



Homecoming

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Homecoming: The Relevance of Radical Feminism for Gay Men

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SUMMARY. Sexual politics in the gay male world would be enhanced by a serious engagement with radical feminist politics, particularly critiques of pornography and the sex industry. As the domination/subordination dynamic at the heart of patriarchy damages homosexual men, such engagement is crucial to the future of a gay movement. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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I am sexually homeless.

By that I do not mean I am confused about my sexuality, though my sexual desire has meandered all over the map and at various times I have wondered (as, I suspect, most people do at some point in their lives), “Just what the hell am I?” But, at 44 years of age, I have a reasonably clear sense of that map and the terrain I cover: I sometimes find myself attracted to men, other times to women. I am gay, except when I am straight. Call me bisexual if you like, though it is not how I identify myself. My sexual self-description is: I feel straight when I am with a woman and I feel gay when I am with a man. And during periods of celibacy, I bounce between the two.

Instead, my sense of homelessness grows out of the intersection of my sexuality and my politics. I came to understand my gayness through radical feminism (e.g., Frye, 1983) and, more specifically, through the radical feminist critique of pornography (Dworkin, 1988; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997). At the same time I was engaging those political philosophies and issues, I was working through personal questions about my sexuality. The political analysis, which highlighted the construction of sexuality and the power dynamics behind it, helped me to understand the personal in a new way, allowing me to move from being trapped in a conventional heterosexual life to a place where I could acknowledge and begin to express my desire for men. Once those things became clear to me, I felt an understandable sense of liberation, of hope for charting a new path that could combine my sexuality, sexual politics, and radical politics more generally. Nearly a decade later, my short-term optimism (though not necessarily my long-term hope) has mostly evaporated, primarily because I have found no community in which my sexuality and politics easily fit, except perhaps for the radical lesbian feminist community. That is the irony of it all—the source of the ideas that have helped me understand myself is unavailable to me in life. I have learned from radical lesbian feminism and have worked on intellectual and political projects with lesbian feminists, all to my benefit. But men simply cannot be part of some aspects of that community’s social and sexual life.

The claim that I am sexually homeless does not mean that I cannot find anyone with whom I can share intimate, philosophical, or political connections. I am fortunate to have close friends with whom I have had a variety of relationships. I am not complaining that “nobody likes me” or that “I cannot find a date.” I am surrounded by a number of people—gay and straight, men and women—whom I consider to be quite remarkable. I often meet individuals to whom I feel attracted and with

whom I can imagine being intimate. I am fortunate to have an active professional and political life that provides satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. If I were to continue in my current partner-less state indefinitely, I would not consider it a tragedy.

What concerns me most is not my own particular state of being at the moment but, rather, the state of the world. The fact that I can find no community in which I feel at home, in which I can integrate my sexuality, sense of self and political orientation, should be of no interest to others except for what it says about the wider culture. If I were to meet the man and/or woman of my dreams tomorrow, this question of community remains. Consequently, the objective for me—indeed, for all of us—should not simply be finding that “special someone” but, rather, helping to build such a community based (for me) on principles of justice and equality as understood within a radical framework.

Let me expand on my conception of sexuality and sexual politics. The radical feminist analysis in which my ideas are rooted identifies sexual activity as one of the key sites of the oppression of women by men. In patriarchy, sex is based on a dynamic of domination and subordination. Men, generally, are trained through a variety of cultural institutions to view sex as the acquisition of pleasure through adversarial relations with women. Sex is a sphere in which men are trained to see themselves as naturally dominant and women as naturally passive. Women are objectified and their sexuality commodified. Sex is sexy because men are dominant and women are subordinate; power is conceptualized as erotic. The predictable result is a world in which violence, sexual violence, sexualized violence, and violence-by-sex are so common that they must be considered normal; expressions of the sexual norms of the culture, rather than violations of those norms.

