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Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution

ELLEN WILLIS

PREFACE

The feminist movement is currently engaged in a passionate, explosive debate — or rather, a series of overlapping, intertwined debates — about sexuality. The arguments have crystallized around specific issues: pornography; the causes of sexual violence and how best to oppose it; the definition of sexual consent; the relation of sexual fantasy to action and sexual behavior to political practice (is there such a thing as “politically correct” sex?); the nature of women’s sexuality and whether it is intrinsically different from men’s; the meaning of heterosexuality for women; the political significance of “fringe” sexualities like sadomasochism. Each of these issues has become a focus of deeply felt disagreement over the place of sexuality and sexual morality in a feminist analysis and program. In one way or another they raise the question of whether sexual freedom, as such, is a feminist value, or whether feminism ought rather to aim at replacing male-defined social controls over sexuality with female-defined controls.

While there has always been tension among feminists with differing sexual attitudes, it is only recently that the differences have come to the surface and defined political factions, creating a serious intramovement split. The reason for this development, I believe, is the rise of the new right. The women’s liberation movement emerged in a liberal political and social climate; like the rest of the left it devoted much of its energy to making a radical critique of liberalism. Since sexual liberalism appeared to be firmly entrenched as the dominant cultural ideology, feminists put a high priority on criticizing the hypocrisies and abuses of the male-dominated “sexual revolution.” But as liberalism fell apart, so did the apparent feminist consensus on sex. Confronted with a right-wing backlash bent on suppressing all non-marital, non-procreative sex, feminists who saw sexual liberalism as deeply flawed by sexism but nonetheless a source of crucial gains for women found themselves at odds with feminists who dismissed the sexual revolution as monolithically sexist and shared many of the attitudes of conservative moralists.

In this essay I argue that a sexual liberationist perspective is essential to a genuinely


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radical analysis of women’s condition. Much of my argument centers on the psychosexual dynamics of the family, where children first experience both sexism and sexual repression. This discussion refers primarily to the family as it exists — actually and ideologically — for the dominant cultures of modern industrial societies. Clearly, to extend my focus backward to feudal societies or outward to the Third World would require (at the very least) a far longer, more complex article. I strongly suspect, however, that in its fundamentals the process of sexual acculturation I describe here is common to all historical (i.e., patriarchal) societies.

I

The traditional patriarchal family maintains sexual law and order on two fronts. It regulates the relations between the sexes, enforcing male dominance, female subordination, and the segregation of ‘‘masculine’’ and ‘‘feminine’’ spheres. It also regulates sexuality per se, defining as illicit any sexual activity unrelated to reproduction or outside the bounds of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. Accordingly, the right’s militant defense of the traditional family and its values has a dual thrust: it is at once a male-supremacist backlash against feminism and a reaction by cultural conservatives of both sexes against the ‘‘sexual revolution’’ of the past twenty years.

There is, of course, an integral connection between sexism and sexual repression. The suppression of women’s sexual desire and pleasure, the denial of our right to control reproduction, and the enforcement of female abstinence outside marriage have been — together with our exclusion from equal participation in economic and political activity — primary underpinnings of male supremacy. Conversely, a restrictive sexual morality inevitably constrains women more than men, even in religious subcultures that profess a single standard. Not only is unwanted pregnancy a built-in punishment for female participation in sex (assuming the prohibition of birth control and abortion on the one hand, and lesbianism on the other) and therefore a powerful inhibitor; it is visible evidence of sexual ‘‘delinquency,’’ which subjects women who break the rules to social sanctions their male partners never have to face. Still, it is important to recognize that the right’s opposition to sexual permissiveness — as expressed in its attacks on abortion, homosexuality, ‘‘pornography’’ (defined as any sexually explicit material), sex education, and adolescents’ access to contraception and abortion without parental consent — has consequences for both sexes. Gays and teenagers are obvious targets. But the success of the ‘‘pro-family’’ agenda would also impinge on the lives of adult heterosexual men, who would have to contend with the unwanted pregnancies of their wives and lovers, women’s increased sexual fears and inhibitions, restrictions on frank discussion and public legitimation of sex and sexual fantasy, and a general chilling of the sexual atmosphere. While some men are willing to accept such constraints on their own freedom in order to reassert certain traditional controls over women, many are not.

The dual focus of pro-family politics, on feminism and on sex itself, has serious implications for feminist theory and strategy. It means that feminists cannot define their opposition to the pro-family movement solely in terms of defending female autonomy against male power, nor can they ignore the fact that conflict over sexual morality cuts across gender lines. If the women’s movement is to organize effectively against the right, it will have to develop a political theory of sexuality and in particular an analysis of the relation
between feminism and sexual freedom. Such an analysis would help feminists to identify and avoid responses to sexual issues that unwittingly undercut feminist aims. It would clarify many disagreements among women who regard themselves as feminists. It would also enable feminists to seek alliances with male opponents of the right’s sexual politics — alliances that are undoubtedly necessary if the battle is to be won — on the basis of a clear understanding of mutual interests, differences that need to be resolved to achieve a working coalition, and issues on which it is possible to agree to disagree. The intensity of current debate on sex among feminists and gay activists reflects a visceral comprehension — if not always an articulate understanding — of how much is at stake.

At present, the right has its feminist opponents at an enormous disadvantage. The pro-family movement has a coherent ideology and program whose anti-feminist and anti-sexual aspects reinforce each other. In contrast, feminists are ambivalent, confused, and divided in their views on sexual freedom. While there have been feminist sexual libertarians in both the 19th century and contemporary movements, for the most part women’s liberation and sexual liberation have developed as separate, often antagonistic causes. The sexual libertarian movement that began in the 1950s was conspicuously male-dominated and male-supremacist. Though it advocated a single standard of freedom from sexual guilt and conventional moral restrictions, it displayed no insight into the social reasons for women’s greater inhibition and conformity to moral norms. On the contrary, women were blamed — often in virulently misogynist terms — for adhering to the sexual prohibitions men and a patriarchal society had forced on them. At the same time male libertarians intensified women’s sexual anxieties by equating repression with the desire for love and commitment, and exalting sex without emotion or attachment as the ideal. From this perspective liberation for men meant rebelling against the demands of women, while liberation for women meant the opportunity (read obligation) to shuck their “hangups” about casual sex.

The question that remained unasked was whether men had sexual hangups of their own. Was the rejection of any link between sexual desire and emotional involvement really an expression of freedom — or merely another form of repression? To what extent did men’s demand for “pure” sex represent a predatory disregard of women as people — an attitude that could only reinforce the conventionally feminine sexual reluctance, passivity, and unresponsiveness that men found so frustrating? There was also the touchy issue of whether sex as conventionally initiated and orchestrated by men was pleasurable for women. In theory there was much concern with female orgasm and the need for men to satisfy women; in practice that concern often translated into a demand that women corroborate men’s ideas about female sexuality and protect men’s egos by acting satisfied whether they were or not. A conservative popular Freudianism neatly coopted the idea that women had a right to sexual fulfillment by preaching that such fulfillment could be achieved only through “mature” acceptance of the feminine role; in effect women were told that to actively assert their sexual needs would make satisfaction of those needs impossible; if they were submissive and yet unsatisfied it meant they weren’t submissive enough. For women trapped in this logic, the theoretical right to orgasm became a new source of pain, inadequacy, and self-blame. Finally, the sexual revolution did not seriously challenge the taboo on lesbianism (or homosexuality in general).

