

“FEMINIST” PERSPECTIVES ON SEXOLOGY

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THE FEMINISTS' DISSATISFACTION

Are feminists always at odds with sexologists on the claims and findings of sexology? This is not a trick question posed to mark once again this notorious age of political correctness, but a challenge for both parties to re-examine and perhaps re-envision their mutual relationship.

Numerous feminists have contended that one hundred years of sexological theory and research has at times facilitated, but more often than not, remained indifferent to or even tried to contain women's, and in the modern age especially, young girls', long struggle for control over their lives and their sexuality. For example, in an effort to win legitimacy for the field of sex research, the early western sexologists' claims to scientificity and objectivity created a professional language to that purpose and opened up intellectual space for the discussion of sex. Yet as that scientificity and objectivity expressed itself mainly in terms of instinctivist and essentialistic notions of sexuality and gender differentiation, couched in a vocabulary that predicates the normal/abnormal binary, sexology also put into place a conceptual framework that made it quite easy to ostracize all gender/sexual deviation and diversity to the margins of pathology. As much as sexology has become increasingly sensitive toward such issues, the lingering presence of the objectivist framework is far from extinct.

FEMINIST VICTIMOLOGY

Ironically, feminism itself has also proven to be no less unfriendly toward women outside gender/sexual norms. Western feminism in the 1970s began from a clear and repeated rejection of the essentialism and biologism of sexology by claiming that male sexuality (understood as mostly sexual harassment and sexual violence against women) is not biologically determined but socially constructed. Yet in its place, the feminists substituted an equally essentialistic idea, albeit in the language of social constructionism, of male sexual needs now redefined as male power needs. For those feminists, it is the exercise of male sexuality that creates and determines men's power, and yet it is the need to dominate and exercise power in sexual activity that determines the nature of male sexuality. Within such a "feminist" world picture, women are portrayed mostly as powerless and helpless, low in sexual drive and most vulnerable in sexual matters; and the biologism of sexology quietly re-enters through the back door. Furthermore, the feminist proposal of social constructionism was rarely carried to its logical conclusion of actively creating/constructing possibilities for social and cultural change. Instead, feminism provided the discourse of victimology for women and an image of righteousness for the state to institute more rigid rules to govern all forms of sexual expression. The resulting indiscriminate ban on pornography, whatever its content or target audience, for example, has devastated the circulation of erotic literature for lesbians who are already at a disadvantage in relation to accessibility to cultural resources. The sex debates which stretch from the 1980s well into the 1990s document this critical exchange.

THE COLLUSION OF FEMINISTS AND SEXOLOGISTS

Strangely enough, sometimes feminists and sexologists work closely with one another. Recently, the middle-class-oriented, good-woman type of self-proclaimed "state feminists" in Taiwan have launched a crusade to clean up Taiwan, ridding the island of all forms of sex-related cultural production, from TV variety shows to pornographic CDs to the internet and other traditional or new forms of sex work. The "state feminists" believe that pornography and the sex industry constitute the most serious forms of degradation for women in our culture; they thus work very hard to eradicate such cultural artifacts and practices, even at the expense of stigmatizing and criminalizing the sexuality of female sex workers. The Taiwanese sexologists, made up of mainly public health specialists and physicians and thus keen in upholding the normal/abnormal, healthy/pathological binary, stood aside and gave their consent to the purity campaigns. Such collaborations between feminists and sexologists are becoming quite common these days as the Taiwanese government embarks upon the so-called "gender equality education" (sex education being a part of it) in response to the increasingly active sexual activities among teenagers. The new sex education is, not surprisingly, oriented toward abstinence and monogamous marriage, packaged in a lot of sexological and feminist(!) babble.

Such an account of the complex relations between feminism and sexology provides a simple answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this report. No, feminists and sexologists are not always at odds with each other. It depends on how sexologists deal with emerging sexualities in this rapidly changing culture of desire, and, more importantly, what kind of feminists are there to interpret and appropriate the former's work.

THE PROBLEM OF THE GOOD-WOMAN FEMINISTS

By now, the two grand polarities--that between man and woman, and between normal and abnormal--have come to constitute the field of sexological research, as well as feminism, as the most basic essential facts of human sexuality and both are believed to find their most socially desirable state in the institution of marriage. In fact, when sex therapy and sexology discuss sexual harmony, sexual expression, or sexual satisfaction, the sexual is always framed within monogamous marital relationships--while messages of danger worded in medical jargon accompany those sexual activities and relations outside the marriage institution. The good-woman type of mainstream feminists may bemoan the absence or infrequency of such blissful states in intimate relationships, and suggest that the problem would be solved if only men would apply more tenderness and patience toward women. Feminist sex radicals, on the other hand, lay open the often troubling, irrational, or perverse nature of sexual desire and fantasy, which may bear little relation to our conscious ideas and commitments.

