

# REVIEWS

**THE LEFT AND THE EROTIC**

**Eileen Phillips (ed)**

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**SEX AND LOVE**

**Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (eds)**

Women's Press £4.95 pbk  
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An alarming trend is developing. Erstwhile feminists are beginning to rewrite history. We have had Betty Friedan, American author of *The Feminine Mystique* arguing in her new book, *The Second Stage*, that feminists should admit to having gone not

only far enough, but too far, in demanding equality with men in the public sphere. We should, according to Friedan, re-emphasise what many would see as traditional female qualities such as caring and gentleness, and direct our efforts to creating the social forms which enable both men and women to develop these virtues. She writes as though feminists have not always recognised that we must change men as much as women; that we must assert women's rights to public and economic power and status *without* submitting to the aggression, competitiveness and denial of the personal sphere which men exhibit in the pursuit of that power and status.

More recently, Germaine Greer in the pages of the *Sunday Times* has presented a caricature of feminism. 'The truth is', says Greer, 'that we *are* being manipulated by the promotion and commercialisation of sex that (Mary Whitehouse) finds so repulsive. This is what we call liberation.' So much, then, for years of feminist campaigns against the exploitation of women's bodies in advertising, so-called beauty competitions and pornography. So much for our less publicised struggles to develop new ways of relating to each other which challenge the commercialisation of sex without slipping back into the prudery and moralism characteristic of Mary Whitehouse's campaigns and pronouncements. Because of the status of Greer and Friedan as self and media appointed gurus of feminism, we should take their writing seriously and organise our arguments in opposition. There are still too many people, including people on the Left, waiting to dismiss feminism as a freakish off-shoot of the permissive 60s.

Within this context *Sex and Love*, a collection of new essays published by the Women's Press and *The Left and the Erotic*, essays based on contributions to a workshop at The Moving Left Show in October 1982, are very welcome and useful. Both recognise the problems which allow Friedan and Greer to retreat from whatever commitment to feminism they might once have had: the mistakes the women's movement has made in assuming too simple a connection between the personal and the political, and in not recognising the complexity of desire; and the changes in the wider political climate which can be used to force sexuality off the political agenda altogether and which make us feel less confident about, and more isolated in, our commitment to sexual politics. As Noel Greig puts it in *The Left*

*and the Erotic*, we can no longer take comfort from 'the invigorating sense of being part of a broad, progressive movement which embraced gender and class, music, political activism, love and revolt . . . that sense of 'convergence', the feeling that great changes were to happen...' But both books propose that reassessment and refinement are called for rather than retreat and revision.

They speak forcefully of the possibility of change and the potential of pleasure. They reject tendencies evident in some recent feminist work to equate heterosexual sex with intractable sexism or to reduce lesbianism to feminism with sex as a more or less optional and de-eroticised extra. They contain testaments to actual change. But both books also reflect the political climate of the sober 80s, particularly in their retreat from the polemical style which has characterised much previous feminist writing on sexuality. This shift is important. Lynne Segal is perhaps too hard in *Sex and Love* on the 'crass and simplistic' psychology of Masters and Johnson and on those feminist books which use this research to celebrate the clitoris as the site

of female pleasure. But she, and the other writers who take up the same theme, are surely right to suggest that by emphasising the biological possibility of female sexuality without *also* understanding the complexity of desire, we have sometimes come close to foreclosing an area of exploration which is important for us, within our individual lives and in our wider attempts to formulate a politics of sex. Lynne Segal argues that rather than celebrating the power of women's sexuality 'it would be more helpful for us to understand why it is so very, very *hard* for us to change our erotic life, even when we consciously desire to.' This recognition, however, is only a starting point and both books suggest a range of strategies, theoretical and practical, by which we might move beyond this.

Having marshalled our arguments, however, or at least having outlined some of the parameters, what are we going to do with them? Their implications for our individual lives seem clear. Certainly I felt challenged and changed and clearer as a result of reading these two books, not least because both refuse to lay down a political line but recognise that sexual and personal experience is variegated, and change is not merely a question of will power or rational political choice.

What about the implications for collective politics? Elizabeth Wilson touches on this question in her contribution to *The Left and the Erotic*. She argues convincingly that there may be more than we previously thought to Freud's estimation of romantic love as 'a neurotic compulsion'. That formulation explains something of the force which romantic desires have in our own lives and the way in which, more generally, romantic desire reappears in new forms in sub-cultures ostensibly built on opposition to romanticism. Does this mean that some aspects of sexuality, like growth or the ageing process are 'a kind of bedrock of human experience around which politics develops but which are not, in themselves, inevitably political'? In fact what, if anything, is the relationship of politics to emotions?

Elizabeth Wilson herself appears to think that the connection is fairly tenuous. Since romanticism is not necessarily either good or bad, since there is no 'correct line', she concludes that 'in pursuing the demon lover through the recesses of the psyche we shall not regenerate Marxism nor discover better forms of political practice . . . we may come to have less grandiose visions of what the political can accomplish and cease



to denounce all politics which does not promise us Utopia.' What concerns me about this conclusion are two assumptions upon which it implicitly rests. The first is that sexuality is peculiar, not in the *extent* of its resistance to rationality, but in exhibiting resistance at all. But my experience is that in acting politically women and men on all sorts of issues make choices which don't necessarily correspond to a predictable and objective logic. The failure of the Left to recognise this has led us to ignore some issues which matter to people because they don't fit easily into our 'scientific' schema. It has also, on other issues, led us into sterile sloganising or obscurantist arguments. The second assumption is that feminism is a politics of the personal and subjective whilst Marxism is the science of the objective and reasoned. From where I stand this is not only to marginalise feminism by a process of compartmentalisation. It is also to reduce Marxism to its economic objectives rather than to recognise that these are no more (nor less) than means to an end which is the transformation of social relations, including those which are most personal and intimate.

Other contributions to the books draw different conclusions from Elizabeth Wilson. Some draw no conclusions. We are still at a very early stage in our attempts to relate emotion and politics. What emerges strongly from both books however is that socialist feminists, and the Left more generally, need to pay much more attention to this area. And anyone who is serious about personalising politics should read these books.

**Tricia Davis**