At its inception, the contemporary women’s liberation movement was dominated by young women who had grown up during or since the emergence of sexual libertarian ideology; many radical feminists came out of the left and the counterculture, where that
ideology was particularly strong. Unsurprisingly, one of the first issues to surface in the movement was women’s pent-up rage at men’s one-sided, exploitative view of sexual freedom. From our consciousness-raising sessions we concluded that women couldn’t win no matter how they behaved. We were still oppressed by a sexual double standard that while less rigid was by no means obsolete: women who took too literally their supposed right to sexual freedom and pleasure were regularly put down as “easy,” “aggressive,” or “promiscuous.” Heterosexual women still lived in fear of unwanted pregnancy; in 1968 abortion was illegal — except in the most dire circumstances — in every state. Yet at the same time men were demanding that women have sex on their terms, unmindful of the possible consequences, and without reference to our own feelings and needs. In addition to suffering sexual frustration from the inhibitions instilled by repressive parents, fear of pregnancy, and men’s sexual judgments and exploitative behavior, we had to swallow the same men’s humiliating complaints about how neurotic, frigid, and unliberated we were. Unfortunately, the movement’s efforts to make political sense of this double bind led to confusions in feminist thinking about sexuality that are still unresolved.

At least in theory, organized feminism from the 60s to the present has been united in endorsing sexual freedom for women, including the right to express our sexual needs freely, to engage in sexual activity for our own pleasure, to have sex and bear children outside marriage, to control our fertility, to refuse sex with any particular man or all men, to be lesbians. Almost as universally, feminists have regarded male sexuality with suspicion if not outright hostility. From the beginning radical feminists argued that freedom as men defined it was against women’s interests; if anything men already had too much freedom, at women’s expense. One faction in the movement strongly defended women’s traditional demands for marriage and monogamy against the anti-nuclear family, sexual liberationist rhetoric of the counterculture. Proponents of this view held that the sexual revolution simply legitimized the age-old tendency of men in a male-supremacist society to coerce, cajole, or fool women into giving them sex without getting anything — love, respect, responsibility for the children, or even erotic pleasure — in return.1 At the other extreme were feminists who argued that under present conditions, any kind of sexual contact with men, in marriage or out, was oppressive, and that the issue for women was how to resist the relentless social pressure to be with a man.2 Later, lesbian separatists elaborated this argument, claiming that only women were capable of understanding and satisfying women’s sexual needs.

Although the idea that in order to achieve equality women’s sexual freedom must be expanded and men’s restricted has a surface common-sense logic, in practice it is full of contradictions. For one thing, the same social changes that allow greater freedom for women inevitably mean greater freedom for men. Historically, a woman’s main protection from

1 Some radical feminists argued that there was nothing wrong with marriage, per se, only with sex roles within marriage. (In a sense this position was an early version of Betty Friedan’s “pro-family” feminism, minus the sentimental glossing over of male power.) Others maintained that while sexual freedom in the context of women’s liberation was an ultimate goal, for now it was in our interest to resist the sexual revolution. See, for example, Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (Morrow, 1970), pp. 160–163. Another version of this argument was advanced by Kathie Sarachild, an influential theorist in the early movement, in “Hot and Cold Flashes,” The Newsletter, Vol. 1 #3, May 1, 1969: “We women can use marriage as the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the family revolution. When male supremacy is completely eliminated, marriage, like the state, will wither away.”

2 Of the early radical feminist groups taking a female separatist position, the most influential were The Feminists in New York City and Cell 16 in Boston.
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sexual exploitation has been to be a “good girl” and demand marriage as the price of sex — in other words, relinquish the freedom to spontaneously express her sexuality in order to preserve its bargaining power. Furthermore, this traditional strategy will not work for individual women if most women “scab” by abandoning it, which implies the need for some form of social or moral pressure to keep women in line. (If one assumes that women will voluntarily decline to take advantage of their increased freedom, then demanding it makes no sense in the first place.) In practice, relaxing social condemnation of female “unchastity” and permitting women access to birth control and abortion allays social concern about men’s “ruining” or impregnating respectable women, and so invariably reduces the pressure on men — both from women and from other men — to restrain their demands for casual sex. Thus the feminist critique of male sexuality tends to bolster the familiar conservative argument that a morality restricting sex to marriage is in women’s interest — indeed, that its purpose is to protect women from selfish male lust.

Another difficulty is that judgments of men’s heterosexual behavior necessarily imply judgments about what women want. Dissenters within feminist groups immediately challenged the prevailing judgments, arguing with monogamists that they wanted to sleep with more than one man, or that they didn’t want the state messing into their sex lives, and arguing with separatists that they enjoyed sex with men. As a result, assumptions about what women want were soon amended to authoritative pronouncements on what women really want/ought to want/would want if they were not intimidated/bought off/brainwashed by men. The ironic consequence has been the development of feminist sexual orthodoxies that curtail women’s freedom by setting up the movement as yet another source of guilt-provoking rules about what women should do and feel.

That irony is compounded by another: the orthodoxies in question dovetail all too well with traditional patriarchal ideology. This is most obviously true of polemics in favor of heterosexual monogamy, but it is no less true of lesbian separatism, which in recent years has had far more impact on feminist thinking. There have been two overlapping but distinct tendencies in lesbian feminist politics: the first has emphasized lesbianism as a forbidden erotic choice and lesbians as an oppressed sexual minority; the other — aligning itself with the separatist faction that surfaced in the radical feminist movement before lesbianism as such became an issue — has defined lesbianism primarily as a political commitment to separate from men and bond with women. The latter tendency has generated a sexual ideology best described as neo-Victorian. It regards heterosexual relations as more or less synonymous with rape, on the grounds that male sexuality is by definition predatory and sadistic: men are exclusively “genitally-oriented” (a phrase that is always used pejoratively) and uninterested in loving relationships. Female sexuality, in contrast, is defined as tender, nonviolent, and not necessarily focused on the genitals; intimacy and physical warmth are more important to us than orgasm. The early pre-lesbian separatists argued that celibacy was a reasonable alternative to sleeping with men, and some suggested that the whole idea of a compelling sexual drive was a male invention designed to keep women in their place; women

didn’t need sex, and men’s lust was less for pleasure than for power. In short, to the neo-Victorians men are beasts who are only after one thing, while women are nice girls who would just as soon skip it. The inescapable implication is that women who profess to enjoy sex with men, especially penile-vaginal intercourse itself, are liars or masochists; in either case they have chosen (or been forced) to be victims and to uphold an oppressive system. Nor are lesbians automatically exempt from criticism; gay women whose sexual proclivities do not conform to the approved feminine stereotype are assumed to be corrupted by heterosexism.

