



## Sex & Love



New thoughts on old contradictions

Edited by  
Sue Cartledge & Joanna Ryan

Why this new attention to the politics of sex? In part it is the result of the insistence of those feminists, gays and lesbians who never abandoned the seemingly thankless task of raising sexual issues within the left

**Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality** edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1983)

Once upon a time political writing on sex and sexuality was thinly scattered through a few feminist journals and the occasional book. Today that is changing, and now even publishing houses long considered bastions of the male left and its preoccupation with political economy, have started to produce collections of essays on sex. Recently three such books have been published - only one of them by a feminist press.

During the seventies, those who enjoyed the privilege of dominant sexual practices and sexual relationships, including the straight male left, considered writing on sexuality to be the domain only of those who suffered from these arrangements - feminists, gays and lesbians. Why this new attention to the politics of sex? In part it is the result of the insistence of those feminists, gays and lesbians who never abandoned the seemingly thankless task of raising sexual issues within the left. But I suspect that this new interest is more a response to the obvious political successes of the new right in mobilizing itself in opposition to the supposed demise of the family, the ostentatious rise in homosexuality, and lippy feminists demanding equal rights in the workplace and the right to reproductive self-determination. In short the new right has raised sex as a main plank in their seductive platform.

The left today is far from enjoying the mass appeal it once had. In its struggle to regain its credibility and strength it will also have to make sexual and gender issues a crucial part of its own politics. The publication of these three books signals a shift in this direction. Hopefully they will encourage less lip service and more real inquiry by socialists.

**Powers of Desire**, the Monthly Review contribution, is a huge and necessarily pricey collection of mainly already-published pieces. Some of the articles: Ann Snitow's classic on mass market romance, Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga's on sexual silences in feminism and Deirdre English's on "the fear that feminism will free men first" are important and provocative pieces. But because it is such an inclusive collection that tackles historical as well as contemporary issues, the book as a whole is too eclectic to pursue a single theme. If you haven't read much American feminist writing on sex, this is a good reader, but because the bulk of the articles have already appeared, the collection treads water rather than moves our analysis forward.

**The Left and the Erotic**, published by Lawrence and Wishart in London, England, is a curious collection of essays, some of which address the book's intent to examine the connections and barriers between sexual politics and the politics of the left. Most of the essays fall rather wide of that mark. The introduction by Eileen Phillips, and Elizabeth Wilson's piece on the new romanticism, almost make the book worth picking up, but much of the rest of the book is a mish-mash of how badly the left has dealt with sexual issues and how difficult that has made political life for feminists and gays.

**The Left and the Erotic** edited by Eileen Phillips (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983)

Elizabeth Wilson's encounter with the American lesbian movement at the contentious 1982 Barnard conference on sexuality sparked an which traces both conventional and outlaw sexuality to their roots in the romantic tradition. She makes a valuable point in her critique of both early feminist and contemporary views on sex. She argues that both views - one that sees sex as the "bestial appetite of the male" and elevates celibacy and love to a "higher state" and the more contemporary view of sex as "self expression, self fulfillment and release" - reflect more or less the same attitude to sex: "Both see sex as functional and appetitional; the difference lies only in what should be done about it." She doesn't delve into this point, more's the pity, as it signals a critique of the assumptions underlying much contemporary writing especially American, on sex.

Eileen Phillips' introduction is an attempt to find the points of connection between the libertarian politics of feminism and the liberatory politics of the revolutionary left. Unfortunately she slides around the issue and ends up with little more than the rather weak conclusion: "We have with the socialist tradition practices and understandings which can help us as well as hinder us. . . . We have also the need to transform our visions and our strategies so as to address a politics of freedom which does not relegate the personal and the sexual to a space where angels fear to tread and fools rush in."

On the way to this conclusion she does make some valuable points. Her first is that the current political debate on sexuality has hindered our analysis: "We remain caught in the noose of negative critiques of sexual relations, only able to speak the violence and degradation; we are silenced about the excitements or compulsions or delights of sensual experience." I would go farther and argue that the litany of sexual danger and abuse which we hear in the public debates (especially in the USA, the Canadian feminist movement is much further ahead on this point) on abortion, birth control, pornography, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and child abuse has exacerbated our fear. These are the only issues of sexuality around which there is a public debate, and to a great extent they reinforce the age-old message loud and clear that, as women, our sexuality is indeed a dangerous liability. It's clear that the intent of making these issues public is to create the space in which women can enjoy our sexuality without threat from man, church or state. But has this been the effect?

**Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions** edited by Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (London, The Women's Press, 1983)

Phillips' other important point lies in her identification of "desire" as the crucial concept for any analysis of sex and sexual relationships. She quotes Judith Williamson's criticism of the discovery of the G spot: "But how about desire? -without which the G spot is as useful as a hole in the head, and which equally can turn the nape of your neck or the back of your hand into a sexual explosion. But it is always as if men have desire. Women have 'pleasure' - usually given by a man." This leads Phillips to argue: "It appears that desire is the crucial factor, the pin which holds the edifice of male domination together." Phillips doesn't go further into the issue but her use of the concept of desire together with Wilson's critique of the view of sex as appetitional and functional points to a new way to analyze sex and sexuality.

The concept of desire echoes through Phillips' collection and the Monthly Review collection which even uses the word in its title and through the third book **Sex and Love** put out by the Women's Press in London, England.

**Sex and Love** has taken on the difficult task of trying to analyze the often illogical, subjective and vexing emotional context of our sexuality. For this reason alone it is the most interesting of these three books. It delivers exactly what its subtitle promises - new thoughts. It is implicitly a profound critique of the way much feminist writing has focused on the mechanics of sex. In order to be able to see our sexuality clearly, so it was assumed, it first had to be taken outside the context of our heterosexual relationships. It is this isolation that most characterizes the early writing on sexuality. The notion of an independent sexuality came from a desire to discover what our sexual urges and responses are in a private place away from the domination of men. We learned that the clitoris is the site for orgasmic stimulation and that we can stimulate ourselves or together with another woman just as, or even more, pleasurably than with a man. The research of Masters and Johnson and later, Shere Hite, was used to validate sexual autonomy and to give us new tactics in our quest for sexual pleasure. Lynne Segal in her contribution to **Sex and Love** gives us a pointed critique of these sexologists: "Sexual behaviour . . . narrows down to become the effective stimulation for orgasm - a straightforward physical event. And even this physical event is more or less the same for everybody on every occasion, never more or less significant."

The problem is that even while we've learned to teach our sexual partners what most turns us on, we have been treating our sexuality as a thing. Objectifying our sexuality is, of course, exactly what men/the media/the pornographic industry/capitalism does that we resist so virulently. Yet we have come close to objectifying our own sexuality by treating it as an appetite that can be satisfied by consuming any one of a plethora of actions from licking to whipping.