The foundation of this routine fusing of sexuality and various levels of violence is men’s power over women, but in patriarchy other disparities of power such as race and ethnicity can be, and routinely are, sexualized. Power dynamics can be created—tops and bottoms, masculine and feminine—within same-sex relationships, even when the participants are of relatively equal status. The fact that people may move between those roles (that is, a man can be both a top and a bottom in a sexual relationship) does nothing to undermine the existence of those roles and the power dynamic of which they are an integral part. Instead of eroticising power, the radical feminist critique challenges us to eroticise equality. While we should work to eliminate the differences in power that stem from illegitimate authority such as sexism and racism, there is no way to equalize all differences in power that emerge because

of people's differing talents and temperaments in specific situations (and, in fact, attempting to eliminate those differences would be disastrous). So, there will always be complex questions about power, even when people consciously work at establishing egalitarian relationships. The goal is not some totalitarian imposition of rules, but a constant awareness of how power differences are routinely sexualized and how that affects relationships. The task is to engage in critical self-reflection about the way those power relations affect the most intimate aspects of our lives and ask if there are not other ways to structure our lives that will be more satisfying.

Understanding the role power plays in sexuality is a complex endeavour; however, some integral components of that understanding are fairly straightforward. I believe that a fundamental tenet of a progressive sexual ethic is that people and their sexuality should not be bought and sold, that intimacy is not a commodity for the market. This assertion is based on a principle of justice and a sense of empathy, growing out of a conception of what I believe human beings are for, and a concern for those who are routinely and predictably hurt in such a system. That same sense of justice and empathy leads me to oppose capitalism more generally, again for that simple reason: People are people, not things to be used by others. But to remain focused on sexuality: If intimacy is an arena in which people have maximal freedom to explore themselves and others in relatively egalitarian relationships, sexuality can be a source of liberation. If intimacy is an arena in which people's erotic experiences are structured by dynamics of domination and subordination, sexuality can be a tool of control. Buying a person for sex is domination; in a world based on equality, sex would not be a commodity.

I am aware that some individuals clearly state they want to offer themselves and their sexuality for sale, whether it is in prostitution, pornography, strip bars, or other aspects of the sex industry (Delacoste & Alexander, 1998). I am not contesting their capacity to make such a decision. Instead, I am arguing for a different sexual ethic; my goal is not to harangue those who make that choice but instead to be part of a movement that tries to change the society so that the sex industry becomes obsolete. My goal is not to impose my sexual ethic on others, but to explain why I think a radical feminist critique is compelling and why the norms of the society should change.

I am aware that gay pornography has been one of the few sites where gay youth have been able to see representations of same-sex love and gay men have been able to see their desire for men validated. But these

putative advantages do not mean that we must continue to accept this medium; rather, new, and perhaps better, ways to achieve self-affirmation should be pursued. I am not against the exploration of sexuality through art and literature but, instead, am arguing against the pornography industry's use of people to create profit, and not a deeper understanding of sexuality.

Pornography, straight or gay, often is defended on the grounds that it frees up people's sexual imaginations. I argue the opposite; pornography tends to limit our imaginations, forcing sexuality into channels that typically reproduce a domination/subordination dynamic. I am suggesting we should reject the commercialization and objectification inherent in the sex industry and look for new ways to validate gay sexuality.

This argument brings me back to my homelessness. I have met some men who are interested in these kinds of questions and this kind of analysis, and are willing to talk about it. But I have found very few gay men who are interested in this as a *political project*. That is, I have not met many gay men who are willing to publicly identify with (or sometimes even engage in) the radical feminist critique, and use that framework to analyze gay culture.

