

Radical refusals

On the anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality

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Abstract

This article examines how women consciously choosing asexuality might inform both radical feminist politics and anarchic concepts of positive and negative liberty. By resituating some of the lesser-known narratives of the 1960s' and 1970s' radical feminist movement (e.g. Valerie Solanas' SCUM Manifesto and Boston's Cell 16 and No More Fun and Games), asexuality is shown to disrupt key intersections between sexuality and the state, particularly institutions that control reproduction, pleasure, and women's bodies. Using interview data with Cell 16 members, content analysis of early radical feminist writings, and theoretical and historical analyses of separatism, the piece argues that, by removing themselves from sexuality, women can take a more anarchic stance against the entire institution of sex, thereby working toward more nihilistic, anti-reproduction, anti-family goals that severely disrupt commonly held assumptions about sex, gender, and power.

Keywords

anarchy, radical feminism, asexuality, Valerie Solanas, Cell 16

I do not believe that sex has an inherent power to transform the world. I do not believe that pleasure is always an anarchic force for good. I do not believe that we can fuck our way to freedom.

Pat Califia *Macho Sluts* (1994: 15)

Why am I the slave of Man? Why is my brain said not to be equal of his brain? Why is my work not paid equally with his? Why must my body be controlled by my husband?... There are two reasons why... These two things, the mind domination of the Church and the body domination of the State, are the causes of sex slavery.

Voltairine de Cleyre, 'No Authority But Oneself', cited by Sharon Presley (2000)

The various intersections between sexuality and politics – between the struggle to claim the body as a site of political and social power while also valuing its role as a source of pleasure and physical experience – has represented a central dilemma in the feminist movements of the past 40 years. To conceptualize sex as an institution, that is, linked with state power, connects relatively personal practices with larger social and cultural narratives. As the 1960s' women's movement situated the body as a key site of political struggle, particularly within radical circles, sexuality marked the potential for power, freedom, and liberation. The freedom to be sexual and not face dire reprimands, particularly for women, overlapped with many other previously denied freedoms. The second wave rejected women's relegation to chastity, reproduction, and non-orgasmic

sex, first by advocating better contraceptive options for women (e.g. widespread use of the 1960 birth control pill), and then by asserting women's entitlement to clitoral orgasms and more sexual pleasure. Mobilizations for less sexual repression and more sexual autonomy appeared throughout the USA. Sexual freedom for many women became synonymous with the freedom to have more sexual activity, partners, sexual positions, sexual speech, and physical pleasure. In the shadow of the sexual revolution, women allegedly underwent a transformation from subdued, suburban, sexless housewives to revved-up, urban, highly sexed liberated women (Foley et al., 2002).

Left out of this master narrative of the sexual revolution, however, are the many other interpretations activists espoused for integrating sexuality and political freedom, particularly as radical feminists referenced the political goals of anarchism. Consequently, more sex became grossly insufficient for liberation. Certainly, anarchists have long been divided between individual anarchism, emphasizing freedom from the state – what Berlin (1969) called 'negative liberty' – and social anarchism, advocating both negative and positive liberty, sometimes simultaneously, as a mechanism for freedom. Similarly, radical feminists fought for 'freedom to' as much as 'freedom from', simultaneously advancing ideas about women gaining and blocking access to others. These radical circles attended to distinctions between 'power over' (domination and oppression), 'power to' (freedom to do/act), and 'power with' (collective power to do/act. See Allen, 2008). Indeed, though second-wave feminists made sexual and political advances with far-reaching consequences, most of which went uncontested as gestures of genuine social progress, other versions of the sexual liberation story have fallen into obscurity.

