

LESBIAN OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION

Everyone in Australian society is brought up with the belief that homosexuality is "unnatural" and "wrong". While we expect political conservatives to have a conservative view it is disheartening to find precisely the same anti-homosexual attitudes among members of the Left. Membership in a Left group doesn't necessarily mean that you will challenge existing notions about homosexuality.

Like the rest of society the Left prefers to ignore our existence. Occasionally, however, the silence is broken with traditional attitudes in the guise of theories attributing homosexuality to capitalism. A Maoist radical therapist tells us that the ruling class creates the conditions for homosexuality and then declares it an individual illness. (It is, of course, part of the general decadence of capitalism!) We find a similar sort of rubbish in Janey Stone's CRITIQUE OF RADICAL FEMINISM, in which we are described as - "last year's radical feminist solution" - a put-down for both lesbian feminists and non-political lesbians. We know of no radical feminists who became lesbians as a point of political principle.

There is a reluctance in left organisations to challenge perceived working class values in relation to homosexuality. Middle class revolutionaries defer to and exaggerate working class prejudice. In fact, a very large percentage of homosexuals are working class.

Homosexuals in Left organisations experience oppression as homosexuals. They are oppressed culturally and socially within those organisations. These homosexuals find that their comrades, like their employers, are prepared to use their labour but only as long as they remain silent and deny their sexual identity. The men of Gay Liberation were afraid to march in a Gay contingent at May Day because of the possibility of physical violence from other marchers for whom 'poofers' is a national sport.

Homosexual liberation is impossible under capitalism, but it is not guaranteed under socialism. Gay Liberation cannot be bought off by the granting of civil rights under capitalism. All oppressive power structures - racism, sexism and class - reinforce each other and only by changing all these structures will liberation be achieved.

We are not offering lesbianism as a political solution or a feminist tactic. We are fighting to end the oppression of lesbians and destroy sexism. Our experience as lesbians is a prime motivating force to this end.

Not only do ideas reflect social and economic conditions, certain basic social and sexual values are so deeply implanted in us because of socialisation in infancy by the family and constant reinforcement by the total social environment, that constant struggle and serious consciousness raising are needed in order to effect change. By CR we do not mean liberal gossip sessions divorced from political involvement. But neither do we regard mere "ideological" commitment to abolishing sexism as adequate.

We are not interested, at this point, in discussing the hows and whys of revolution but in getting you to challenge your prejudices regarding homosexuality. This is one of the preconditions for a serious consideration of revolutionary change.

HOW ARE LESBIANS OPPRESSED ?

"Understand this - that the worst part of being a homosexual is having to keep it a secret. Not the occasional murders by police or teenage 'queer-beaters'; not the loss of jobs or expulsion from school; not dishonourable discharges - but the daily knowledge that what you are is so awful it cannot be revealed.

The violence against us is sporadic. Most of us are not affected. But the internal violence of being made to carry - or choosing to carry - the load of your straight societies unconscious guilt - this is what tears us apart, what makes us want to stand up in the office, in the factories and the schools and shout our true identity".

Martha Shelley Gay is Good

Take the word "lesbian" - it is so emotionally charged, so negative, that it automatically evokes a shudder of distaste. To most people its literal meaning is unclear but it carries a burden of ugliness which is widely understood.

The word "lesbian" has been invested with all the hatred heterosexual society feels for women who do not need men - who have chosen to love and live with other women.

So great is the stigma attached to the word "lesbian", that even many lesbians do not wish to associate that label of abhorrence with the creative and beautiful experience which is their love.

The label "lesbian" is used in a crudely sexual way so as to totally define the women on whom it is placed. This definition contains the implication that lesbians are not "real" women. In fact, lesbian women are very real women.

As lesbian-feminists we regard the word "lesbian" as both positive and of great political value.

Lesbian women are condemned and oppressed. Yet there are no laws against lesbianism. This reflects both the psycho-social nature of our oppression and the conspiracy of silence which surrounds us.

In Australia there is an inbuilt cultural condemnation of lesbianism which is upheld and perpetuated by the Church and the social sciences. These two make strange bedfellows and yet they appear to be united on the subject of homosexuality. With religion becoming more discredited, it is ironical to see such social sciences as Psychology step into the breach to uphold the religious concept of what is "natural", with the less moralistic but just as judgemental terms "normal" and "abnormal".

