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The circulation of the WPIIRE is deliberately limited and may vary depending on the topic at hand. Their main purpose is to help the author by stimulating comments, suggestions and criticisms. These may concern the content as well as the form, the sources as well as the analysis. We hope the WPIIRE will enhance international exchanges and contribute to a better collectivization of current theoretical, historical and political thinking.

The studies presented in this format generally retain an unfinished character. They are circulated to insure some exchange prior to completion and possible publication. It is therefore requested that they not be quoted or referred to in public without the formal authorization of the author.

Working Paper Number 15:

Sexuality

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Introduction to Working Paper 15

This Working Paper of the IIRE is the transcript of a report by Rebecca Flemming given at the 1990 European Women's School at the IIRE in Amsterdam. We are circulating this Working Paper in the framework of preparations for the Seminar on Women's Oppression and Struggles due to take place at the I.I.R.E. in September-October 1991. With such WP we wish to make known studies done by the participants themselves.

This is the fourth WP-IIRE that we are publishing for the 1991 Women Seminar. The first one is the WP n° 9, “Lessons from Women’s Everyday Forms of Resistance in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia”, by Carol McAllister. The second one is the WP n° 13, “Sexual Oppression and Class Oppression”, by Stephanie Coontz. The third one is the WP n° 14, "Helena Molony: Actress, Feminist, Nationalist, Socialist and Trade-Unionist", by Penny Duggan.

We hope to publish before the end of 1990 and beginning of 1991 several more Working Papers on women’s issues. We would be very happy to receive proposals, especially from those to whom these WP-IIRE have been sent.

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Number 14: Helena Molony: Actress, Feminist, Nationalist, Socialist and Trade-Unionist, by Penny Duggan
Number 15: Sexuality, by Rebecca Flemming
Introduction

This article is based on a report given at the 1990 European Women's School in Amsterdam. The report was both separate from, and connected to, the theme of the School - "Violence Against Women". It was separate from, because the discussion on sexuality is not in any way a subset of the discussion on violence against women, but is rather an attempt to examine some areas which have previously been neglected and to begin to integrate issues of lesbianism and lesbian liberation. It was connected because questions of male and female sexuality and their construction are a significant part of the discussion concerning violence against women, as the previous discussions at the School demonstrated.

The report is largely theoretical, not because practice is unimportant but because but because the two go hand in hand. Correct practice is based on correct theory, and the FI at an international level and at most national levels has not discussed theories of sexuality. Indeed the socialist feminist current more widely has traditionally been weak on questions of sexuality and lesbianism. These questions are not just interesting theoretical abstractions but have crucial implications for concrete interventions in the class struggle. The formulation of strategies for lesbian and gay liberation and for combatting male violence are two of the most obvious examples of this.
Sexuality is a complex domain of sexual desires. It must be distinguished, but not completely separated from sexual practice on the one hand, and sexual identity on the other. An individual's sexual desires and sexual practice frequently do not coincide. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the married lesbian whose desires are only for women but whose sexual practice is almost exclusively with her husband, because of economic dependence, social circumstances and pressures. Sexual identity is the conscious acceptance of a label, a self-recognition of membership of a particular collectivity.

The concept of sexuality as a separate sexual domain within the human character is itself a relatively recent invention.

The first question to be asked is - how is sexuality constructed, both for individuals and society? The dominant answer given to this question, so dominant most people do not even think about it, is that sexuality is a natural given, that it is biologically determined. What they in fact mean is that naturally, genetically people are given heterosexuality, but for some people this biological process goes wrong and they turn out deviant, abnormal.

In this framework it is only lesbian and gay sexuality that needs a causal explanation, everything else can be just assumed. However, a quick examination of the facts shows that it is construction of sexuality as a whole that must be explained and that biological determinism is simply not credible.

From Caelius Aurelianus' Fifth Century AD Latin translation of Soranus' First Century medical texts to the present day work of East German sexologist Gunter Dörner, scientists have sought biological explanations for sexual deviancy. Theories have ranged very widely. Caelius Aurelianus suggested either mental illness or an "improper mixing of the seeds" at fertilisation. Veniamin Tarnovsky, an eminent sexologist in pre-revolutionary Russia, wrote that homosexuality was caused by damage to the parents genes resulting from "hysteria, epilepsy, anaemia, alcoholism, typhus, debauchery, the soil, the climate or altitude". Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, the Nineteenth Century German writer and lawyer, thought that homosexuals (including himself) were the product of the anomalous development of the originally undifferentiated human embryo resulting in an "anima muliebris virile corpore inclina", a female mind in a male body or a "third sex". Gunter Dörner favours a hormone theory and has said that the "future sexuality" of a foetus may be determined by measuring its different hormonal levels while still in the womb, thus enabling the abortion of foetuses which will develop into lesbians or gay men.