This article resituates some of those lesser-known radical narratives in order to show that not engaging in sexuality may link with anarchist politics, separatism, and alternative forms of social change. As the 1980s' sex wars fractured feminists into two competing camps (sex positives vs. sex radicals, who disagreed vehemently about 'fucking our way to freedom'), these missing discourses of radical feminist mobilizations toward asexuality became even further silenced, raising several questions: Why do feminist historians promote a monolithic narrative of the sexual revolution that championed sexual expressiveness? Can we have an anarchist politics of sexuality based on asexuality and 'negative liberty'? What if women stopped having sex permanently? Would this symbolize a form of political rebellion or further sexual repression? How does asexuality inform modern sexual politics and institutions, particularly surrounding gay rights and gay identity?

Certainly, while celibacy (i.e. temporary periods of sexual abstinence) has a long, politically significant history within social and religious movements, asexuality (i.e. permanent, identity-based sexual refusals) has received little attention, particularly for feminist politics. This article addresses what asexuality has meant, and might mean, to feminism by critiquing the single agenda promoted when sex intersects with state politics: the maintenance of traditional gender roles based on pro-reproduction and pro-family agendas. I examine feminist disagreements about challenging state and cultural constructions of women's sexuality, as well as the damaging consequences of

this discourse for women (e.g. control of prostitution, regulation of sex toy distribution, imposition of severe birth control onto women of color and so on). This analysis shows how current sexual politics serve the state's interests. Next, I revisit early radical feminism and its relationship to asexuality and separatism by drawing upon two often forgotten or obscured entities: Valerie Solanas' writings, and the political goals of radical feminist group Cell 16. Using analysis of Solanas' SCUM Manifesto along with interview data and texts from radical feminists affiliated with Cell 16, I (re)situate asexuality and separatism as viable options for an anarchist sexual politics. I conclude the article by situating asexuality as relevant to contemporary sexual politics, particularly gay marriage debates and disagreements about 'biology vs. choice' models of queer identity. Limitations of asexuality, particularly in its unfortunate mirroring of anti-choice, abstinence-only, right-wing discourse, also figures centrally in my concluding analysis, as conservative social forces constrain and powerfully co-opt feminist options for constructing sexual politics. Nevertheless, when women stand against sexuality – whether via separatism, temporary periods of celibacy, or asexuality as sexual identity – this strongly decenters the naturalness and inevitability of sex by revealing different ways that women can exercise social and political power. By removing themselves from sexuality, women assert an anarchic stance against the institutions that engender sex, thereby working toward more nihilistic, anti-reproduction, anti-family goals that severely disrupt commonly held cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and power.

Part I: Sex and pleasure as freedom?

In part, because the sexual revolution figures so prominently in our collective narratives of sex and social change, little attention has focused on dissenting voices arguing against sex as a means of liberation. For example, in the vaginal vs. clitoral orgasm debates (disagreements that gained wide publicity and notoriety), radical feminists fought vehemently for recognition of clitoral orgasms, yet many other radical feminists cautioned against substituting one form of oppression (tyranny of the vaginal orgasm) with another (tyranny of the clitoral orgasm).

As Jane Gerhard (2000) said,

The vaginal orgasm, attained exclusively through intercourse, had long been a keynote in the clamor of expert ideas about female sexual health and normality ... During these early years of women's liberation, when feminists came of age in and through the rhetoric of sexual liberation, the female orgasm came to signify the political power of women's sexual self-determination. (Gerhard, 2000: 449)

As women fought against barriers to women's full sexual pleasure, particularly claims that women 'outgrew' clitoral orgasm or that women's desire was irrelevant or nonexistent, little attention was paid to those arguing that sex could never achieve

liberatory goals because of its fundamental rootedness in power and inequality.¹ Rather, many argued that clitoral orgasm, improved relationships, and more sexual expression would bring about women's social and political equality. For example, Erica Jong's (1973) *Fear of Flying* advocated women embracing the 'zipless fuck', that is, frequent sex without emotional consequences as liberatory.

