

Let's Talk About Sex

The Class War Federation

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This article has a couple of local references — one to local politicians, and one to the ‘Carry On’ films (a series of comedy films based on sexual innuendos — a bit like a less ‘adult’ National Lampoon).

“As far as I’m concerned, working in crummy factories for disgusting pay was the most exploitative work I ever did in my life. I’m aware that, in a sense, it was Hobson’s choice for me. But I maintain that I had more control over my life as a worker in the sex industry than as one as a worker in an ordinary factory.”

Nickie Roberts, former prostitute and stripper.

Introduction

Porn...women’s liberation...prostitution...sexuality...promiscuity... feminism... All these issues and struggles have been discussed, misinterpreted, used by people and groups to win some power and try to control others. Usually, in this mess, the subject of sex and sexual behaviour crops up time and time again. To win their arguments, a lot of politicians, middle class feminists, and religious bigots have launched attacks on working class people’s sex lives.

The arguments and debates have been confusing and have left people feeling guilty about totally natural sexual desire and behaviour. This has not helped women, men or our class as a whole.

We have produced this article to get the juices flowing. We don’t want to control or put people’s lives on guilt trips, like so many others — we do want to fight for a world where sex, like every other arena of our lives, is healthy, free of unnecessary confusion, and controlled by us, not the powers that be.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the politics of sex changed. Sex became the banner under which all women, regardless of their class, race, or nationality were supposedly united. Suddenly the bizarre idea that sex=porn=men=violence became a universal equation.

The theory was so reactionary that, at the time, it was hard to separate the voices of the radical left from the extreme right.

Story So Far

Up until this time, the battle had been to bring into the open the discrimination that women faced every day. The overall mood was that anything was possible — women were insisting on breaking out of the repressive roles that had been forced on them. They demanded that women’s sexual pleasure should be a fundamental part of any heterosexual relationship.

In the 1990s, unless you're a religious or sexual bigot, this is just plain common sense. But in the 1970s the world just wasn't used to women defining themselves as sexual beings.

Women began exploring sexual possibilities, which was both a painful and a liberating experience.

However, this was a short halcyon period of time, and one that was replaced by the theory that sexual liberation was a dangerous thing – if women became too sexually liberated, then men would hold it against them. While some women were brave enough to leap into the unknown, others were claiming that women's sexuality had been so colonised and threatened that there was only one route to take: batten down the hatches, and try to get rid of everything that was, and still is, unpleasant and nasty. Because sex and desire can't be described as rational, these feelings have always been associated with chaos and non-conformity. Middle class feminists wanted the women's movement to have the aura of respectability. Due to these reactionaries, Victorian values became dressed up as feminist thought.

Some History

Middle class Victorian women and some suffragettes had established themselves as moral authorities. Even some of the most radical nineteenth century activists had accepted the overall view that men are sexual predators, and that 'fallen' women were victims of them. Of course, the view also held that married middle class women were sexually pure.

The suffragette, Christobel Pankhurst, claimed that women had to be sexually above reproach to be morally worthy of the vote! Needless to say, this didn't apply to men who already had the vote and ran the world. The right, like Pankhurst, has always tried to keep women as prisoners by emphasising the idea that women's 'feminine' nature is essentially different from men's'. Feminists began to fall into the trap of idealising women in much the same way – claiming that they were celebrating, rather than punishing, 'difference'.

The result was whether a woman's stuck up on an angelic pedestal of purity, or stuck in the kitchen in between dropping countless babies, she's still stuck.

Then, when the middle class suffragettes, activists and right-wingers all got into bed with biological theories they turned sex into a battleground. These theories stated that women are passive nurturers and men are active aggressors.

The idea was that women have to play victim always. So it wasn't a great surprise that when the sex backlash started in the 1970s, talking about women enjoying heterosexual sex, it was seen as feminist heresy.

Sex and Sexism

Sex began to be blamed for all sexism. The fact that the way we bring up our children, and the way that women are politically and economically controlled took a back seat in the sex politics of the day – they weren't seen as keys to women's oppression. It wasn't just sexual violence and sexism, but fucking in general, that became the main issue of gender politics. Women were universal victims, having to endure whatever was forced upon them sexually, by men. The concept of consensual, exciting sex wasn't even on the agenda.

Men, especially working class men, were generally seen as timebombs, waiting to be activated by a quick glance at a wank magazine. The argument that reducing heterosexual sex to a no-go status would limit, rather than expand, women's sexual and general freedoms, was seen as an argument collaborating with the enemy.

In a world which usually relies on copulation for us to survive, gathering together to wipe out intercourse was too self-destructive, and equally un-natural, even for followers of such puritanical feminists as the American, Andrea Dworkin. As a result, many began to attack pornography, to attack sex, rather than to attack the exploitation of women. "Porn is the theory. Rape is the practice" became feminist bywords. There was little data to support the theory, but sex is too emotive an issue to need factual back-up. As a result, the struggle for women's greater economic, intellectual and sexual freedom was replaced by demands for censorship.

Porno Wars

In denouncing pornography, feminism found itself allied with right-wing fundamentalists. Church groups and right-wing pressure groups joined feminists in blaming pornography for sexism.

