

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY AND THE DEBATE OVER "SEXUAL PLURALISM"

**Prof. Dr. Fatmagül BERKTAY\***

This article argues that although sexuality has an undeniable biological basis it is also a social construct with a history and that the natural body assumes meaning within historical and cultural context: what is sexual in one context may not be so in another and an experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings. As such, both sexuality and different sexual identities such as homosexual identity all have a history, as Foucault powerfully demonstrates. However, some writers point to the danger of "reductionism" within this approach and rightly argue that a greater understanding of the relationship between the biological and the social is needed.

The issue of sexuality as a crucial area of human experience inevitably involves an ethical dimension which has led to a debate over "sexual pluralism" and "sexual relativism" within feminism. This article while emphasizing the need for tolerance in sexual matters and being ware of the moralism some feminist movements occasionally reveal, nevertheless argues in favor of a feminist sexual theory which has a balanced approach toward the relationship between the social and the biological and which integrates ethical concerns.

Sexuality, as Foucault suggests, is a category of human experience which cannot be isolated and is not uniform throughout history. The dominant ideology in Western society maintains that sexuality is "natural", "innate" and "instinctual", and there is a reluctance to accept that it has a history. But, historical research shows that there have been shifts in sexual behavior and meanings attached to it, and that the practice and ideology of sexuality are in a state of flux. Even the very concept of sexuality, as some internal bodily desire rather than mere sex acts, only emerged in 19th century. "The so-called instinctive feelings are the biological raw material from which full-fledged human emotions develop" says Alison M Jaggard, and even apparently universal emotions such as anger or love may vary cross-culturally: "The more one learns about the ways in which other cultures conceptualize human faculties, the less plausible it becomes that emotions constitute what philosophers call a "natural kind". Not only do so-

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\* İstanbul Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Öğretim Üyesi.

me cultures identify emotions unrecognized in the west, but there is reason to believe that the concept of emotion itself is a historical invention, like the concept of intelligence or even the concept of mind<sup>(1)</sup>.

The biological basis of sexuality, the fact that it is a bodily experience, has led to one-sided biological accounts of sexuality. We all have a body, and the sexual experience is indeed, among other things, a bodily experience. This sounds more than obvious. But the body is too complicated a phenomenon. Yes, we all have bodies, yet at the same time we are bodies. Society, as Marx suggests, cannot maintain itself without the constant and regular reproduction of our bodies and their dispersal in social spaces. The fact that we are bodies may open the way to biological reductionism, while this in turn may lead to a reaction in the other extreme, that of conceiving of human beings solely as "social actors" who are determined only by their social status, beliefs and values. Perhaps the contradictory character of the body leads to such dichotomized perceptions: "The body is a space, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and plurality: it is something that is solid yet also fluid, something abstract and 'eternal' yet at the same time most concrete<sup>(2)</sup>." Moreover, this elusive body comes in gendered pairs and, strangely enough, one part of the pair happens to represent "the body" more than the other, and comes to be seen as "the sex".

How is it that the human body takes on a gendered form, and how does it happen that gender difference implies inequality? "Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities" says Gayle Rubin. Then the idea that men and women are two mutually exclusive categories must arise out of something other than a non-existent "natural" opposition<sup>(3)</sup>. Tackling with the above questions in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir makes two claims: 1) The body is not a natural fact but an historical idea, 2) One is not born but rather becomes a woman. The formulation "one is not born but becomes a woman" suggests that one is perhaps born a given biological sex but then acquires a given set of cultural and historical significations and so comes to embody an historical idea called 'woman'... Thus one becomes one's gender: To become a woman means to realize a set of cultural possibilities which is an activity constantly renewed... In this sense, gender is a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one's own flesh as a cultural sign<sup>(4)</sup>."

1 Alison M. Jaggard, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology", in *Women, Knowledge and Reality*, Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds., Unwin Hyman, 1989, p.131.

2 Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1984, p.8.

3 Gayle Rubin, as cited in *Desire – The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow et. al. Virago, 1984, p.381.

4 J. Butler, "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution", *Women, Knowledge and Reality*, op.cit., p. 261.