Though neo-Victorianism has been most militantly promoted by lesbian separatists, in modified form — i.e., allowing that men (some men at least) can change their ways and be good lovers — it has also had wide appeal for heterosexual feminists. (Conversely, lesbians have been among its loudest critics; this is not a gay-straight split.) Its most popular current expression is the anti-pornography movement, which has seized on pornography as an all-purpose symbol of sex that is genitally-oriented, hence male, hence sadistic and violent, while invoking the concept of “erota” as code for sex that is gentle, romantic, relationship-oriented — in a word, feminine. Clearly, this conventional view of female as opposed to male sexuality is consistent with many women’s subjective experience. Indeed, there are probably few women who don’t identify with it to some degree. But to take that experience at face value is to ignore its context: a patriarchal society that has systematically inhibited female sexuality and defined direct, active physical desire as a male prerogative. Feminist neo-Victorians have made the same mistake — only with the sexes reversed — as male libertarians who criticize female sexual behavior while adopting stereotypical male sexuality as the standard for judging sexual health and happiness. In the process they have actively reinforced the larger society’s taboos on women’s genital sexuality. From a conservative perspective, a woman who has aggressive genital desires and acts on them is “bad” and “unwomanly”; from the neo-Victorian perspective she is “brainwashed” and “male-identified.”

Overtly or implicitly, many feminists have argued that sexual coercion is a more important problem for women than sexual repression. In the last few years, the women’s movement has increasingly emphasized violence against women as a primary — if not the primary — concern. While sexual violence, coercion, and harassment have always been feminist issues, earlier feminist analyses tended to regard physical force as one of several ways that men insure women’s compliance to a sexist system, and in particular to their subordinate wife-and-mother role. The main function of sexual coercion, in this view, is to curb women’s freedom, including their sexual freedom. Rape and the tacit social tolerance of it convey the message that simply by being sexual, women are “provocative” and deserve punishment, especially if they step out of their place (the home) or transgress society’s definition of the “good” (inhibited) woman. Similarly, sexual harassment on the street or on the job, and exploitative sexual demands by male “sexual revolutionaries,” punish women for asserting themselves, sexually and otherwise, in the world.

The current feminist preoccupation with male violence has a very different focus. Rape and pornography, redefined as a form of rape, are regarded not as aspects of a larger sexist system but as the foundation and essence of sexism, while sexual victimization is seen as the

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4 The best known exponents of these views were Ti-Grace Atkinson, of the Feminists, and Dana Densmore, of Cell 16.
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central fact of women's oppression. Just as male violence against women is equated with male supremacy, freedom from violence is equated with women's liberation. 5 From this standpoint the positive aspect of freedom — freedom for women to act — is at best a secondary concern, and freedom for women to assert an active genital sexuality is, by the logic of neo-Victorianism, a contradiction in terms.

Whatever its intent, the objective effect of feminists' emphasis on controlling male sexuality — particularly when that emphasis is combined with a neo-Victorian view of women's nature and the conviction that securing women's safety from male aggression should be the chief priority of the women's movement — is to undercut feminist opposition to the pro-family backlash. It provides powerful reinforcement for the right's efforts to manipulate women's fear of untrammeled male sexuality, thus intimidating women into stifling their own impulses toward freedom in order to cling to what little protection the traditional roles still offer. The convergence of neo-Victorian and pro-family ideology is most striking in the recent attempts by so-called "feminists for life" to argue that abortion is "violence against women" and a way for men to escape responsibility for their sexual behavior. While this argument did not come from within the feminist movement but from anti-abortion pacifists seeking to justify their position to feminists, it is perfectly consistent with neo-Victorian logic. No tendency in organized feminism has yet advocated outlawing abortion, but one does occasionally hear the argument that feminists should spend less energy defending abortion and more on educating women to understand that the real solution to unwanted pregnancy is to stop sleeping with men. 6

Neo-Victorians have also undermined feminist opposition to the right by equating feminism with their own sexual attitudes, in effect reading out of the movement any woman who disagrees with them. Since their notion of proper feminist sexuality echoes conventional moral judgments and the anti-sexual propaganda presently coming from the right, their guilt-mongering has been quite effective. Many feminists who are aware that their sexual feelings contradict the neo-Victorian ideal have lapsed into confused and apologetic silence. No doubt there are also thousands of women who have quietly concluded that if this ideal is feminism, then feminism has nothing to do with them. The result is widespread apathy, dishonesty, and profound disunity in a movement faced with a determined enemy that is threatening its very existence.

5 The following is a good example of this kind of thinking: "... if we are going to destroy the effects of pornography in our lives ... We must each be able to visualize on a grand scale what it is that we want for ourselves and for our society ... Would you try now to think of what it would be like to live in a society in which we are not, every minute, bombarded with sexual violence? Would you try to visualize what it would be like to go to the movies and not see it, to be able to walk home and not be afraid of it ... If we set that as our goal and demand nothing less, we will not stop fighting until we've achieved it." — Kathleen Barry, "Beyond Pornography: From Defensive Politics to Creating a Vision," in Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography, ed. Laura Lederer (Morrow, 1980), p. 312.

6 The June, 1981, issue of the feminist newspaper off our backs published two letters to the editor on this theme. One of the writers, while affirming her unequivocal stand in favor of legal abortion, protests, "'Why are we fighting so hard to make it 'safe' to fuck with men?' ... Why don't we focus on eliminating the need for abortion and birth control?" The other letter states, "'Compulsory pregnancy results from compulsory penetration ... So I'm getting impatient to know when we will really take control over our bodies and not let ourselves be penetrated?" and goes on to assert "'the inescapable fact that since I did not allow men to have control over my body, I could not then turn around and claim control over my baby's body.'"
II

The foregoing suggests that feminists are at a theoretical impasse. If a feminist politics that advocates restrictions on male sexuality leads inexorably to the sexual repression of women and the strengthening of anti-feminist forces, such a politics is obviously untenable. But how can women support sexual freedom for both sexes without legitimizing the most oppressive aspects of male sexual behavior? I believe our hope for resolving this dilemma lies in reexamining certain widely shared assumptions about sex, male versus female sexuality, and the meaning of sexual liberation.