Not all second wave radical feminists disagreed with these claims. For some radical feminists, clitoral supremacy joined with radical self-determination. TiGrace Atkinson (1974) argued that men exercised patriarchal control by insisting that heterosexual intercourse (and vaginal orgasm, if it occurred) should trump all other forms of sexual pleasure. Atkinson argued, 'The construct of vaginal orgasm is most in vogue whenever and wherever the institution of sexual intercourse is threatened. As women become freer, more independent, more self-sufficient, their interest in (i.e. their need for) men decreases' (Atkinson, 1974: 13–14). She also famously said, 'Why should women learn to vaginal orgasm? Because that's what men want. How about a facial tic? What's the difference?' (Atkinson, 1974: 7). A number of other feminists, including Kate Millet (1970), Mary Jane Sherfey (1970), and Anne Koedt (1973), supported these views, citing pressures toward heterosexual intercourse and vaginal orgasm as a coded mechanism to encourage heterosexuality. They furiously argued that these cultural scripts denigrated the clitoris and demanded a penis as the mature and appropriate avenue to pleasure. Koedt declared, 'The recognition of the clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution' (Buhle, 1998: 217).

While showcasing the clitoris played a central role for feminist activism of the time – particularly as it championed lesbian identification, lesbian sexuality (Johnston, 1973; Singer and Singer, 1972), polyamory and non-traditional gender roles – other feminists faulted these claims of sexual liberation and rejected this celebration of newfound sexual 'freedoms'. Some radical feminists argued against vaginal and clitoral orgasm, directing suspicion toward sex as a mechanism for liberation. For example, Cell 16, a radical feminist group based in Boston in the 1970s, figured centrally in the radical fight for gender justice by advocating abstention from sex, radical unity among women (including women protecting other women from gender-based violence), and separatism. Cell 16 argued that patriarchy placed women amidst an 'orgasm frenzy' (Densmore, 1968: 110), obsessed with pleasurable sex without attending to the larger social critique. Sheila Jeffreys (1990) argued that the sexual revolution essentially replaced one form of oppression with another, and that new forms of sexual expression (e.g. pornography, *The Joy of Sex* books, televised discussions of sex) did not actually facilitate women's freedom. Another Cell 16 member, Roxanne Dunbar (1969), who later cited anarchism as a key influence on her politics, argued that sexual liberation became equated with 'the "freedom" to "make it" with anyone anytime' (Dunbar, 1969: 49), and that this

¹ Such positions found support two decades later by sex radicals like Catharine MacKinnon, who argued, 'Women's sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others. But women never own or possess it... The moment women "have" it – "have sex" in the dual gender/sexuality sense – it is lost as theirs' (MacKinnon, 1989: 172).

ignored women's experiences of sex as 'brutalization, rape, submission [and] someone having power over them' (Dunbar, 1969: 56). Other radical voices also said that the sexual freedom campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s merely allowed men sexual access to greater numbers of women and therefore worked in direct opposition to women having more control over their personal and sexual freedom.

These dilemmas about integrating sexuality and social justice have raged on in modern sexual politics as well, as feminists use sexuality as a benchmark for other personal and social freedoms. Of course, feminists have made excellent progress with sexuality, including the aforementioned efforts to value clitoral orgasm as central to women's sexual pleasure, mobilizations for more awareness about sexual violence, battery, and domestic violence, and global acknowledgment of sexual repression (e.g. Female Genital Surgeries, criminalizing marital rape, expansion of abortion rights and so forth). Sex education reforms continue, even as more direct and harsh attacks against comprehensive sex education persist. Increasing numbers of sex researchers and gender/race scholars promote feminist and antiracist ideologies, and more and more college students take sexuality courses. That said, feminist politics too often prioritize sexuality as a central and inextricable part of women's liberation, such that those who challenge its primacy remain silenced and forgotten. These suppressed voices ask: Why bother with sex at all? What if women removed sex from their lives entirely? How might this change our understanding of liberation and freedom?