In other words, what arouses sexual desire rarely obeys the walk-in-the-sunset type of marital sexual bliss, nor does it follow the dictate of conscious feminist pursuit of sexual equity, but often includes inappropriately submissive, aggressive, hostile, or deviant impulses. And sexology's reluctance, if not incompetence, to deal with these impulses--other than in terms of pathology--will mostly likely produce conclusions without any awareness of preexisting prejudices and current deployments of power. Sexology has yet to affirm that sexuality can be as much about fear and anger as love and affection, as much about domination and subjection as mutuality and respect, and that sexuality is more than an interpersonal matter, more than a family affair, and that it reflects quite specific historical and cultural meanings. Unfortunately, such thoughts often lie outside the conceptual categories of sexology and beyond its explanatory

power. In this respect, feminism, in all its varieties, serves as a sober reminder that there is much more to sexuality than sexology, or feminism itself, is ready to concede.

SEXOLOGY AS A SCIENCE OF DESIRE

Looking back at the historical development of sexology and its exchanges with feminists both in the west and the east, sexology seems to be the most enlightening and progressive when it carries to its logical conclusion a self-portrayal of scientificity and objectivity phrased not in terms of heteronormativity but in terms of non-prejudicial openness. British historian of sexuality studies Jeffrey Weeks has described sexology as aspiring to building “a science of desire.” And sexologists since the hayday of this profession have often seen themselves as in the vanguard of “the struggle for modernity,” with their commitment to the protocols of science and their devotion to sexual enlightenment (Weeks 69). Yet Weeks also points out that sexology often ends up contributing “to the shaping and maintenance of an elaborate technology of control” (63). The founders of sexology from Krafft-Ebing to Havelock Ellis may have hoped that the vocabulary they created to describe human sexuality could capture and perhaps tame the complexities and diversity of sexual behavior and sexual desires, yet as queer sociologist Gayle Rubin puts it, “Sexualities keep marching out of the diagnostic and Statistical Manual and onto the pages of social history” (287). As the new field of “sexuality studies” emerges upon the translation of Michel Foucault’s work on sexuality, sexology faces its greatest challenge ever: would it remain circumscribed in its seemingly objective and empirical bent, thus remaining oblivious to sexual oppression and inequality, or will it strive for the sexual freedom and sexual equality that make up the modernist project? The Taiwanese example is that many sexologists may have sexual enlightenment as their pronounced goal of social reform, yet they often align with the most conservative ethics of authoritarian Confucianism or Christianity in promoting a sex education that takes abstinence as its main thrust.

Here the work of Foucault and his followers proves to be useful and insightful for a feminist reinvention of sexology. The talk of sexual health and pathology, of sexual diseases and reproduction, of normality and perversion within the discourse of sexology leads it easily into a role of social control and a power tool for state administration. In particular, sexological discourses have had a wide range of power effects in the area of sexual morality, gender roles, child-rearing, discipline of adolescence, body regime, self-formation, education, social hygiene and national welfare. If we are going to have a new sex-positive sexology, it needs to be self-critical of such discursive power effects.

Furthermore, feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding has shown that radical social movements such as feminism and the gay rights movement are actually good for science, good for the pursuit of truth. For these types of politics help us eliminate the pervasive cultural bias that could affect scientific data as well as hypotheses. Hence, in the name of the pursuit of truth, sexologists would do well to welcome more sex minorities, such as transgenders, bisexuals, sex workers, SMers, and many others, to come out and come forward to challenge the discrimination and pathologization that pervades most sexology. In addition, Foucault has said that “truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience” (57). This observation on erotic art as heuristic for contemporary sexology may prove to be most enlightening, for there is no reason why sexology cannot incorporate the goal of erotic art and reorient itself toward the promotion of pleasure. In other words, faced with sexual diversity and variance, sexology could become a “pleasure-centered sexology” rather than a juridical sexology

absorbed in the search for etiology and cure.

A SEXOLOGY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

Early sexology had to win its legitimacy as a field of research and academic pursuit by relying upon its association with the more acceptable institutions of power, especially medicine and law (two fields too well-known for their extreme lack of reflection and self-critique). Now as we become more and more aware of the plurality, plasticity, and diversity in human sexual desire and expression, sexology's bid for legitimation could be reinvented as being linked to other socio-cultural institutions such as the human rights and equality discourse--the true spirit of modernization according to sociologist Anthony Giddens; and perhaps also to our abundant erotic culture and even aesthetics--which Giddens has so aptly renamed as the core of "life politics." Work is already under way in feminist studies and the new field of sexuality studies. Whether sexology itself would catch on or not will be up to all of us here.

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