The philosophy of the “sexual revolution” as we know it is an extension of liberalism: it defines sexual freedom as the simple absence of external restrictions — laws and overt social taboos — on sexual information and activity. Since most people accept this definition, there is widespread agreement that we are already a sexually emancipated society. The easy availability of casual sex, the virtual lack of restrictions (at least for adults) on sexual information and sexually explicit material, the accessibility (for adults again) of contraception, the legalization of abortion, the proliferation of massage parlors and sex clubs, the ubiquity of sexual images and references in the mass media, the relaxation of taboos against “deviant” sexual practices — all are regularly cited as evidence that this culture has largely overcome its anti-sexual history. At the same time, sexual liberalism has clearly not brought nirvana. Noting that “liberated” sexuality is often depressingly shallow, exploitative, and joyless, many men as well as women have concluded that sexual liberation has been tried and found wanting, that it is irrelevant or even inimical to a serious program for social change.

This is a superficial view. In the first place, this society is far from endorsing, even in principle, people’s right to consensual sexual relations, of whatever sort they prefer, as a basic liberty. (Skeptics are invited to imagine public reaction to a proposed constitutional amendment guaranteeing freedom of sexual association.) There is strong and stubborn resistance to legalizing — let alone accepting as socially and morally legitimate — all sexual acts between consenting adults; children have no recognized sexual rights at all, and adolescents virtually none.7 But the basic problem with this dismissal of sexual freedom as a valid political issue is that it focuses on the quantity and variety of sexual activity, rather than the quality of sexual experience. Political opposition to restrictive sexual mores is ultimately based on the premise that a gratifying sexual life is a human need whose denial causes unnecessary and unjustified suffering. Certainly, establishing people’s right to pursue sexual happiness with a consenting partner is a precondition for ending that suffering. Yet as most of us have had occasion to discover, it is entirely possible to “freely” participate in a sexual act and feel frustrated, indifferent, or even repelled. From a radical standpoint, then, sexual liberation involves not only the abolition of restrictions but the positive presence of social and psychological conditions that foster satisfying sexual relations. And from that standpoint, this culture is still deeply repressive. Most obviously, sexual inequality and the resulting antagonism between men and women constitute a devastating barrier to sexual happiness. I will argue in addition that sexual liberalism notwithstanding, most children’s

7 In the ongoing debate over “the epidemic of teenage pregnancy” and whether it is best dealt with by providing teenagers with contraceptives or giving them lectures on chastity, birth control advocates have argued that access to contraception does not increase teenage sexual activity. So far as I know, no “responsible” organization has dared to suggest that adolescents have sexual needs and should have the right to satisfy them.
upbringing produces adults with profoundly negative attitudes toward sex. Under these conditions, the relaxation of sexual restrictions leads people to try desperately to overcome the obstacles to satisfaction through compulsive sexual activity and preoccupation with sex. The emphasis on sex that currently permeates our public life — especially the enormous demand for sexual advice and therapy — attests not to our sexual freedom but to our continuing sexual frustration.

It is in this context that we need to examine the male sexual pattern feminists have protested — the emphasis on conquest and dominance, the tendency to abstract sex from love and social responsibility. Sexual liberalism has allowed many men to assert these patterns in ways that were once socially taboo, and to impose them on reluctant women. But to conclude from this fact that male sexual freedom is inherently oppressive is to make the uncritical assumption that men find predatory, solipsistic sexual relations satisfying and inherently preferable to sex with affection and mutuality. As I have noted, some feminists argue that male sexuality is naturally sadistic. Others grant that men’s predatory tendencies are a function of sexism, but assume that they are a simple, direct expression of men’s (excessive) freedom and power, the implication being that anyone who has the opportunity to dominate and use other people sexually will of course want to take advantage of it.

This assumption is open to serious question. If one pays attention to what men consciously or unwittingly reveal about their sexual attitudes — in their fiction and confessional writing (see Portnoy’s Complaint and its epigoni), in their political polemics (see George Gilder’s Sexual Suicide), in sociological and psychological studies (see The Hite Report on Male Sexuality or Lillian Rubin’s Worlds of Pain), in everyday interaction with women — the picture that emerges is far more complicated and ambiguous. Most men, in fact, profess to want and need mutual sexual love, and often behave accordingly, though they have plenty of opportunity to do otherwise. Many men experience both tender and predatory sexual feelings, toward the same or different women, and find the contradiction bewildering and disturbing; others express enormous pain over their inability to combine sex with love. Often men’s impulses to coerce and degrade women seem to express not a confident assumption of dominance but a desire to retaliate for feelings of rejection, humiliation, and impotence: as many men see it, they need women sexually more than women need them, an intolerable imbalance of power.8 Furthermore, much male sexual behavior clearly reflects men’s irrational fears that loss of dominance means loss of maleness itself, that their choice is to “act like a man” or be castrated, to embrace the role of oppressor or be degraded to the status of victim.

None of this is to deny men’s objective social power over women, their reluctance to give up that power, or their tendency to blame women for their unhappiness rather than recognize that their own oppressive behavior is largely responsible for women’s sexual diffidence. My point is only that the behavior that causes women so much grief evidently brings men very little joy; on the contrary, men appear to be consumed with sexual frustration, rage, and anxiety. With their compulsive assertions of power they continually sabotage their efforts to love and be loved. Such self-defeating behavior cannot, in any meaningful sense, be described as free. Rather it suggests that for all the unquestionable advantages men derive

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8 Shere Hite’s The Hite Report on Male Sexuality (Knopf, 1981) includes many revealing comments from men on this particular theme; see her chapters on “Men’s View of Women and Sex” and “Rape, Paying Women for Sex, and Pornography.”
from “acting like a man” in a male-supremacist society, the price is repression and deformation of spontaneous sexual feeling.

The idea that untrammeled male sexuality must inevitably be oppressive is rooted in one of our most universal cultural assumptions: that the sexual drive itself (that is, “pure” passion unanchored to the “higher” purposes of marriage and procreation) is inherently anti-social, separate from love, and connected with aggressive, destructive impulses. (In providing a modern, secular rationale for this idea, Freud reinforced — even as he demystified — traditional Judeo-Christian morality.) Sexual liberals have promoted the competing assumption that sex is simply a healthy, enjoyable biological function with no intrinsic moral connotations. But this bland view not only violates most people’s sense that their sexuality is not an isolated “function,” that it is bound up with their emotions, their values, their very being; it also evades the question of sexual destructiveness. In practice, sexual liberals often refuse to acknowledge the hostile, alienated, and exploitative impulses that attend contemporary sexual “freedom.” As a result, people who experience their own sexuality as corrupted by those impulses, or who feel victimized by the sexual behavior of others, tend to fall back on some version of the old conservative idea.