Freud is not alone in theorising that lesbianism is maladjustive, regressive and infantile. It is widely assumed that homosexuality is a "personality disorder". But try protesting that lesbian women are not by definition psychopaths and one is met by a "scientific" comment like the following, taken from a commonly used psychology textbook:

"Whether or not homosexual persons themselves regard their sex orientation as normal is beside the point. Most sex deviants look upon their anomalies as "natural" simply because they have always had them as long as they could remember".

Research which has uncovered positive findings has largely been ignored. For instance, few people realise that lesbian women could make up 30% of the female population.

Comprehensive studies of patterns of sexual behaviour - both cross-cultural and among animals - have shown that :

- homosexual behaviour occurs in nearly all human societies and among primates,
- regardless of the amount of repression of homosexuals in a given society it will still occur
- there is an absence of "any evidence to justify classifying homosexual behaviour exclusively as a substitute for heterosexual relations".

- the physiological mechanisms of mammalian mating behaviour are bisexual
- Humans possess an "inherited capacity for erotic responsiveness to a wide range of stimuli".
- Our ability to respond is modified by sexual learning.
- people "who are totally lacking in any conscious homosexual leanings are as much a product of cultural conditioning as are excluding homosexuals"
- "human homosexuality is not basically a produce of hormonal imbalance or 'perverted' heredity" (4)

Yet still the misconceptions are widespread. It is slowly being realised that professionals such as psychiatrists can use their prestige to evaluate as abnormal alternative behaviours which they and their class find unacceptable.

Psychologists, psychiatrists and neurosurgeons claim to be able to cure homosexuality, and every other form of social deviance, by the systematic application of violence (eg aversion therapy). The social sciences are being used to supplement the police and legal system.

Our psychological oppression is complemented by the conspiracy of silence which shrouds lesbian women. Lesbianism is hardly a respectable subject for polite conversation and hence is not found in "conventional" literature, history, politics, art, education, etc

The prevailing prejudices against lesbianism make personal honesty into a nightmare in which a lesbian woman risks everything and everyone she holds dear. It is not surprising that few lesbian women are prepared to take that risk and Come Out of the closet.

Society's virulent lesbian hatred necessitates strong, supportive relationships between lesbian women while raising tremendous barriers to a successful lesbian relationship. Society denies a lesbian couple the support and reinforcement it offers heterosexual couples. Lesbian women face relationships without the protection of specifically defined roles. Above all, the schizophrenic existence of most lesbian women - the forced secrecy and paranoia - can eat away at the foundations of love (5).

However, in spite of all this, Lesbians like being Lesbians!

Lesbians are Lesbians because we like women - NOT because we hate/can't cope with/can't find/need a good fuck from/men.

As yet we have not referred explicitly to the connection between the oppression of lesbians and that of women generally. As feminists, we recognise the oppression of all women. The oppression we experience as lesbians and as women is inextricably linked. A lesbian is not divided into two sections, a female section and a homosexual section. To put it another way, there is nothing essentially male about homosexuality and being a woman does not mean being a heterosexual. Women's liberation and homosexual liberation are part of the same process and if they are to be achieved will be achieved together.

An obvious example of the inextricable link between the oppression of heterosexual and homosexual women is that of the nuclear family.

"The lesbian provides a threefold threat to the family. Her sexuality shows that love and marriage are not necessary complements, and that sexuality can not be subsumed under a voluntary permanent contract, marriage. Further, by her unwillingness to become the property of a male, she undermines the exclusiveness (and naturally the heterosexuality) of the marriage contract. By her opportunity to choose her reproductive partner, she weakens the foundations of the family ideology and demonstrates the divisions within it. Because of the nature of her relationship to the family structure, she also threatens to expose the social coercion necessary for determining women's position in the labour force. In order for this society to continue functioning in the same way, the lesbian must be oppressed since admission of her existence as a natural phenomenon, as an alternative, would expose the contradictions between

the ideology of women's role and the reality of women's lives".

Sisterhood Feels Good

By presenting this paper we hope to stimulate thought and discussion in an area of very real and painful concern to thousands of women and men in Australia today. Whatever other ideological differences exist within the Left, this is one area in which there cannot be two points of view. We must reiterate our opinion that an intellectual ideological commitment is not enough. People react to homosexuals on a gut level in spite of sophisticated rationalisations to the contrary. Thus, it is on this level that the issue must be challenged.

LAURIE BEBBINGTON & JOCELYN CLARKE

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FOOTNOTES

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