Clearly, sex and the state intertwine in numerous ways that warrant consideration of what it would mean – discursively, politically, socially, sexually, and even spiritually – if women stopped having sex entirely, not just as a temporary abstention (celibacy), but as a permanent sexual identity (asexuality). The state polices gender via regulation of sexual behavior and expression, revealing the complicated status of sex as simultaneously a set of practices that can (theoretically) liberate and expand consciousness while also replicating and further entrenching women into a vicious politics of conservatism and repression. Sexuality represents the precise collision between the body and a host of other political realms: social, economic, reproductive, educational, and familial. For example, until *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), so-called 'sodomy laws' upheld the illegality of oral and anal sex (and sometimes all non-reproductive forms of sex) in many US states (Tribe, 2004). The state regulates prostitutes' behavior and maintains their lack of access to resources like health care (West, 2000). Similarly, many US states often regulate the circulation, selling, and distribution of sex toys, citing their indecency and the state's role to promote sexual reproduction (Glover, 2010). In fact, more states in the USA currently have such laws under consideration than in previous years, indicating that this trend is not diminishing. Further, state regulation of pornography's circulation, combined with lack of state intervention in requiring porn actors to use condoms, reveal the state's interest in promoting conservative, pro-reproduction politics (Grudzen and Kerndt, 2007).

In addition to legal loopholes, more explicit links between sex and the state keep entire groups of women subject to increasingly oppressive forms of sexual control.

Imposing severe birth control methods onto women seeking welfare (or refusing to support children born into the welfare system), along with sexual control over immigrant women, represent the state's particular control over poor women and women of color (Roberts, 1998; Schoen, 2005). Women often suffer from the feminization of poverty, particularly when seeking child support payments or maintaining steady incomes following divorce (Albelda and Tilly, 1999). Lack of resources for undocumented women to report domestic violence and spousal rape also showcase the state's tendencies to ignore violence against women by instead normalizing men's sexual access to women's bodies (Andrews et al., 2002; Van Hightower et al., 2000). Further, uneven regulation and criminalization of prostitution (e.g. harsher jail sentencing, mandated STD testing and so on), and relative denial that white western men drive sex trafficking markets also represent the fundamental unevenness of sex and gender by celebrating men's sexuality and demonizing women's sexuality, a trend long ago identified by radical feminist voices (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Taylor and Jamieson, 1999).

These facets of modern sexual life – where state interests and priorities dictate women's sexual behavior – question whether such state regulation benefits women at all. This is not a new claim. Past generations of anarchists, particularly Emma Goldman, have argued that sex and love represent suspicious cultural practices that too often require state intervention and regulation. Goldman located marriage as the key culprit in sexual oppression, calling for an end to marriage when it no longer satisfies women (Goldman, 1896). Though she personally rejected monogamy, her concerns about the underlying institutionalization of sex remained consistent with radical feminist views, as she argued,

Nowhere is woman treated according to the merit of her work, but rather as a sex. It is therefore almost inevitable that she should pay for right to exist, to keep a position in whatever line, with sex favors. Thus it is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men. (Goldman, 1911: 187)

Like Goldman, many later feminists recognized the problems of associating revolution with conventional sexuality, yet these dissenting voices often went unrecognized or silenced. An anarchist politics of sexuality could, on the one hand, advocate polyamory as 'anti-marriage', or, as some radicals have argued, anarchist politics of sex could advocate women blocking sexual access and deconstructing sex and love as institutions. In other words, contrary to anarchy based on multiple lovers and encounters, another interpretation poses that women become empowered when refusing sex entirely, thus threatening sex as an institution of governmental and patriarchal control. If sex remains tangled with the state's influence, beholden to patriarchy and racism, and subject to anti-progressive forces, anarchist sexuality might advocate full removal from sexual exchanges. In short, asexuality may help to dismantle the entire institution of sex.