There is, however, another possibility, advanced by a minority of utopians, romantics, and cultural radicals: that sexual desire, tenderness, and empathy are aspects of a unified erotic impulse; that the split between sex and love and the attendant perversion of sexual desire into exploitative, solipsistic lust are an artificial social product. This thesis has been most systematically and convincingly elaborated in Wilhelm Reich’s radical critique of Freud.⁹ In essence, Reich argued that parental condemnation of infantile genital desires and sensations — quite harmless in themselves — forces the child to split (bad) sex from (good) affection. The child reacts to this thwarting of its sexual expression with frustration, rage, and a desire for revenge. These feelings modify the sexual impulse itself; thus the child’s sexuality becomes sadistic. If the sadistic feelings are also forbidden they turn inward, producing guilt and masochism. People’s guilt at their own overt or repressed sadism, along with their observation of other people’s anti-social behavior, prompts the conviction that sex is inherently destructive. Yet that conviction rests on a piece of circular reasoning: repression creates the destructiveness that is then cited as proof of the eternal need for repression. Thus sexual repression becomes the self-perpetuating basis of a sadomasochistic psychology¹⁰ which is in turn crucial to the maintenance of an authoritarian, hierarchical social order.

⁹ Reich’s basic argument is laid out in The Function of the Orgasm, The Sexual Revolution, and The Mass Psychology of Fascism.

¹⁰ Sadomasochism as a consensual sexual practice has recently been a subject of controversy in the women’s movement, and among anti-pornography activists “sadomasochism” has become something of a code word for any form of sexuality condemned by neo-Victorian standards. To avoid confusion, I want to make clear what I mean by “sadomasochistic psychology”: an emotional attitude consisting of the impulse to dominate, hurt, or revenge oneself on others, along with a reactive guilt manifested in the impulse to submit to others and seek their protection, while embracing pain and suffering as evidence of one’s moral purity. In my view — and Reich’s — this attitude is the inner emotional analogue of social hierarchy. In a sense, psychic sadism and masochism are perversions of the impulses to assertive, autonomous activity and emotional giving, respectively — impulses that are inevitably corrupted by social inequality and coercion.

From this perspective, sadomasochism is a universal cultural attitude, expressed in a myriad of sexual and non-sexual, overt and unconscious, acted and fantasied, public and private, harmful and harmless ways. The neo-Victorian attitude, compounded of sentimentalized feminine eroticism and punitive moralism, is itself rooted in sadomasochism.
Reich contended that people with an anti-sexual upbringing tend to uphold established authority — even when the practical conditions for rebellion exist — because that authority fulfills several functions: it reinforces people’s inner controls over their sadistic impulses and protects them from the uncontrolled sadism of others; it invites people to express sadistic feelings vicariously by identifying with authority; and it permits people to vent those feelings directly on whoever is below them in the social hierarchy. In this way the anger that should inspire social rebellion is transformed into a conservative force, compelling people to submit masochistically to their oppressors while bullying their “inferiors.” Yet even for ruling classes, Reich maintained, power is at best a substitute for genuine fulfillment.

In my view, Reich’s concept of a basic erotic unity shattered by genital repression is fundamental to a feminist analysis and the only hypothesis wholly consistent with a feminist sexual politics. I have tried to show how efforts to control male sexuality undermine women’s struggle for freedom and equality, and vice versa. To take the argument a step further, if the sexual impulse is intrinsically selfish and aggressive, there are two possible explanations for why men’s sexuality, far more than women’s, has displayed these characteristics. One is that sexual desire, per se, is inherently male; the pitfalls of this idea have been discussed at length. The other is that women have simply not been allowed to be as selfish and exploitative as men; to adopt this notion puts feminists in the position of agreeing with conservatives that liberating women from the feminine role would destroy the social cement that keeps civilization going. If, on the other hand, sexual destructiveness can be seen as a perversion that both reflects and perpetuates a repressive system, it is possible to envision a coherent feminist politics in which a commitment to sexual freedom plays an integral part.

If we accept the premise that parents, by rejecting their children’s genitality, atomize the erotic impulse and direct infantile sexuality into a sadistic mode, the source of the difference between “masculine” and “feminine” sexual patterns seems clear. While boys are permitted, indeed encouraged, to incorporate their sadistic impulses into their sexual identities and to express them in socially approved ways, girls’ aggression is no more tolerated than their genitality. Like men, women experience a split between lust and love, but the lustful component of their sexuality is subjected to severe inhibition. Women who do not suppress their lustful feelings altogether — or sublimate them into disembodied romanticism or mother love — usually feel free to express them only in the relatively safe and socially validated context of marriage or a quasi-marital commitment. Thus what looks like women’s superior ability to integrate sex and love is only a more hidden form of alienation.

III

I want to argue, then, that male and female children develop masculine and feminine sexual psychologies thorough a systematic (though largely unconscious) process of parental intimidation, in which sexual repression and sexism function symbiotically. My argument assumes that the most congenial context for this process is the “ideal” patriarchal nuclear family, in which the parents provide a traditional model of sexual roles and attitudes toward sexuality, and dispense strict but loving parental discipline. Just as the new right charges, feminism, women in the workforce, sexual liberalism, divorce, single parenthood, and the weakening of parental authority destabilize and threaten to undermine the process of “normal” sexual character formation. Class, racial, and ethnic differences in family arrange-
ments and sexual mores also affect this process, producing distinctive variations in sexual roles and attitudes. But despite cultural changes and subcultural variations, the basic ingredients of the repressive symbiosis remain. The first is male supremacy and its psychic concomitants, masculine and feminine identity. The second is an underlying negative attitude toward genality, often hidden behind a surface acceptance. The final requirement is a culture that, for all the institutional weaknesses of the contemporary family, is still firmly committed to the ideology and practice of familialism. Which is to say that the great majority of babies and young children depend primarily on one or both parents for love and material sustenance, and are subject to virtually unlimited parental control.

To understand how sexism and sexual repression converge in the child’s mind, it is necessary, in my view, to rethink two Freudian concepts that most feminists have either rejected or interpreted in purely symbolic terms — castration anxiety and penis envy. My contention here is that children subjected to the three social conditions I’ve enumerated develop a quite literal belief in the reality or threat of an attack on their genitals as pleasure-giving organs, as well as an artificial valuation of the penis as an indicator of social power and worth. From infancy children absorb two sets of messages about their sexual organs. As soon as they discover genital desire and pleasure, they learn that such feelings are forbidden. Masturbation and interest in their own, their parents’ or other children’s genitals provokes parental anxiety, displeasure, perhaps outright prohibition. Their frustrated desire then excited and merges with aggressive, vengeful feelings and fantasies that are even more taboo; thus their infantile experience of genitality is thoroughly permeated with a sense of danger. Meanwhile, they have been learning — by observing the behavior of their parents, their siblings, and the world at large — about the social differences between the sexes. At some point, they come to understand that there are two classes of people, one superior and dominant, one inferior and subordinate, and that they belong in one category or the other. Perhaps simultaneously, perhaps not, they discover that the two classes are distinguished by the presence or absence of the penis. It seems entirely reasonable that children’s efforts to piece together all this disturbing information about sex and gender should lead them to the terrible conclusion that girls have been physically mutilated and socially devalued for bad sexual desires, and that boys risk being punished for their badness in similar fashion.