While our society is highly controlled and deeply sexist, pornography may mirror sexism, but it never created it. Most porn is incredibly stupid and quite evidently exploits women as objects with wide-open orifices, beckoning: "I'm lovely, I'm your plaything, do what you want to me". However, it is misleading to claim that all porn is violent and dangerous.

Anti-porn campaigners often state that all women hate pornography; adding that all women working in the sex industry are victims. Rather than calling for safer working environments for sex workers, middle class moralists, bigots and intellectuals have called for more repressive laws and social stigma. The result is that it unofficially gives the go-ahead to the way both police and punters brutalise women working in the sex industry – and that is violence and sexism.

It is ironic that police raids more often than not target gay literature and culture. While soft porn sits less than prettily on the top shelf of your local newsagents, gay bookshops have had cops stripping their shelves of Oscar Wilde's work.

Feminists, past and present, may do well to remember that when Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair are on your side, you've got serious problems. When politicians say that they want to legislate to help the anti-porn campaigns, then it's obviously not the status quo that they'll be legislating against.

Feminists who want the law to clamp down on porn and the sex industry claim that they are not anti-sex. When pornography has been stamped out they say they'll be more than happy to see it replaced by 'erotica'.

Apparently, 'erotica' is aesthetically pleasing, whereas porn is simply manipulative. But class prejudice and aesthetics go hand in hand — if the middle and ruling classes like a sexy image, they sanitise it by calling it erotic art. At the same time, the things that turn the working classes on get labelled as 'smut'. We're not referring to, or advocating things like the 'Carry On' films or 'Hustler' magazine either.

Who then has the right to decide what's art and what's smut? Usually it's middle class academics who assume the right. They have never been known to support either class struggle, or in this case, the sexual liberation and freedoms of both working class women and men, regardless of whether they're gay, straight or bisexual.

They do, however, fulfil a very similar role to the scientists of Victorian England, with their 'biological arguments', and the moralists of old who wanted women to be chaste and pure women before they had the right to vote.

Are You Protected?

Class politics are part and parcel of sexual politics. The Victorian idea that the working classes must be protected from their own foul and perverse natures is a central part of the anti-porn campaign.

The middle classes get to say what can be safely seen because they believe themselves intelligent enough to read pictures and images in more than one way. Anti-pornographers insist that working class men are incapable of seeing sexual images without being a danger to women. This paints working class men as stupid sex monsters, and reinforces the view that, sexually, men are "all potential rapists". In fact so potential that a glance at sex in a movie or a naked woman on a page will send them all out to rape and abuse, or will damage their souls forever.

It is a damaging, hierarchical and sexist class society that introduces the idea of sexual abuse and male power and dominance over women — this is the key to exploitative attitudes and behaviour, not pictures of naked adults having sex.

When In Rome...

At the turn of the century, excavations of Roman Pompeii produced walls, doors and courtyards full of ‘mucky’ pictures. The Victorians decided that such smut couldn’t be reconciled with what they saw as a great civilisation.

All the finds were put into a locked room. When it was finally decided to show the exhibits, the room remained locked to “Women, children and the uneducated”. You see, not much has changed.

Any move back in time, any backsliding in the liberation of our bodies and minds, whether in the name of celebrating womanhood or slagging off promiscuity, is a definite step towards yet more repression — and when repression is in full swing, we lose the little right we have won to make our own decisions and control our lives, making informed choices.

Keep Pushing

Arguments over sex and sexual freedom have been paralysing the progress of the feminist movement for years. The last thing we need are new forms of guilt for women, marching under the dodgy and ever-changing banner of political correctness.

Feminism and sexual politics have to be fundamentally about choice, control over our lives and our bodies, and that must include sexual choice.

Claiming that all women are sexual victims did not unite the women’s movement, it just made women feel scared, disempowered and helpless. It also drove a wedge between women and men who wanted things to change.

Avoiding sex, its complications and contradictions, its passion and energy, won’t make any of us strong. It won’t help us to combat sexism either. What sidestepping the issue in the name of unity and political correctness does is to ensure that middle class women continue to tell working class women (and men) what to do — both in and out of bed.

Sex Is Brilliant

It would be a huge setback for working class people to follow the confusions and morality that has been forced upon us for millennia. There are statements about how we should behave sexually dating back far beyond the Bible, and certainly that little book has been responsible for some very serious repression of women, and at times, of men, particularly gay men.

Sex can be and should be enjoyable for all those taking part in it, and we should certainly not be sanctioned and frowned upon if sex is our way of earning a living, feeding our kids, and having a life rather than just surviving.

That doesn't automatically make prostitution or porn OK — no more OK than having to get up before dawn to build homes for the rich, or clean sewers or get our brains numbed in some production line or other. Neither does this make any excuses for the social fuck-ups and inadequates who rape, molest and abuse.

Keep the Juices Flowing

Sex, and enjoying it, is natural, it's a major part of our lives. When we have consenting sex, with however many partners, male, female, gay, straight or bisexual, why shouldn't it be with passion, pride, excitement and experimentation? If no one is hurt or exploited, if power isn't used over another, then our sex is just that — our own.

It's in the interests of all our class to discuss sex and sexuality, to control our own bodies, and to learn lessons about what's good and what's not. Good medical advice aside, the moralists, politicians and middle classes have no right to hinder us or interfere.

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