

LYNNE SEGAL
A new morality



The Left has failed to develop a progressive sexual morality, or even to consider what one might look like. This failure gives the Right the political initiative, so Rose Schapiro concludes in her punchy post-Gillick survey of the current strength of the moral Right in Britain (*MT* February 1985). Although our moral Right remains a 'moral minority', failing to win over widespread popular support for its anti-permissive, pro-traditional gender and family arrangements, it does succeed in pushing our predominantly liberal welfare agencies onto the defensive: they now speak only a language of bureaucratic paternalism rather than one of support for the stated choices and wishes of young people, women and sexual minorities. But why is the Left silent? It was, it seems only yesterday, once full of sound and fury on the subject.

Twenty short years ago, the new Left, and even the social democratic Left, did have a clearer sexual morality, which it saw as unquestionably progressive. The abortion, male homosexual and divorce reform bills of the late 60s all reflected a belief in the importance of greater tolerance of sexual variety and of separating sexual pleasure from the quite different experience of producing and raising children. Most of the Left in the 60s were firm believers in the Reichian view that more orgasmic sex, in itself, created happier freer people: sexual freedom was the prerequisite for the non-authoritarian, co-operative society.

Today, only the brave or the foolhardy few dare risk such sentiments. If it has learnt little else from feminism, the male Left has learnt that the 'sexual liberation' of the 60s displayed a phallocratic failure to perceive the sexual objectification and compulsive coercion of women which was built into all our images of (hereto) sexuality. It also learnt that it had usually failed even to please women. A failure of orgasmic, silencing, significance.

The women's liberation movement of the early 70s was also clear on the need for a new sexual morality: a morality which rejected the coercive and sexist nature of heterosexual practices, and insisted on every woman's right to sexual pleasure - with or without the necessarily re-conditioned services of men. It also insisted on every woman's right to complete control over her own fertility, but in a context of new economic and welfare supports allowing women the choice to mother

without financial burden or social isolation.

By the late 70s, however, feminists were deeply divided over sexual morality. Many new pressures - the inadequacies and growing setbacks to piecemeal reform, closer engagement with the reality of many men's violence against women, and the growing fragmentation of the women's movement - had produced a new focus on sexuality as *the* primary site of women's oppression, with male violence and rape (seen as condoned and encouraged by pornography) as *the* primary means through which men control women. A new feminist sexual politics emerged - though now a fiercely contested one - premised upon the idea of women as timeless sexual victim and men as all-pervasive sexual threat.

On this feminist perspective it is women who, as in times past, are assigned clear moral pre-eminence. The male Left can therefore once again more easily leave aside questions of sexual morality as primarily women's concern, except in so far as women need protection from other men. And the Left gradually, pushed by feminist action, has begun to support campaigns against the sexual harassment of women. But in the charged discussion of male violence, there is little space for the Left, particularly the male Left, to take up the question of heterosexuality - outside of objecting to the oppressive nature of heterosexism for all sexual minorities.

If heterosexuality, as some feminists have argued, in itself maintains and expresses men's power over women, no morality, however new, can prevent its fateful consequences. If however, as others believe, there is nothing intrinsically coercive, aggressive or degrading to women in men's most vulnerable and fragile appendage, or even in its most typical functioning in heterosexuality, then a new sexual morality needs to begin with the attempt to dismantle the ideology which transforms the penis, as the distinctive signifier of men, into something which can be seen as a potential weapon, and used to confirm men's power. That ideology, I would argue, is constructed from *all* the institutions which give men power in the world, and not simply or even primarily from sexual practices.

Burdened with the weight of all our fierce fantasies for unconditional acceptance, contact, pleasure or escape, sexuality could not be other than conflictual and fraught, however pleasurable. No new sexual morality can protect us from the ambivalent, often distressing, entanglement of our sexual desires and fantasies

with the excitements and traumas of power in personal relations. It is this which makes any new sexual morality such a subtle, complex, tricky affair. It has first of all to recognise all genuinely coercive sexual practices, which certainly includes pressure on young women to fuck, and to be the partner responsible for contraception despite possible health hazards; it also needs to take steps to provide real support and protection to the women, children and at times other men, who can be the victims of these practices.

And it has to distinguish such sexual coercion from the separate but connected

problem of how men in general, ideologically, economically and politically, come to have power over women. The connection, most crucially for some men's sexual practices, comes from the belief that 'real' men should not only have, but be seen to have and to exercise, power over women. Men's sexual performance with women (or other men) is one crucial symbol of that power.

It's going to take a very long time for a new sexual morality to transform the ideology and imagery of sex, linked as it is to all our mythologies of masculinity and femininity. And this is despite the fact that the

actual sexual experiences of individual women and men perhaps bear little relation to such imagery, or at the very least appear more complex and contradictory.

In the meantime, a new sexual morality does need to support the ways in which, against all odds, most of us do continue to seek sexual pleasure and contact; offering support and not prohibition particularly for the dilemmas of young people, women, the elderly, disabled and handicapped. It must do this while, at the very same time, it engages with the struggle to overturn *all* our sexual hierarchies, and their accompanying mythologies of sex.

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