



## Lesbian Sex Wars

by Elise Chenier

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Virtually every strain of feminist thought recognizes sexuality as a source of women's oppression. What to do about it, however, has often been the subject of intense debate. The lesbian "sex wars" constituted one of the most significant debates among second-wave feminists in the United States, Canada, Britain, and elsewhere.

Lasting roughly from 1980 to 1990, it is often characterized as a battle between "pro-sex" and "anti-sex" forces, but arguments over how to address problems of sexual violence and oppression, while at the same time giving consideration to female sexual pleasure and autonomy, were much more complex than such labels suggest.

### **Commercial Sex and Pornography**

Since the early 1970s, radical feminists held that the source of women's oppression is male sexual domination. In this context, commercial sex and pornography were identified as symbolic and real targets of the women's liberation movement.

From the mid-1970s into the early 1980s, public rallies and marches protesting pornography and prostitution drew widespread support among women and men from across the political spectrum. By the early 1980s radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon emerged as the intellectual leaders of a campaign to impose state-sponsored censorship laws against all forms of pornography.

Because many radical feminists viewed sexual relations as fundamentally oppressive to women, and because their primary solution was to introduce legal prohibitions against certain types of sexual representations, critics characterized them as "anti-sex." But such a label oversimplifies. The radical feminist position holds that sex is a social construction, rooted in male desire to dominate women, and that sex outside of patriarchy is impossible since sex itself is a by-product of unequal relations of power, namely domination and submission.

MacKinnon argued that this paradigm applies equally to lesbians, but cultural feminists like Adrienne Rich believed that women could re-connect with their authentic female selves, and enjoy emotionally intimate relationships based on mutuality, equality, and commitment. Unlike radical feminists who eschewed sexual acts and desires deemed "male," cultural feminists held that once liberated, women would have no desire to participate in "male-identified" sex acts.

### **Opposition and Reaction**

For feminists like Patrick Califia (formerly Pat Califia), both radical and cultural feminism advocated sexual repression, not women's liberation. When local women's bookstores refused to carry a pamphlet by San Francisco's feminist sado-masochist group Samois, Califia published a series of articles denouncing radical feminists as puritanical and Victorian.

A self-styled "sex radical," Califia argued that sexual exploration would lead to liberation. His most controversial claim was that rather than reproduce hetero-patriarchal relations, lesbian s/m made unequal power relations visible, something that could benefit the feminist movement's contemporaneous struggle to address existing inequalities between white, middle-class feminists and those of color and of the working classes.

Other participants in the sex wars worried that the anti-pornography movement would erode hard-won civil liberties and threaten the increased visibility of glbtq people in popular culture. Gay men, in particular, questioned how pornography featuring male-male sexual activity could contribute to the oppression of women.

### **Continuing Confrontations**

The majority of feminists, however, remained unconvinced by either the attacks of the sex radicals or the reservations of civil libertarians. In 1980 the National Organization for Women passed a resolution condemning pornography and sado-masochism. Some bookstores continued to ban Califia's work, including *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* (1980), and in 1983 a group of feminists in London publicly burned a copy of Samois' collection of s/m stories, *Coming to Power* (1981).

Perhaps the most famous confrontation in the lesbian sex wars occurred in 1982 at a conference at Barnard College in New York City. Organized under the title "The Feminist and the Scholar IX," the conference brought together a diverse group of feminist thinkers and activists to consider the complex relationship between pleasure and danger.

Local radical feminists deemed some of the topics offensive and attempted to shut the conference down, claiming it promoted anti-feminist values. Protesters handed out leaflets describing individual speakers as sexual "deviants." Clearly, sexuality had become a deeply divisive issue, even as the focus on such issues as s/m, pornography, and censorship obscured other feminist and lesbian issues related to sexuality.

### **A New Theory of Sexuality and the End of the Sex Wars**

Gayle Rubin's contribution to the Barnard Conference called for a new theory of sexuality, one that can account for the repression of sexual minorities, separate from feminism. Others explored female sexual agency from contemporary and historical feminist perspectives.

Subsequent feminist scholarship continued the exploration of female sexuality in the context of pleasure and danger. Over the next decade, radical feminist analysis was eclipsed by the theoretical paradigms that emerged from the conference, and the fierceness of the sex wars subsided.

Two major crises further contributed to the development of a new feminist sexual politics and the decline of the movement toward censorship and repression: the intensification of anti-homosexual sentiment after the emergence of AIDS, and the turn to the political right in the United States.

Sexuality became the flashpoint in the U. S. culture wars. Cuts to funding for safe-sex education and to grants for artists such as Holly Hughes and Robert Mapplethorpe inspired many feminists, but especially lesbians, to form new alliances with gay men and other "sex radicals." Suddenly a theory of sexuality based only on the oppression of women by men appeared increasingly irrelevant, and the lesbian sex wars receded into the background.

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