11 By familialism I mean a social system in which parents are legally obliged to support and care for their biological or adopted children, and legally authorized (as well as socially enjoined) to discipline them. In addition, parents have what amounts to property rights in their children, which can be abrogated only if they violate their parental obligations in some egregious way, or by their own consent to adoption. (Obviously, specific parental rights and obligations differ for fathers and mothers, but these can vary without directly challenging the basic premises of familialism.) To a lesser extent, other relatives are presumed to have rights in and responsibilities to children. But in a familialist system, the community as a whole assumes almost no responsibility for children’s welfare. Thus children who have no parents, poverty-stricken parents, unloving, abusive, or incompetent parents are defined as misfits and social burdens; though the state may grudgingly dole out money to keep them alive, they have little chance of finding an alternative source of love or security. Most people accept familialism as natural and unchangeable. In particular, it is widely assumed to be a fact of human nature that people will make a reliable commitment only to their own biological children, or at any rate to children, biological or adopted, who ‘belong’ to them exclusively.

This perceived catastrophe drastically alters the child’s relation to the world. The child already knows that its parents have the fearful power to deprive it of love, protection, even life, but that knowledge is typically leavened by confidence in the parents’ love. The apparent evidence of female castration convinces the child, far more effectively than normal parental discipline could do, that even the most loving parents are willing to use their power in a truly terrifying way. This in turn suggests to the child that its badness must be utter depravity; the other logical possibility — that the parents are not really loving at all, but capriciously, monstrously cruel — is too frightening to contemplate. The child may at first deny the evidence, or its full import, or its irrevocability, but eventually the bad news sinks in and becomes a traumatic blow to the child’s lingering hopes of beating the system. In accepting the awful truth, the child undergoes a kind of conversion to the parents’ sexual values. After that, though he or she may still rebel, it will be with a sense of moral illegitimacy.

Since the child’s sexual desires do not go away, but continue to evoke anxiety and guilt, its only choice is to repress the whole complex of feelings, especially the traumatic discovery with which they are connected; this ensures that the infantile interpretation of sexual difference will remain impervious to rational correction. But the impact of the trauma, and the degree of sexual repression it engenders, are not the same for both sexes. For one thing, their earlier experience has been different: from the beginning, girls’ sexual and aggressive impulses are restricted more severely. In addition, there is an enormous emotional difference between fear of mutilation and the conviction that one has already been mutilated. The boy’s fear of castration is softened by the knowledge that so far he has been bad and gotten away with it; the girl imagines that her defiance has provoked terrible retribution. The boy fears a punishment that, bad as it is, is specific and limited; the girl’s speculation on what might happen to her if she persists in incurring parental wrath is limited only by her imagination and capacity for terror. The boy feels impotent, humiliated by his parents’ ability to frighten him into submission; the girl suffers, in addition, the far more devastating humiliation of consignment to an inferior class. Furthermore, her terror and humiliation are compounded by other intensely powerful emotions: violation, grief, despair.

The children’s subsequent experience will reinforce these sexual differences. The boy will see that within prescribed limits, he can safely express his “bad” impulses toward women outside the family, with greater or lesser freedom depending on the women’s social status. Given this outlet, his fear will actually stimulate his sexual aggression: by “acting like a man” he can continually assure himself that he is not a woman, while maintaining vigilant control over these castrated beings who must surely hate him and covet his precious organ. The girl, in contrast, will observe that male power often expresses itself in sexual hostility and aggression; she will see that men punish rebellious women with contempt, rejection, and violence. When she grasps the concept of rape she will understand it as a reenactment of her original violation. All this will add to her terror and give it concrete form. In the interest of survival she must at all costs suppress her bitterness, hatred, envy, vengefulness, and predatory lust and accept her subordination. She must desperately direct her energies toward being good.

The castration trauma can be seen as the pivotal event of an ongoing process of acculturation in which parents prepare their children to “freely” embrace a masculine or feminine identity — that is, to see conventional sexual behavior and attitudes as the only tenable alternative and to repress feelings that do not fit the mold. In large part, parents
accomplish this simply by acting out their own masculine and feminine patterns in relation to the child. That parents unconsciously assume toward their children their entire complex of patriarchally constructed attitudes toward each sex would explain the common observation that in relating to a child of the opposite sex, heterosexual parents undercut their sexual prohibitions with covert seductiveness, while in relating to a child of the same sex, they augment the prohibitions with covert hostility based on competitiveness and, no doubt, defenses against forbidden homosexual feelings. Since the parents have internalized the cultural atomization of the erotic, their seductiveness — split off from acceptably sexless parental love — will have a predatory aspect, accentuated by the power differential between adult and child.

This configuration suggests a particular view of another Freudian construction, the Oedipus complex. Though children undoubtedly feel a spontaneous erotic attraction to their parents (especially, given the present system of childrearing, their mothers), there is no reason to believe that intense, exclusive heterosexual desire for one parent and jealous hatred of the other necessarily follow, even for boys, while Freud himself acknowledged that the Oedipus complex in girls required further explanation. On the contrary, it seems likely that parents instigate the Oedipal triangle, encouraging the opposite-sex child’s fantasies with their seductiveness (while at the same time their disapproval inhibits the child’s sexual explorations in general), and provoking or exacerbating same-sex rivalry with their own hostile, competitive behavior.

If the castration trauma terrorizes children into foreclosing certain psychic possibilities (accepting sexual desire as good and natural, seeing male-female difference as a morally neutral fact), the function of the Oedipal situation, as I will try to show, is to channel their response to the trauma in socially approved directions, beginning, most obviously, with heterosexuality. Under “normal” circumstances the child, in coping with the desire, fear, rage, guilt, and disappointment the triangle generates, will eventually come to identify with the prescribed sexual roles because they represent the path of least resistance, offering the least risk of punishment, the most relief from guilt, and the most compensatory satisfactions. If something goes wrong (if, for instance, a child remains unconvinced that conformity offers any rewards worth having; if disappointment with the opposite sex parent is too overwhelming, or conversely the attraction is too strong; if fear of the same-sex parent is excessive or insufficient; if the parents are truly cruel or neglectful; if actual incest occurs) he or she may balk at the final giving over to conventional masculine/feminine identity. In adult life the recalcitrant child may prefer homosexuality or some other form of “deviance”; develop a sexual personality defined by overt emotional conflict and “maladjustment”; or withdraw from the sexual arena altogether. In practice, of course, these choices overlap and form a continuum, from a decisive commitment to masculinity or femininity, with more or less successful repression of conflicting desires, to total refusal, generally disastrous to the individual concerned, to be constituted into the sexual culture.