Let me be clear: By arguing this position I am not accepting the hackneyed stereotype that all gay men are promiscuous, bar hopping, bathhouse dwellers. Certainly that stereotype describes some percentage of the gay male world, and I think the radical feminist critique offers a way for gay men to critique those practices. But just as certainly there are many gay men involved in what the straight world would consider (if not for the same-sex partner) conventional relationships, and that same critique offers a way for us to examine aspects of those relationships as well. Unfortunately, there has not emerged in contemporary gay male culture significant space for a political and cultural project rooted in radical feminism or a radical politics more generally. In my experience, there is virtually no public critique of pornography and, more generally, the sex industry in the gay male world. To the degree there is critical discussion about promiscuity and the practice of anonymous sex, it is rooted mostly in conservative reaction against the "homosexual lifestyle." In my experience, most gay men consider these issues to be matters of personal preference, and not politics. Again, I am not arguing that gay men refrain from thinking or talking about such things, but that those discussions are conducted largely in private and rarely as part of a coherent political project rooted in an egalitarian ethic. The discussion among gay men that goes on in public is largely a contest between a sex liberal/libertarian position and those who want to see gay men fit into

the existing heterosexual system. There are some notable exceptions to this, such as the work of Christopher Kendall (1995) and John Stoltenberg (2000), but I think this quick sketch is a reasonable account of the main currents in the culture.

Why is it the case that gay male culture seems to be invested in sexual objectification and commodification to a degree at least as intense as its heterosexual counterpart? The simple answer is that being gay does not automatically mean a rejection of patriarchy, its sexual ethic, or its values. The struggle against patriarchy is a political struggle, one in which people must make a choice to resist. For men, gay or straight, that means a choice to resist a system that in various ways gives us privilege. To recognise that gay men are discriminated against in society, in some ways, should not keep us from seeing the ways that they retain privileges as men.

Of course, the feminist analysis in which I am rooted is but one approach to gender and sexuality. Other men, gay and straight, may endorse other feminist analyses (including some that celebrate pornography and the sex industry) and may contend that they are just as committed to the end of patriarchy. I am not suggesting all other political positions are illegitimate but instead am making a case for the one I find most compelling. I believe a radical feminist analysis accounts for the evidence in an intellectually and morally honest fashion. It confronts difficult truths and offers a politics with integrity.

Given the brevity of this essay, I am not attempting a thorough defence of the radical feminist analysis or its relevance to gay life and politics. Instead, I am sketching my own alienation from gay politics and culture, perhaps with the hope that others, who see some aspect of their own experience reflected in these comments, will be motivated to look further into the work of these feminists.

After completing a book on heterosexual pornography a few years ago, I gave some thought to undertaking a similar project on gay pornography. I did not pursue it. One reason was because my intellectual and political interests were increasingly centred on understanding and resisting the threat to the people of the developing world that is posed by the militarism and greed of the United States government and the corporations that set its agenda. What time I allocate to other projects tends to focus on sexism and racism, places where—as a white man—I think I have compelling moral obligations. I return regularly to the feminist critique, issues of the sex industry, and the project of resisting patriarchy because I still believe the issues are important and because I think resistance is

integral to my other political interests. Eroding the power of patriarchy will help in the struggle against militarism, capitalism, and racism.

But the decision to focus on other work also had to do with an assessment of what seemed possible at that moment in gay culture. I wish I saw more signs that these interests could find a home there, but for now I do not. However, I believe that over time, the value of radical feminism's resistance to patriarchy will become clearer to gay men. While it often seems more "realistic" politically for marginalized groups to work to carve out a space in the dominant society rather than challenge the fundamental patriarchal norms of that society, I think such an approach is dangerous. There are many compromises one makes in political struggles, and dogmatic assertions of political purity are mostly self-indulgent. But there is a great difference between making judgments about short-term compromises with an unjust system to advance a political project and accepting without question the unjust norms and principles on which the system is based. I believe that in the long run, a gay-rights movement that accepts the norms of commodification and objectification in capitalism and patriarchy will flounder. The future—if it is to be a decent one—lies in a consistent rejection of a world structured on domination, from the most intimate parts of our lives to the largest questions of global justice.

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