Part II: Remembering radical histories

Though many radical feminists connected sexual expression with women's social and political freedom, many lesser-known radical feminists instead argued that asexuality would fuel women's empowerment. For example, Valerie Solanas, most known for writing the polemical and highly controversial SCUM Manifesto² before she shot Andy Warhol, controversially promoted asexuality as a logical outcome of having sex with men. Solanas (1996, originally published 1968), who allegedly worked as a prostitute for many years, espoused the supremacy of asexuality, saying,

Sex is not part of a relationship; on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, noncreative, a gross waste of time. The female can easily – far more easily than she may think – condition away her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral and free to pursue truly worthy relationships and activities... When the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male, whose ego consists of his cock, will disappear. (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 26–27).

Solanas championed asexuality by claiming that enlightened women, aware of their disempowerment, will eventually reject sex altogether, while women compliant with patriarchy will doggedly pursue sex. To highlight the absurdity of correlating sex with positive social change, she equated sex with extreme obedience and compliance with male norms: 'Sex is the refuge of the mindless. And the more mindless the woman, the more deeply embedded in the male "culture", in short, the nicer she is, the more sexual she is. The nicest women in our "society" are raving sex maniacs' (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 27). She particularly criticized justifications of sex as a means to community love and solidarity:

But being just awfully, awfully nice they don't, of course descend to fucking – that's uncouth – rather they make love, commune by means of their bodies and establish sensual rapport; the literary ones are attuned to the throb of Eros and attain a clutch upon the Universe; the religious have spiritual communion with the Divine Sensualism; the mystics merge with the Erotic Principle and blend with the Cosmos, and the acid heads contact their erotic cells. (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 27)

Solanas satirically attacked constructions of sex as a form of consciousness raising and spiritual growth, instead portraying it as powerfully flawed and most often disempowering.

² Note that, while the SCUM Manifesto is popularly known as 'The Society for Cutting Up Men', Solanas herself never defined the text that way, calling editor Vivian Gornick a 'flea' for referring to it as such.

Solanas believed that women could empower themselves once they stopped having sex, drawing upon asexuality as an option for post-sexual-revolution empowerment. Solanas portrayed women who denounced sex as worldly, experienced, and justifiably unable to comply with men's demands. Such women arrived at asexuality after a lifetime of sex:

Unhampered by propriety, niceness, discretion, public opinion, 'morals', the 'respect' of assholes, always funky, dirty, low-down SCUM gets around...they've seen the whole show...the fucking scene, the sucking scene, the dyke scene – they've covered the whole waterfront, been under every dock and pier – the peter pier, the pussy pier...you've got to go through a lot of sex to get anti-sex, and SCUM's been through it all, and they're now ready for a new show; they want to crawl out from under the dock, move, take off, sink out. (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 28)

Asexuality became the outcome of sex rather than an identity that originated early in life. Women who recognized sex as limiting, Solanas argued, could prioritize more important things, particularly personal gratification and, perhaps, social justice for women:

[T]hose females least embedded in the male 'Culture', the least nice, those crass and simple souls who reduce fucking to fucking; who are too childish for the grown-up world of suburbs, mortgages, mops and baby shit; too selfish to raise kids and husbands; too uncivilized to give a shit for anyone's opinion of them; too arrogant to respect Daddy, the 'Greats' or the deep wisdom of the Ancients; who trust only their animal, gutter instincts; who equate Culture with chicks; whose sole diversion is prowling for emotional thrills and excitement; who are given to disgusting, nasty, upsetting 'scenes'; hateful, violent bitches given to slamming those who unduly irritate them in the teeth...these females are cool and relatively cerebral and skirting asexuality. (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 27–28)

Thus, while Solanas' characterization of asexuality as a tool for female empowerment had elements of satire, hyperbole, and perhaps even madness, she most essentially argued that women could only achieve personal freedom or self-gratification via refusing sex. Asexuality freed women from authoritarian constraints of patriarchy, demands of men, and less worthy pursuits of pleasure and physical gratification.

