements from underground trains. There was a moment around 1980–1982 when it really did seem that feminist anti-pornography campaigns had some chance of being successful. In reaction, some women in the USA (Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, or FACT) and in the UK (Feminists Against Censorship, or FAC) began campaigning and writing in defence of pornography, either on a free speech basis or because they positively approved of pornography and wanted it to be more available to women.

The furore of the arguments that took place around the very important question of whether it was necessary to challenge pornography have been called by those who took the position of defending the rights of pornography makers and consumers 'the sexuality debates' or 'sex wars'. The wars or debates constituted a politically crucial watershed in the history of this wave of feminism. The 'debates' halted real progress towards creating a sexuality of equality, and set in train a backward march in which the sexual and gender practices that feminist theorists and activists had challenged as hostile to women's interests came to be promoted as 'freedom', or even 'transgressive', and politically revolutionary in themselves. The power difference between men and women was eroticized in sado-masochism, for instance, rather than dismantled.

The 'lesbian sex wars' focused on the issue of 'lesbian' pornography and 'lesbian' sado-masochism (SM). Kimberley O'Sullivan, who was on the pro-porn and pro-SM side, says that the 'sex wars' were entirely restricted to the lesbian community in Australia, and did not percolate out into mainstream feminism (O'Sullivan 1997). Lesbian feminists argued that when lesbians engaged in the practices of porn and SM, they imported the dominance/ submission values of male supremacist sexuality into lesbian culture (Linden et al. 1982; Saxe 1994). These practices replicated the woman-hating of male-stream culture even when the perpetrators and pornographers were lesbians. Lesbians, it was pointed out, are raised in male supremacist culture. Some are trained to be sexual in child sexual abuse and in prostitution/pornography. Whereas lesbian feminists choose explicitly to reject this training, some lesbians embrace and celebrate it. The sex wars were fuelled by what I have called a 'lesbian sexual revolution' (Jeffreys 1993). A sex industry was created by and for lesbians, selling lesbian pornography, sex toys and dildos, in the early 1980s. The sexual values of this industry came from prostitution and men's pornography, and so did many of its personnel. The lesbian who started the main porn magazine for lesbians in the USA, *On Our Backs*, for instance, was a stripper (O'Sullivan 1997). It was fuelled also by the fact that some lesbians who took pleasure in pornography and sado-masochism were determined to protect this pleasure from lesbian feminist criticism. Lesbians who criticized the sexuality of dominance and submission did not conceal the fact that their sexual responses, too, were affected by the culture of the sado-society, but they sought to change this (Jeffreys 1990b). Those who defended the

sexuality of inequality did not want to change. Protecting this sexuality required the reprivatization of sexuality. In order to make sexual response and practice off limits for political analysis, they had to be separated out from the political, and made private once again.

Gayle Rubin, the US lesbian sadomasochist, provided an important theoretical foundation for the reprivatization of sex. She engaged in a bold and remarkably successful ploy to insulate sexual practice from feminist discussion. In a 1984 piece entitled 'Thinking sex' she argues that sexuality and gender need to be separated theoretically (Rubin 1984). Thus 'gender' is that which may properly be analysed through a feminist lens, whilst 'sexuality' is not suited to feminist analysis and should be seen as a separate form of oppression, to be analysed by sexual libertarians and sadomasochists like herself. Her ploy conveniently removes sadomasochism and other practices of hierarchical sex such as child sexual abuse from feminist critique, and has made her essay extremely celebrated within the new queer studies. It is constantly reproduced, even in feminist anthologies, despite the fact that it can be seen as an attempt to limit feminist analysis and shut out troublesome women from looking at mainly male gay practices.

Her tactical strike has been seen as problematic by the doyenne of queer theory herself, Judith Butler, who points out that Rubin's 'liberation' of sexuality from feminism 'dovetails with mainstream conservatism and with male dominance in its many and various forms' (Butler 1994: 20). Lesbian feminists have noted the centrality of her work to the reprivatizing of sex. The feminist philosopher Bat-Ami Bar On describes Rubin as having engaged in a 'flight from feminism', and says that she 'contributes to the construction of a feminism for which the personal is not political' (Bar On 1994: 60). Rubin's work provided the theoretical foundation for the considerable opposition that developed to lesbian feminist understandings of the need to analyse politically and transform sexuality that developed in the 1980s, the 'lesbian sex wars'. The sex industry provided the commercial motive.

All the principles of lesbian feminism came under attack in the 1980s and 1990s. Separate lesbian organizing, culture and existence were attacked as some lesbians in the 1990s developed a newly close relationship with gay men in queer politics. Woman-loving was regarded with suspicion as masculinity became the highest value in a mixed queer culture. Sexuality was the crucial point of difference in the lesbian sex wars. It is also, I will argue in this volume, the most

important point of difference between lesbian feminism and queer politics. Though much could be written about the queer agenda in other respects, it is the queer agenda for sexuality that will be examined here in detail. Those lesbians who sought to depoliticize sexuality, to oppose feminist criticism of eroticized dominance and submission in sadomasochism, in the dynamics of pornography and prostitution, identified with the new queer politics. For them, attacking lesbian feminism as boring and unsexy was something of a rite of passage into the new politics (Walters 1996).