When the body is perceived as a site for the constant production and reproduction of cultural possibilities then the acting itself becomes the constituting. The refusal of a naturalistic approach that reifies gender and the conception of gender which is not causally dependent upon sex opens the way for a "gender pluralism": "If sex is the anatomical facticity of binary difference among human bodies and if gender is the cultural significance that sex comes to assume, then gender is in no way causally dependent on sex, and we might as well ask whether there cannot be a number of different genders that each sex permits<sup>(5)</sup>." Judith Butler also points out that besides the refusal of any causal relation between sex and gender, one recent reviewer of de Beauvoir such as Monique Wittig, have suggested that "sex" itself is a misnomer, and that the biological reality that we designate as sex is itself an historical construct<sup>(6)</sup>.

As cross-cultural evidence and comparison proves, natural body assumes meaning within historical and cultural context: what is sexual in one context may not be so in another. An experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings. Gender systems present gender categories as unalterable, and like the categories male and female sexuality itself is seen as natural "in the sense of a structure given in the nature of the world<sup>(7)</sup>" But only a quick glance at history would show us that the ideal family of the Victorian era, for instance, was "a long and painful evolutionary struggle away from nature" as Pat Caplan puts it<sup>(8)</sup>. There are even examples of fluidity in sexual desire within individuals over time which is due to the changing of the social context in which sexual experience occurs. (However, the notion that sexuality is constructed at the cultural / historical level does not mean that it can be easily reconstructed or deconstructed at the social or personal level)

The modern perception of sexuality is an ideological reflection of the changes that have occurred in the contexts of daily life within which sexuality is embedded. The separation, with industrial capitalism, of personal life from public life, of family life from work has reorganized these contexts and through this process, as Foucault suggests, "sex" has come to acquire a seemingly independent existence, has become a "thing-in-itself" which was not always so. According to Foucault, a society which treats sexuality as a thing-in-itself and sexual freedom as a value, in fact, forces us to confess our inner "secrets", especially to medical or para-medical experts: Our freedom forces us to conform to standards

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Desire, *The Politics of Sexuality*, op.cit. p. 382.

8 Pat Caplan, ed., *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, Tavistock, 1987, p.11.

of personal exposure. In addition we live in a world where our bodies are increasingly subject to inspection and surveyance by professional or governmental institutions<sup>(9)</sup>. This is a very important insight that some feminists such as Gayle Rubin, who draw on Foucault in some of their analyses, tend to ignore in their discussion on sexual "freedom".

Ellen Ross and R. Rapp, in a similar vein as Foucault's, argue that today in western societies sexuality is controlled by the large-scale social and economic forces, the most powerful of which is the state: "Sexuality thus enters the 'social contract' connecting the individual citizen and the state. In the process, an ideological space is created that allows us to see 'sex' as a defining characteristic of the individual person, 'released' from the traditional restraints of family and community."<sup>(10)</sup>

### The Possibility of Homosexual Identity

Homosexuality as an identity is a product of this historical process. Although homosexual behavior existed before capitalism, it was only the development of capitalism that has allowed some men and women to call themselves gay and lesbian, in the late twentieth century. The classification of the sexual types occurred in the nineteenth century when capitalism and urban development made it possible for individuals to exist beyond the sphere of the extended family as a productive and reproductive unit. And at the same time sexuality was "released from the imperative to procreate" as John D'Emilio puts it <sup>(11)</sup>.

Yet why is capitalist society, which has made homosexuality - "a new way of organizing one's personal life"- still filled with so much homophobia? D'Emilio seeks the answer to this question in the contradictory relationship of capitalism with the family. Capitalism, while undermining the material basis of the nuclear family by taking away the essential functions that cemented the ties between the family members, at an ideological level, enshrines the family as the source of love and emotional security. The acceptance of the erotic choices depends on the degree to which society affirms sexual individuality and sexual expression. Thus, D'Emilio suggests a struggle to "liberate" **all people's** sexual expression instead of waging a struggle only to defend the rights of a homose-

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9 Cited in B.S Turner, *op.cit.*, p.58.