While Solanas' arguments for asexuality lean toward the theoretical (Solanas resisted any characterization of herself as 'within movement', preferring autonomy in advocating social justice for women), other radical feminist groups like Cell 16 – a group known for its militant program to separate from men sexually and politically – argued for asexuality as central to collective feminist identity. In my personal interview with noted Cell 16 leader, Roxanne Dunbar (later Dunbar-Ortiz) in December

2008, she outlined Cell 16's strategies of championing celibacy and asexuality as a mechanism to raise feminist consciousness:

A woman could either be cold or pure, virginal and monogamous, or the opposite of that. We proposed that women could be totally sexual beings but still choose to be completely autonomous and not always in a relationship to a man. It came out of a lot of discussions, including Dana's [Densmore] idea that women should have the choice if they wish to be celibate. We were hearing a lot about guerillas and it was recommended that women not get married because they'd be held hostage to their families and everything. Why can't women also be celibate? We got all these figures together about all of these celibate people – monks and priests especially – but everyone laughed at celibate nuns. It was like something was really screwy for women to resist sex and become a nun... We all saw celibacy as a choice that women could make, that it wasn't something sick. We wanted to depathologize it.

Following the publication of Cell 16's journal, *No More Fun and Games*, Dunbar-Ortiz said that the group received much attention for asserting asexuality and celibacy as viable options for women. Densmore's 'On Celibacy' article stirred up controversy both within and outside of radical feminist circles, arguing

One hangup to liberation is a supposed 'need' for sex. It is something that must be refuted, coped with, demythified [sic], or the cause of female liberation is doomed... Sex is not essential to life, as eating is. Some people go through their whole lives without engaging in it at all, including fine, warm, happy people. It is a myth that this makes one bitter, shriveled up, twisted... The guerillas don't screw. They eat, when they can, but they don't screw. They have important things to do, things that require all their energy. (Densmore, 1968)

Densmore also pointedly argued that sex required men to exercise power over women, so if women avoided sex altogether, they could resist some of these power imbalances:

Sexual freedom is the first freedom a woman is awarded and she thinks it is important because it's all she has; compared to the dullness and restrictiveness of the rest of her life it glows very brightly. But we must come to realize that sex is actually a minor need, blown out of proportion, misunderstood (usually what passes for sexual need is actually desire to be stroked, desire for recognition or love, desire to conquer, humiliate or wield power, or desire to communicate). We must come to realize that we don't need sex, that celibacy is not a dragon but even a state that could be desirable, in many cases preferable to sex. (Densmore, 1968)

Importantly, Densmore situated women's sexual energies as easily fulfilled by non-sexual relationships with others, absorbing work, and political activism. She particularly warned against women relying upon men's validation and sexual attention, citing men's tendencies to use sex and attraction against women in a socially controlling way:

Erotic energy is just life energy and is quickly worked off if you are doing interesting, absorbing things. Love and affection and recognition can easily be found in comrades, a more honest and open love that love you for yourself and not for how docile and cute and sexy and ego-building you are, a love in which you are always subject, never merely object, always active, never merely relative... If you don't play the game, the role, you are not a woman and they will NOT be attracted... You will be feared and despised and viciously maligned, all by men you know perfectly well... How is that possible? Obviously, because they were never worshipping you... We will cease to love and admire such men. We will have contempt for men who show that they cannot love us for ourselves, men whose egos demand and require falsehoods. (Densmore, 1968)