My intention here is to outline the paradigmatic “successful” working out of the Oedipus complex for both sexes. The discussion that follows assumes two heterosexual parents in the home, with the mother as primary caretaker — still the situation of most young children. Logically, families that diverge significantly from this structure should produce people with a wider, less predictable range of sexual psychologies, a prospect of major concern to pro-family conservatives. But to see this factor in perspective, two crucial points must be kept in mind. First, sexual acculturation has never been more than relatively
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successful, even in societies enforcing rigid adherence to the traditional patriarchal family form. However thorough the imposition of psychic repression and guilt, “illicit” sexual desire and rage continually threaten to break through, which is why internal controls must be reinforced by external social sanctions. Equally important, individual families and even “deviant” familial subcultures do not exist in a vacuum. They are situated in a dominant culture that affects both parental behavior and attitudes and children’s perceptions of how families are supposed to work, as well as a cultural history that has shaped the parents’ emotional makeup. Thus for a child brought up by a single parent with a conventional sexual identity in a conventional environment, a fantasy of the missing parent may in crucial respects substitute for the actual person; even if the child has never met the absent parent, and if the caretaking parent does not have lovers on which the child’s imagination can focus, he or she may construct a workable fantasy out of parental and social messages about what mothers or fathers are like. Conversely, in a standard nuclear family whose emotional undercurrents are greatly at odds with its facade of normality, the child’s experience and consequent path may be far less typical than that of the child from a “broken home.” What I mean to suggest is that while my paradigm is at best an approximation of the experience of most children, the psychology perpetuated by the “ideal” Oedipus complex defines the sexual norm. Though this norm — an abstraction to begin with — is increasingly attacked and eroded, it still exerts a controlling influence on our social mores and, for most of us, our unconscious predispositions. In fact, I would argue that people whose childhood experience departed so radically from the paradigm that it has no emotional resonance for them cannot function in this culture, even as deviants.

In the “normal” case, then, the mother’s role in the family insures that from the beginning boys and girls get different signals about sex. To the boy, the mother conveys a complex and contradictory message of affection, seduction, and rejection. In the context of her maternal love and his infantile dependence her seductiveness, with its admixture of aggression, makes her an embodiment of erotic power that is both irresistible and scary; at the same time her disapproving rejection of his sexual response frustrates and confuses him. His father, on the other hand, is more clearly censorious, more emotionally distant (since he is less involved in the child’s day-to-day care), and much more powerful: the mother, so potent a figure in relation to the boy, is obviously subject to the father’s control. It is also clear that father has claimed mother for himself, and that the sexual prohibitions he enforces on the rest of the family do not apply to him.

The boy’s discovery of his mother’s “castration” puts all this in a new light: mother belongs to the deprived class, therefore she must envy and hate his maleness. This explains both the predatory element in her desire — which he interprets now as a potential attack on his penis, stemming from a wish to appropriate the prized object — and, in part, her sexual rejection. He is outraged at his mother’s betrayal in condemning the “badness” she has encouraged — and of which she is equally guilty, as her penisless condition attests. But he also understands her behavior as a means of protecting both of them from his father. For father is obviously responsible for mother’s punishment, and by far the greater threat to his own manhood.

In response to this threat, the boy represses his guilty desire and his rage at his father. He accepts his father’s moral authority and adopts him as a model, a strategy that is at once a form of appeasement and of acceptable competition. But he can allow himself to feel considerable anger at his less dangerous mother. By deprecating her (she is after all “only a
woman"") he takes revenge, reduces the danger still further, comforts himself for his loss, and compensates for the humiliation of having to submit to his father. Yet he also idealizes her: out of guilt and the need to renounce their sexual bond (and also as a way of negating his father’s victory), he denies her seductive attitude and transforms her into the pure woman who rejects men’s bad impulses for their own good.

The mother is more unambiguously hostile to her daughter’s sexuality. Besides seeing the girl as a rival and a doubly taboo sexual object, she feels freer to exercise power over a (mere) girl. We can also assume that she identifies more with a daughter, and that the girl’s naive desire threatens to undermine her own hard-won inhibitions. Finally, it is mother’s job to enforce the sexual double standard. The likely result is that the girl will blame her mother for her mutilation, while her father’s seductiveness gives rise to the hope that he, as the real authority in the family, will rescind the punishment. Disillusioned with mother (her first love), she diverts her passion to father and imagines that he will side with her because she is willing to be “bad” with him in defiance of spiteful mother (who, as the girl sees it, wants her child to share her own deprived state). Also, since she has not yet accepted her inferior status as irrevocable or deserved, she believes that she is worthy of her father, while her mother is clearly not his equal. Her moment of awful truth comes when she understands that her father will neither restore her penis nor choose her over her mother. Though he has encouraged her badness, he nonetheless condemns it and stands with his wife, the good woman, against her. She realizes now that the powerful man she counted on to protect her may instead abandon or turn on her.

With this realization, her perception of the aggressiveness in her father’s desire translates into a threat of rape, or even death. With horror and panic she imagines that having alienated her mother and failed to win her father she is an outcast, alone, powerless, contemptible. Her only recourse is to devote herself to appeasing her parents in the hope of regaining some sense of a secure place in the world, and, despite her humiliating demotion, some kind of self-respect. She adopts her mother’s sexual righteousness, not only out of fear and guilt but because she has begun to believe that her mother punished her out of love, to warn her and keep her from inciting her father to rape and murder. On one level the girl’s loyalties revert to a pre-Oedipal pattern, in which father was if anything an unwelcome rival for mother’s attention: she sees herself and her mother as fellow victims of male power. Yet she does not completely suppress her desire for her father, who continues to be seductive as well as rejecting. Rather, she represses the self-willed aggression at the core of her “badness” and, again taking her mother as a model, expresses her sexual response in an indirect, muted — i.e., feminine — way. Thus she propitiates her father while simultaneously placating and competing with her mother.

In the girl’s case, the most dangerous emotion is not her Oedipal desire, in itself, but her subversive wish to reject her female destiny. She can admit (much more readily than the boy can admit of his mother) that she is sexually attracted to her father and craves his sexual approval; what she cannot afford to recognize is her fury at not getting satisfaction, at being forced into passivity with the threat of violence. Like the boy, she is often able to express a modicum of anger at mother, who is less powerful and, she surmises, has already done her worst; such anger usually takes the form of competitiveness, disparagement of mother’s inferior feminine traits, and complaints about being dominated, unloved, or misunderstood. But it is a superficial, ambivalent anger, for the daughter’s deepest feelings of rage and betrayal must remain buried if she is to do what she has to do: be a woman.
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For both sexes, the incentive to identify with the same-sex parent and embrace a conventional sexual role is not only fear of punishment but the prospect of psychic and social rewards. For the boy the rewards are greater, more direct, and more obvious. He will be able to express his aggressive impulses, his needs for both autonomy and power, in a wide range of non-sexual activities in the larger world (which activities and how wide a range will depend on his position in the class and racial hierarchy, but his opportunity will always exceed that of women in comparable social categories). He will have authority over women, the power to punish them if they forget their place, and a gratifying feeling of superiority. He will have considerable leeway in demanding and taking sexual pleasure, which, however morally dubious, even in his own eyes, is nonetheless a prerogative and an imperative of manhood.