10 E.Ross and R.Rapp, "Sex and Society : A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology" *Desire*, *op.cit.* , pp. 121-22

11 John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" in *Desire*, *op.cit.* , pp.143-144.

xual minority<sup>(12)</sup>. D'Emilio's account of a gay identity is in contrast with that of the medical establishment which responded to the emergence of a homosexual identity by describing - and thus circumscribing- it as a 'condition', something that is inherent in a person, a part of her/his "nature". "Non-conformity to norms of heterosexuality threatens the dominant ideology's view of sex as 'innate' and 'natural'" says Pat Caplan. The "doctors" that are a part of the dominant ideological establishment seem to have found a way out, although quite precarious!

This medical response brings to mind the role played by the "sexologists" of the late 19th century who contributed to the shaping of a naturalistic ideology concerning female sexuality and whose theories were largely a response to the feminist challenge and changing relations between genders. M. Jackson suggests that Havelock Ellis, one of the best known sexologists, by arguing that male dominance and female submission were biologically determined and inherent in heterosexual relations, gave scientific legitimation to the model of sexuality which feminists were challenging at the time. "You are women, and hence by nature different" said the scientists of the Victorian era and "your differences disqualify you for the worldly roles you seem, most unwisely, to wish to assume."<sup>(14)</sup> Sex, which was a fact of the organic constitution was immutable. Drawing on a static conception of human nature this view rejected the possibility of any real change in the sexual division of labour and was used to reinforce traditional sex roles. As Kate Millett puts it, "patriarchy presented itself as nature"<sup>(15)</sup>. Feminists of the period were well aware that essentialist naturalism was an anti-feminist weapon and they tried to fight against it. It is quite paradoxical that in this struggle they should be, in an indirect way, helped by Freud who declared that anatomy was destiny.

Freud, while suggesting a normative sexual development, at the same time opened a way for the critique of that path. The importance of his work was that he reformulated the way in which sexuality could be viewed: "Though he never personally gave up the belief that a complex biological mechanism underlay the workings of the mind, his account of the dynamic unconscious and of the autonomy of psychic life served to challenge the fixity of all biologically given positions, the inevitability of sexual difference and the essentiality of sexual

12 Ibid, pp. 148-49.

13 M Jackson, "Facts of Life or The Eroticization of Women's Oppression? Sexology and the Social Construction of Heterosexuality", in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, op.cit., p.58. 14 John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" in *Desire*, op.cit., pp.143-144.

14 C.E. Russett, *Sexual Science*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1989, p. 23.

15 Cited in Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics*, p.58.

identity.<sup>(16)</sup>" Thus with Freud, sexuality, from an existence on the margins of culture and nature, becomes incorporated into the cultural process and offers an alternative way of conceiving of sexual difference and identity. As Jeffrey Weeks puts it, "it is at this point that contemporary feminism and radical sexual movement seek to reappropriate Freud as a guide to a non-essentialist theory of identity."<sup>(17)</sup>"

### The Need for a Balanced Approach

As sexuality is "a nexus of the relationships between genders much of the oppression of women is born by, mediated through and constituted within it" says Gayle Rubin; and this fact has led feminists to be critically interested in the subject, and perhaps to their uneasy relationship with it. Rubin discerns two strains of thought within the movement in this respect. One that criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and demanded sexual liberation for both men and women; and the other that described sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This second tradition which, according to her, "resonates with conservative anti-sexual discourse" achieved temporary hegemony with the advent of the anti-pornography movement<sup>(18)</sup>.

Especially after 1960s, with the feminist claim that personal is political, many canons of sexual meaning were challenged. But as sexuality is so difficult to define and so intertwined with issues of gender, class and race that generalising about its social construction seems to have been equally difficult and problematic. Perhaps this accounts for the variety of theoretical approaches that try to explain it, and also for the occasional oversimplifications and reductionisms. As some writers point out, social constructionism could be used against women as well<sup>(19)</sup>. Feminism came to see that despite their shared biology, women of different classes, races and sexual orientation could have conflicting interests. The term 'woman' used in feminist discourse often substituted part of women's experience for the whole, thereby "relegating the experience of some women to silence."<sup>(20)</sup> Some feminists had a feeling that the social construction theory had run into "some misguided interpretations" and started to criticize what Carol S. Vance calls "feminist parochialism"<sup>(21)</sup>.