There are two central flaws in this approach. The first is that the sexual deviancy that different scientists have tried to explain has changed over history. Caelius Aurelianus was addressing the question of why there were molles (Greek - malthacae) - men who actively sought the "passive" role in sex with other men and who were stigmatised, condemned and derided for this transgression against the strict sexual hierarchy of ancient Rome which demanded that the passive partner in sex between men was a social inferior - a slave, a youth, a non-citizen etc - and did not really enjoy it. Same sex relationships between men were an intrinsic part of the framework of ancient Roman society, but clear rules governed their conduct as much as any other forms of sexual relationship. The later scientists were attempting to explain the phenomenon of the modern homosexual, a concept which bears only a passing resemblance to that of the Roman mollis. The second problem is that throughout this gamut of complex and sometimes imaginative scientific theories concrete proof remains elusive. The sheer variety of theories is symptomatic of this difficulty. For every study which shows that lesbians and gay men have different hormonal patterns or differently shaped skulls than everybody else there are at least five that conclude the exact opposite. Recent research carried out in the US on identical twins brought up separately
that aimed to establish the extent to which human characteristics are biologically determined claimed to have found evidence that virtually everything, including political and religious views and character, was genetic. The single exception was sexuality which they concluded was not the result of biology! It is thus necessary to dismiss these theories as deriving more from the social prejudices and moral imperatives of the day than sound scientific method.

History is even more damning of biological determinism. The most cursory of glances down the ages reveals a wealth of sexual and social diversity which require the most impossible of mental contortions to explain with reference to biology. The status and preponderance of the man/youth relationship in ancient Greece, the ubiquitous nature of sexual relationships between men in classical Rome, the "Romantic Friendships" between women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Europe, the modern phenomenon of coming out and the growth of the lesbian and gay communities and lesbian and gay liberation movements are just some of the more obvious examples. Is it really believable to argue that the Ancient Greeks had a distinct biology from their latter day counterparts or indeed that the populations of Western Europe and North America went through some sort of biological transformation around 1970? Conceptions of male and female sexuality have also changed through history. In the various classical debates between Helen (the advocate of the superiority of sexual relationships between men and women) and Ganymede (the advocate of the superiority of sexual relationships between men and youths), Helen's most telling argument is frequently that a relationship between a man and a woman was more reciprocal than that between a man and a youth because women derive sexual pleasure during intercourse while only the active partner does so during intercourse between men. The virgin/whore dichotomy of woman as essentially virginal and non-sexual on the one hand and as overpoweringly and dangerously sexual on the other dominated much of the thinking of the early Christian era and middle ages, after which women became increasingly desexualised.

Evidence on the construction of sexuality can also be gathered from looking at different cultures across the world. The role of the berdache (a male or female transvestite who often had same-sex sexual relationships, sometimes including marriage) in some Native American Indian tribes has been the subject of many articles. The tribes of Papua New Guinea in which the male coming of age rite consists centrally of oral sex between an older man and the young man who is being initiated have been thoroughly studied and documented by anthropologists. Marriages between women are recorded in many areas of Africa.

Biological determinism is also political nonsense. For if lesbians and gay men were a fixed minority, comprising somewhere between 5% and 20% of the population, differing only from the majority in their sexual preferences, what then explains the suppression of same-sex sexual activity (except within certain historical and cultural constraints) over most of history and the institutionalised oppression of lesbians and gay men under capitalism? For within the biological determinist framework such suppression and oppression is completely irrational - lesbians and gay men could be easily accommodated within the system and everybody would be saved a lot of trouble. So what has sustained this bizarre irrationality through the annals of time and why does it seem to be on the rise in Western Europe at the present? Socialists are rationalists and look for underlying causes and reasoned explanations.

Nor should the personal experience of many lesbians and gay men be ignored. Those who did not find their sexuality under a gooseberry bush but rather through a whole process of development and change. This is particularly true of lesbians, many of whom
became lesbians because of their involvement in the women's liberation movement, not as a direct result of a conscious political decision (though some did), but as their sexuality changed in struggle - in challenging conventional ideas about gender and sexuality, in leading political lives centred around women, in the development of the strong independent woman......Now, when the women's movement is weaker and there has been a general shift to the right in society some of those women have reverted back to heterosexuality.