For the girl, the male-dominated world outside the home promises little in the way of power, material reward, or self-esteem. Direct, aggressive pursuit of sexual gratification or personal power over men is taboo. Given these strictures, the role of good woman has significant advantages. It allows her to exercise a certain amount of power by withholding sex and manipulating men’s desire. It enables her to marry: with luck her husband will provide indirect access to the resources of the male world, a vicarious outlet for her impulses to worldly participation and power, disguised sexual fulfillment in the form of romantic ecstasy and (if she is really lucky) actual sexual satisfaction within permissible bounds. Marriage carries with it the privilege of motherhood, which will become her greatest and most socially legitimate source of power, as well as a source of erotic pleasure. Finally, goodness offers her a means to retrieve her shattered pride. If she is good, men will respect her; in fact, she can claim moral superiority to men with their animal urges. In the name of morality she can, if she chooses, crusade against vice, bully “bad” women, and even make men feel guilty — another socially acceptable way to vent aggression and exercise power.

Since the sexual formations of women and men are complementary, each sex to a large extent meets the expectations (positive and negative, overt and repressed) of the other; the child’s experience with the opposite-sex parent “works” when applied to other heterosexual objects (which is why, just by “acting naturally,” each new generation of parents recreates that experience with its children). In adult life, the masculine man displaces most of his feelings about his mother to his relations with other women, carrying with him the emotional contradictions of his childhood. He experience ensures that women can do nothing right, that he will always feel cheated: sexual rejection or reserve evokes the primal disappointment, while ready acceptance (let alone active seduction) revives the castration fear. To complicate matters, he assumes that marriage and procreation legitimize his lust (father is allowed to fuck mother), yet to marry a woman and have children with her defines her as good, hence sexually taboo. His unconscious confusions reinforced by social mores, he treats “good” women with “respect”; the rage their reserve provokes he directs — in the form of sexual predation and contempt — toward the “bad” women who respond to him, thereby transgressing their prescribed role and challenging his authority. He tends, in other words, to arrange his sex life on the principle that he wouldn’t want to join any club that would have

13 Accordingly, this role is not equally available to all women: men of dominant classes and races have typically regarded women of subordinate classes and races as “bad” by cultural definition, and therefore fair game for sexual and economic exploitation. For an excellent analysis of how black women have been systematically denied “good woman” status, see Bell Hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (South End Press, 1981).
him as a member. When he marries he demands his wife's sexual compliance, yet cannot tolerate any display of "excessive" sexual enthusiasm, initiative, or self-assertion. Then, finding domestic sex boring and his wife's "goodness" inhibiting, he sleeps with (or has fantasies of) more exciting women to whom he need recognize no loyalty or commitment. He feels guilty about his own "bad" desires, yet also proud of them since they confirm his manhood. He considers the "good" woman morally superior to himself, yet has a deep conviction that all women are secretly bad, that their goodness is a hypocritical facade. If he transgresses the bounds of respectful behavior with the good woman, he rationalizes that he could only get away with it because she was really bad all along. At its extreme this is the psychology of the rapist and the wife-beater.

The same double binds ensure that the woman's claim to goodness, hence her safety and legitimacy, is never secure. In the first place, she knows on some level that her goodness is phony — that deep down she is indeed lustful, angry, rebellious — and she feels guilty about it. Thus she will often accept the judgment of the rapist or wife-beater that she somehow asked for or deserved punishment. Furthermore, the requirements of goodness are contradictory. The good woman must defer to men, do their will; she must also curb her sexual desire; yet part of what men will is that women not only sleep with them but desire them. Her father wanted her to desire him, but when she went too far (and how far was that? where did she cross the line?) love turned into rejection and threat. As she grows up she will encounter the same dilemma: the boys demand that she be attractive and sexy, but if she goes too far they label her easy; if, on the other hand, she goes too far in the other direction — too aloof, too indifferent — they condemn her as a cold bitch or a sexual failure. In marriage the good woman must not refuse her husband but must not demand too much. Always she must walk the elusive line between being too good, therefore bad, and not good enough. The line shifts with history and circumstance, the particular man or his particular mood; the more freedom women achieve the more tenuous the line becomes. The anxiety this uncertainty provokes functions actively as a means of social control; women can never stop trying to be better, to escape an inescapable taint. Given this impossible situation, it is no wonder that so many feminists are more preoccupied with their fears of male violence than with their hopes for sexual freedom. Indeed, women's quest for security — futile by the very nature of the system — not only discourages women from demanding freedom but often moves them to defend rigid standards of sexual morality and resist any blurring of the line between good and bad women. In doing so, they shore up the very system that punishes them. Finally, the only way women will ever break out of this trap is to destroy the association between sex and badness.

Sexual liberals have tried to dismiss that association as an unenlightened remnant of our puritanical past. But since the cultural unconscious cannot be erased by fiat, they have succeeded mainly in damaging their credibility. In a sense, sexual liberalism creates its own backlash. Men scoff at the idea of the good woman — and find that they are terrified by the specter of the bad woman, self-willed, demanding, perhaps insatiable. Women try to be free — and end up being punished. Both sexes equate sexual freedom with a license to be bad — and feel guilty. The power imbalance between the sexes remains. As a result, the symbiosis of sexism and sexual repression continues to recreate a complex of patriarchal emotions that increasingly conflict with our rational ideas and aspirations and with the actual conditions of our lives. It is in fact the social instability and psychological tensions this conflict produces that have made people so receptive to pro-family ideology. The right proposes to resolve the
conflict by changing social reality to conform to our most conservative emotions. Feminist politics, in contrast, often seem to embody the conflict instead of offering an alternative solution. Nor is this any wonder, if such a solution must include a fundamental transformation in people’s sexual psychology. Yet however dangerous and uncharted the territory, it is precisely this task that we must somehow begin to address.

The first step, I believe, is simply to affirm the validity, in principle, of sexual liberation as a feminist goal. This in itself will clarify many confusions and contradictions in current feminist thinking, and indicate practical political directions. For instance, my analysis suggests that crusading against pornography as a symbol of male violence will impede feminism rather than advance it; that focusing primarily on issues of women’s safety (like rape) may be more problematic and less effective than focusing on issues of women’s sexual freedom (like abortion rights); that it is important for feminists to defend people’s (including men’s) freedom to engage in consensual sexual activity, including acts we may find distasteful. In short, it is a losing proposition for feminists to compete with the right in trying to soothe women’s fears of sexual anarchy. We must of course acknowledge those fears and the legitimate reasons for them, but our interest as feminists is to demonstrate that a law-and-order approach to sex can only result in a drastic curtailment of our freedom. In the long run, we can win only if women (and men) want freedom (and love) more than they fear its consequences.