16 J.Weeks, "Questions of Identity", *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, op.cit., p.38.

17 Ibid.

18 G.Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p.301

19 J. Sayers gives the example of denial, on grounds of abstract principle, that menstruation has any negative aspects does not serve women, especially working class women. *Op. Cit.*, p.123.

20 Carole S.Vance, op.cit., p.17.

21 Ibid.

The natural outcome of this self-criticism process has been an attempt to embrace the experience of diverse groups of women. By now it was evident that female sexuality could be thought about and acted on differently according to age, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. There also was the feeling that "movements of sexual freedom had very often ended by constricting homosexuality, female sexuality, and even sexual excitement itself<sup>(22)</sup>." That sexuality never exists in a vacuum, and that "it is the most self-conscious of human activities" as Angela Carter puts it, did not mean that we could ignore the body. "We experience (sex) in our bodies and live it out in our fantasies" says Jeffrey Weeks, "it might be true that sex is not the truth of our bodies, nor need it be the relentless force that we often experience as unstoppable, beyond rational control. But it must be based on biological sources and bodily potentials<sup>(23)</sup>." This meant that a greater understanding of the relationship between the biological and the social was needed. Biological facts did not speak for themselves, but neither did the social ones!

Underlying the new approaches to women's sexuality was a view of sex as a human realm with its own historical dynamics, distinct - if not autonomous - from civil society<sup>(24)</sup>. Each person's sexuality had its own history, and "politically correct" prescriptions of sexual behaviour seemed to serve nothing but the circumscription of the very sexuality feminists wanted to liberate.

### Feminists Versus Feminists

By the end of 1970s, feminism's ranks started to be split up by divisions over topics such as pornography, sado-masochism, and sex itself. There was the rejection of the assumptions about the erotic expression of power. Lesbian practitioners of sado-masochism for instance, argued that the play of domination and submission in their rituals was harmless, and distinct from the exploitation of the world outside the bedroom<sup>(25)</sup>. The erotic paradox was said to be the meeting point of dependence and independence, self-affirmation and self-obliteration, domination and submission, childhood and adulthood, and to "ignore this paradox in favor of some norm of politically desired behaviour was to cut ourselves off from a crucial area of human experience.<sup>(26)</sup>"

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22 Desire, *Op.cit.*, p.154.

23 J.Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1985, p.122.

24 Desire, *Op.cit.*, p.289.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, p.291.

Jessica Benjamin, in a similar vein, speaks of "the strange union of rationality and violence that is made in the secret heart of our culture and sometimes enacted in the body." This rational violence mingles love with issues of control and submission, and it tells us about the feelings that are denied fulfillment in western culture except in outbursts of collective and individual deviance and madness. She also points out that the violation of the body in erotic encounter breaks the taboo between life and death and breaks through our discontinuity from the "other". And while this break is the hidden secret of all eroticism, it is most clearly expressed in erotic violation<sup>(27)</sup>. This interpretation offers us deep insight into the psychology of erotic violation: but why is there the need to assert control? Benjamin, following Chodorow's argument, says that objectification of women is rooted in the repudiation of the mother, and this repudiation also stamps the formation of male gender identity: Male children achieve their distinct identity by denying their identification or oneness with their mothers and an objectifying attitude comes to replace the earlier interactions of infancy. She also argues that the fact that social structure and culture enforces individual isolation so rigidly, the transgression that attempts to break it may be more violent<sup>(28)</sup>. Although I take Benjamin's warning against falling into moralism quite seriously, I still feel that a purely psychological analysis - which reminds me of Wilhelm Reich's theory of fascism- is not sufficient to explain something that is the outcome of "the interplay of great social forces and deep human needs", as Benjamin herself puts it.

Against the camp that emphasizes the nature of sexual difference and the need for taking risks in the pursuit of women's sexual pleasure is that of the "cultural feminists" who tend to an essentialist position and pose male and female difference as innate and immutable. These feminists are interested in protecting differences in order to establish a female identity as an almost utopian alternative to male values and selfhood. In this view not the degendering of society but its appropriation by women (with the so-called women's virtues) is seen to be the desired end. According to Mariana Valverde the result of this tendency is a construction of sexuality as uniformly oppressive. It gives us "a picture of relentless male violence drawn with the twin brushes of feminist functionalism [...] and philosophical pessimism" and at the same time "by assuming that the male objectifying gaze is the only possible meaning of the term 'sexuality'" it denies women any position from which to reclaim or invent non-patriarchal sexual desires<sup>(29)</sup>. Here then, the category "woman" as a cultural construct serves to blur

27 Jessica Benjamin, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination", *Desire*, Op.cit., pp.292-96.

28 *Ibid.*, pp.304-307.