If biological determinism is so clearly and categorically incorrect, why has it remained such a dominant view? Virtually unchallenged outside various political movements and a few materialist pockets in academia? The answer lies in almost the same place as the reason why the ideology of gender roles being based on constant biological differences between the sexes. To cast inequalities, or oppressive structures as natural is a frequent and highly effective mechanism for maintaining privilege and domination. Something which is natural is not only necessary or good but also unquestionable, un challengable. Capitalism has so much resting on differential and unequal concepts of gender and on the institution of heterosexuality that both are portrayed as natural, unchanging and unchangable.

In addition, the early homosexual rights movement firmly believed that their only chance for legal reform rested on persuading society that homosexuality was a congenital sexual anomaly and that homosexuals were therefore a harmless minority who should not be punished or condemned for something that was beyond their control. As J A Symonds wrote to Edward Carpenter, the British utopian socialist and gay man in 1892 - "The first thing is to force people to see that the passions in question have their justification in nature." Such a view did represent a practical step forward from characterisations of homosexuality as a disease to be cured that were also powerful at the time, but there were more radical voices, for instance Eduard Bernstein of the German SPD but they were marginalised.

So, like most things, sexuality is socially constructed. An individual's sexuality is constructed by the society they live in. It is not static but changes and develops within an individual's lifetime. It is determined by an ongoing process in which subjective factors constantly interact with objective factors. This does not mean that an individual's sexuality is something superficial, easily changed or a matter of choice in the same way as people choose a brand washing powder in the supermarket. Rather it is something intrinsic to our identity, very deep like gender (another social construct) but not immovable. It is something that consciousness plays a major but not determining role in shaping.

Of equal importance is the fact that in any given society an individual's sexuality is constructed and develops within a historically specific framework. It is not just individual sexuality that is socially constructed but the very concepts and categories of sexuality itself and the different relations they have with society, the state and the economic system. In classical Greece, for example, marriage was an expected and universal part of life, young girls of 12-14 would be married to men of around 30 (the age difference was less in the lower classes), if they were rich enough to have slaves a citizen woman would then lead a secluded, but by no means leisurely, life. The work expected of women of all classes was approximately the same and a central function was to bear children. The options open to the man were much wider, both in terms of work and public life (though limited by wealth and status) and in terms of sexual pleasure. He could visit prostitutes (some brothels were state run), or the more sophisticated hetaire, he could sleep with his slaves and he was expected to have sexual relationships with other males. Same sex relationships in this era were formalised (almost institutionalised) and idealised in a way unknown since, however they were circumscribed by rules reflected the power relationships of this patriarchal and
Rebecca Flemming

slave based system. The homosexual relationship that was formalised and idealised was one that reinforced the dominant position of the adult male citizen; it was between a man and a youth (who did not have citizenship but would attain it when he came of age). Within this sanctioned and encouraged affair it was seen as natural for the man to adopt a dominant role. The youth, on the other hand, had to tread a fine line between not challenging his lover's dominance and not appearing to take a "woman's" role (i.e., to initiate or desire a passive role). The price of becoming too passive a partner or showing undue inclination to be sodomised was losing the rights to address the assembly and thus participate actively in public life. Citizen men could also have sex with socially inferior males, such as slaves, but these were expected to be mere casual relationships and the citizen male must always take the active and dominant role.

Thus it can be seen that the classical Greek concepts of sexuality, of prescribed sexual behaviour were very different from those of today. There was no equivalent of the modern gay man (let alone the modern lesbian) in ancient Greece even if it is accepted that actual sexual practice did deviate to some extent from rules and ideals. The citizen male with his wife at home and his obligation and desire to produce a family, his sexual options and the idea of the highest expression of love being between a man and a youth does not fit into any of our modern sexual categories, indeed it would be very surprising if he did given how fundamentally different classical Greek society was from society today, in its slave mode of production and its political, social and legal framework derived from that.

Similarly feudal concepts of sexuality with its focus on specific sexual acts and their relationship to procreation differ vary widely from those current. The different sexual options provided by the structure of society, the dominace of christianity in western Europe, the changing shape of the family all played their role. The historical description could continue, but the point is the same - sexuality is a historical and social construct.

It is important to stress that the history of sexual relationships between women and those between men has been largely separate, they have converged only relatively recently. The tendency to see lesbians as simply a pale reflection of gay men both historically and in the present day is inaccurate, misleading and reflects the gender inequalities in society.

The present stage of the history of sexuality was ushered in by the establishment of modern industrial society. During the long and arduous passage from feudalism to capitalism an attendant series of transitions occurred in the field of sexuality with the emergence of the lesbian and gay identity and the subsequent creation of lesbians and gay men as a distinct social group. Like the changing economic order itself, the process by which homosexuality stopped being a sexual activity and became a sexual identity was complex and uneven. It was quite distinct for men and women and involved a number of different phases. However, it is possible to describe broadly the trends and themes that underlay these developments.