29 M. Valverde, "Beyond Gender Dangers and Private Pleasures: Theory and Ethics in the Sex Debates", *Feminist Studies* 15, No.2, Summer 1989, p.241.



the real differences between women, and the debate over sado-masochism itself is sufficient to make one quite suspicious about the glorified "innate women's virtues".

Pornography is a subject where the polarized attitudes toward sexuality is conspicuous. Feminists who react against prescriptivism and emphasize the need for tolerance about different sexual practices react against the moralism of the anti-pornography movement and point out that it restricts women's sexual freedom. A.Hollibaugh argues that "our horror at pornography is often horror at sex itself"<sup>(30)</sup>. While some of the criticism this camp brings about the other is certainly grounded, it becomes far-fetched when it amounts to an almost uncritical affirmation of "commercial sex"<sup>(31)</sup>. I do not think that in the name of sexual pluralism we have to accept an imagery imposed by a deeply misogynistic capitalist industry. And it is also very difficult to treat sexual freedom and emancipation as a positive value in itself after Foucault, who "gives a subtle rendering of the general argument that sex and capitalism have gone hand-in-hand too long for sex to be interpreted at face value as a radical force"<sup>(32)</sup>. Does a perspective built on a range of sexual possibilities mean that sexuality should be seen out of the realm of values whatsoever?

When Gayle Rubin suggests an "anthropological" attitude toward sexuality<sup>(33)</sup> arguing that sex acts should not be of ethical concern, "sexual pluralism" seems to be running into "sexual relativism" which leaves out the possibility of a feminist sexual ethic. As Mariana Valverde points out, this may be the reason why women who are more interested in ethical values than the vindication of abstract choice have tended to feministic moralistic systems that fill the ethical void with arbitrary but spiritually satisfying content: "The debate on sexual theory, therefore, cannot revolve only around the logic or lack of logic of various theories of sexuality. It has to address the ethical questions that, for most people, are far more pressing than the theoretical questions."<sup>(34)</sup>

Then the question arises : How much sexual and moral pluralism is possible within feminism? There seem to be no clear-cut answer to this question, no simple formula. But it is obvious that feminism lacks an adequate theory of sexuality when just a "freedom of sexual expression" is not enough. Let us hope that

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30 A.Hollibaugh. "Desire for the Future : Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure", *Pleasure and Danger*, op.cit., p.402.

31 G.Rubin, "Thinking Sex", op.cit., passim

32 A.Snitow et.al., "Introduction" , in op.cit., p.1.

33 G. Rubin, "Thinking Sex", op.cit., p. 284

34 Mariana Valverde, op.cit., s. 248.

this theory will embrace diversity and multiplicity and it will allow people to be themselves without oppressing others. In Valverde's words, "the task before us is perhaps best envisaged as the effort to discern and bring about the conditions for a nonalienated sexuality, rather than as an attempt to maximize the sexual rights of individuals or groups".<sup>(35)</sup> Let us hope that we shall be "broad and big" while tackling with this task and that we shall keep in mind that "pettiness separates, breadth unites", as Emma Goldman touchingly reminds :

Pettiness separates, breadth unites. Let us be broad and big.  
 Let us not overlook vital things because the bulk of trifles  
 confronting us. A true conception of the relation of the sexes  
 will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but  
 one great thing: to give of one's self boundlessly, in order to  
 find one's self richer, deeper, better. That alone can fill the  
 emptiness, and transform the tragedy of woman's  
 emancipation into joy, limitless joy.<sup>(36)</sup>

Indeed, the fact that sexual desire is formed and deformed within the power relations of a sexist and oppressive society should not lead us to give it up. How can we forget that "eroticism is one of the basic means of self-knowledge, as indispensable as poetry?" (Anais Nin)

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35 Ibid., s.252.

36 Emma Goldman, *The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation*, cited in Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, Virago, 1979, p.151 (post script).