A transformation of economic organisation brings with it a transformation of social organisation which includes the regulation of sex and sexual relations. One characteristic of this period was a tightening of the family form and an underlining of its role as the basic unit of society. This sharpened lines of demarcation between individuals inside and outside of the nuclear family and left an ever dwindling room for manoeuvre. Nor must the importance of the economic aspect itself be overlooked. The initially progressive role of capitalism - the economic expansion and general increase in wealth that it brought provided the material conditions for the development of a lesbian and gay identity. Growing financial independence and personal freedom are crucial, individuals began to be able to survive outside the family, while mercantilism and industrialisa-
tion accelerated urbanisation and the historical evidence demonstrates the key role played by urban culture and city life in the process. It is in the urban centres of the countries first to have their bourgeois revolutions and quickest to industrialise that the lesbian and gay identity developed initially, for example the appearance of the "molly", the gay man, and "molly houses" where they used to meet and which were occasional raidied by the forces of law and order in late Seventeenth Century London. There were similar developments in Amsterdam and slightly later in Paris and Venice.

The divergence of lesbian history from that of gay men becomes apparent once again as it would be sometime before even some women began to approach financial and social independence, and they continued to tread their own path in terms of sexuality and sexual relationships which is only now beginning to be uncovered. The existence of women who dressed up as men to join the army or navy in northern Europe during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries has been documented and though the research shows that for the majority of women there was no sexual motive involved, they were simply poor women, without the financial support of a family who basically had to choose between soldiering, prostitution or starvation, there were some women who did have sexual relationships with other women in this way, sometimes even taking a wife. This marked a particular stage in the development of a lesbian identity, a period when because of the gender role of women as sexually passive, the suppression of any information about sex between women and the male ridiculing of the physical impossibility of sex between women, some women thought that the only way they could pursue sexual relationships with other women was by living as a man.

Following the formation of the lesbian and gay identity is the creation of the social group of lesbians and gay men. This was tied up not just with the activity of lesbians and gay men themselves but also to the attitudes and reactions of the rest of society to them. Two events stand out as part of this process of recognition, categorisation and regulation. The infamous British Labouchere amendment to the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1885 made acts of "gross indecency" between men criminal offences marked a watershed in sexual legislation. Prior to that there had been laws against particular sexual acts, for example sodomy which was illegal whether with a man or a woman, not against a particular type of person. Associated with this changing legal situation was the emerging science of sexology with its passion for categorisation and labelling and its exciting discovery of a specifically homosexual personality, caused by a variety of congenital or environmental misfortunes.

Queen Victoria, so the story goes, did not believe that lesbians existed so women escaped criminalisation in Britain in 1885. An attempt was made in 1921 by Mr Macquistion MP to bring acts of "gross indecency" between women within the scope of the criminal law. Though his amendment was passed with an overwhelming majority in the House of Commons, it was opposed with such unanimity and vigour by the Lords that it was abandoned without a vote. Their objections were not based on any enlightened or even vaguely liberal grounds but rather on the commonly held belief that to mention such things in the statute book would only encourage women who previously never heard of such things to try them out. The Lord Chancellor himself declared - "If you accept a sophisticated society in a sophisticated city, I would be bold enough to say that of every 1000 women, 999 have never even heard a whisper of these practices."

Though obviously the formation of the sexual identity came before the creation of the social group, these transitions should not be seen as completely separate but rather as a continuing process, the factors in which constantly intersect and interact. It is only at this point that the previously separate strands of homosexual
The age of capitalism is the age of "compulsory heterosexuality", where the division between homosexual and heterosexual is of prime social significance. The key distinction is no longer the relationship of a certain sexual activity to procreation, the age or class of the sexual partner nor the role played during sex but the gender of the individuals involved.

The patriarchal, heterosexual family in its many different historical forms has always been a prop of class rule. Under capitalism not only has the family developed into its most acute form - the nuclear family - but it has become more than ever a lynchpin of the present order. The reasons for this are well established and rest on two main factors. Firstly, that the family is essential for the efficient and economical reproduction of labour. For, as Marx says - "The maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital." Secondly, the family constitutes an effective means of social control. A society of small units which can be isolated and are encouraged to be insular and self-interested, is obviously easier to manage and intrinsically anti-collectivist. The state may also devolve some of its power on the "head of the family" as its agent. Moreover, the family recreates the dominant ideology. It is in itself authoritarian and teaches obedience to its children. Some of the power structures of society are entrenched within it - that men have power over women, and both, to different degrees, have power over children - and are presented as the natural and inevitable order of things.

So the overall picture is of capitalism as an economic system that necessarily controls sexuality in society. Since the heterosexual, patriarchal family is essential for the continuation of the capitalist order the system drives people into that structure and forcibly eliminates anything that objectively represents an alternative. Lesbians and gay men are fundamentally incompatible with the family thus inequality is set down in law, mercilessly maintained by the forces of the state and reproduced and continued by the many diverse structures of modern society. Heterosexism - the ideology of the superiority of heterosexuality - leaves no aspect of life untouched.

The political implications of this are manifold. On a practical level it means that both heterosexuality and homosexuality can be "promoted", demolishing the safe arguments of much of social democracy and liberal thought. "We are what we are", said Labour's Chris Smith, Britain's only out-gay MP, during the debate on Section 28 of the Local Government Bill which makes it illegal for any local authority to "intentionally promote" homosexuality. The Labour Party and many others found this a convenient banner to rally around when under attack. An acceptance of the social construction of sexuality leaves this argument high and dry. This is not a problem, indeed it allows for real progress to be made. The argument that should have been used against Section 28 (and was in some quarters) is not that homosexuality cannot be promoted because that leaves the underlying meaning of the Section unchallenged as well as flying in the face of reality, but rather that lesbian and gay sexuality is equally valid to heterosexuality so both should be promoted equally throughout society. Then the term corruption becomes meaningless since no moral stigma is attached to lesbians and gay men. Any denial of this equality is clearly discriminatory and encourages and justifies bigotry and oppression.

The fact that sexuality is socially constructed means that rather than fighting for equal
rights for a discreet minority within society, the struggle is for the liberation of human sexuality as a whole. The oppression of lesbians and gay men means that we will be leading that struggle at the present time but the aim is not integration but liberation of everybody. Entwined with this is the fact that since lesbian and gay oppression is historically and materially intrinsic to the capitalist system, lesbian and gay liberation is intrinsic to the overthrow of that system and the creation of socialism.

The argument that sexual violence against women is caused by the inherently aggressive nature of male sexuality is also contradicted by the fact of the social construction of all sexuality. Male violence is about power and the structural oppression of women.

The majority of theoretical writing on the question of sexuality and lesbianism has been by radical feminists who have very much lead the way on these subjects and realised their importance from an early stage. However, though radical feminism excels at describing the concrete realities of women's oppression, their analysis of root causes and the ultimate conclusions reached are fundamentally flawed. This is not the place for a very detailed critique of the length and breadth of radical feminist thought, but rather an attempt to address some of the main points on sexuality in brief.

The first is the idea put forward by a particular strand of radical feminism which argues that heterosexuality is the basic cause of women's oppression, the root of all evil etc. If it is accepted that sexuality is socially constructed, and radical feminism has been quite insistent on this point, then there must be something outside of sexuality which constructs it. It cannot therefore be the root cause of anything.

The second is the virtual equation of lesbianism with feminism. Either in the sense that it is not possible to be a feminist without being a lesbian, because men are the enemy and to sleep with them is to collude in women's oppression, or in the sense that lesbianism is nothing to do with sexual desires it is to do with politics, being "women identified", or a mixture of the two. Both of these assertions are wrong and problematic. The former is clearly completley contrary to Marxist method. Gender is not the only, or overriding, division in modern society and this current is totally reductionist. It leads to essentialist views of gender and sexuality, and to separatism which may be an attractive lifestyle, but represents an effective opting out of the struggle for change. The second desexualises lesbianism, and by implication women in general, taking it out of the realm of the erotic into the realm of friendship. Ironically, this echos one of the strands of women's and lesbians' oppression - the denial of female sexual desire and capacity (wives were to endure, not enjoy intercourse with their husbands) and the denial of any physical sexual content to relationships between women (a variation of the "invisible lesbian" theme) - and in its most extreme form leads to a kind of "feminist puritanism" which has frequently very reactionary consequences eg demands for censorhip of pornography (including lesbian erotica) and practical alliances with the Christian Right.

The final issue that must be discussed is that of "socialist sexuality". The building of a socialist society will not mean the freeing of sexuality, the unleashing of some powerful force, nor is it about uncovering the true human sexuality hidden under capitalism etc, it will simply mean that human sexuality will be constructed by a different social order, a socialist order without women's oppression, differential gender roles or compulsory heterosexuality. People will be able to make choices between equal options and to control their own lives. What exactly that will look like in practice, it is impossible to predict!