Dunbar-Ortiz and Densmore's constructions of celibacy (temporary withdrawal) and asexuality (permanent, identity-based withdrawal) as viable options for radical feminist politics links women's political advancement to control and autonomy over sexuality. In essence, sex limited women's liberation potential because it enforced sexual access to men, disallowed women from refusing sex, and constructed 'liberated sex' as more sex rather than more personal agency. If women derived freedom from sex with more partners, this maintained and supported the patriarchal status quo. Radical sexual refusals, in contrast, allowed women to resist patriarchy by setting their terms for sexual pleasure and sexual access. Though neither Dunbar-Ortiz nor Densmore described themselves as anarchists at the time – though Dunbar later (2002) identified herself as an anarcha-feminist – their statements about asexuality (particularly in decentering sex and patriarchy) aligned them with anarchists like Emma Goldman (despite Goldman's endorsement of multiple sex partners). An anarchist politics of sex might offer the permanence of asexuality as a preferred option for women, particularly in a culture that demands state control over women's bodies and sexualities. Current battles over same-sex marriage, for example, stand greatly at odds with central tenants of anarchist sex radicals, who advocate dismantling marriage as an institution, citing its tendencies to legalize gender disparities and impose the state's will onto the private lives of individuals. An anarchist vision of sexuality might instead redefine relationships outside of power and fixed gender roles, thereby mimicking ideologies of 1960s' and 1970s' radical feminism.

To understand the silencing of these feminist voices, consider that the anarchist implications of sexuality have facilitated the obscurity of Cell 16 and Valerie Solanas. The role of asexuality has largely been forgotten in writing, theorizing, and historicizing radical feminism, perhaps indicating the threat it poses to state interests. When

women choose asexuality, rather than simply being asexual as consequence of their ‘fixed’ psychological makeup, it challenges ideas about identity and institutions. Indeed, separatism originated as an asexual action, or, in anarchist terms, as a form of negative liberty (‘freedom from’ before ‘freedom to’). Boston’s Cell 16 advocated separatism long before other radical groups prioritized lesbian separatism. Consequently, Cell 16 operated as a kind of ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ (i.e. a worker’s strike against capitalism), challenging men’s sexual access by advocating general revolt. Consider Catharine MacKinnon’s astute comparison between capitalism/wage workers and patriarchy/women: ‘Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism... In Marxism to be deprived of one’s work, in feminism of one’s sexuality, defines each one’s conception of power per se’ (MacKinnon, 1982: 515– 54). MacKinnon later described the exploitative qualities of a ‘good’ fuck, noting that even a ‘good’ male partner exploits, just as, for Marxists (and, by extension, anarchists), even a ‘good’ day of paid labor also exploits workers (MacKinnon, 1987).

Certainly, Cell 16’s ‘sex strike’ must be remembered as preceding lesbian separatism; before women asserted sexual freedom from men by having sex with other women, they first needed a basis upon which to separate from men at all. Historian Alice Echols (1990) credits Cell 16 with helping to establish the theoretical and political foundations of lesbian separatism by first advocating asexual separatism. In *No More Fun and Games*, both Roxanne Dunbar and Lisa Leghorn advised women to ‘separate from men who are not consciously working for female liberation’, and to resist lesbian relationships by instead championing periods of celibacy. They characterized lesbian relationships as ‘nothing more than a personal solution’ (Echols, 1990: 165) that would not sufficiently address the necessary redirection of energy needed to achieve sexual and personal liberation.³

To reimagine separatism as an essentially asexual action – one based on women’s refusal from the entire institution – helps to reestablish its radical and anarchic roots. Separatism originally targeted women’s denial of men’s sexual access to their bodies, thereby decentering assumptions about traditional marriages, nuclear families, and the necessity of sexuality. When feminist histories present separatism as a lesbian action, this implicitly further radicalizes true asexual separatism. When women stop having sex, this limits the social control aspects of sexuality, particularly because it picks off the pro-reproduction, pro-family, pro-pleasure discourses in favor of women’s autonomy and sexual agency to withhold sex. Perhaps an asexual political agenda advances women’s liberation in the direction of nihilism, a claim Solanas supported in her SCUM Manifesto:

³ Notably, while Cell 16 never specifically defined separatism as removing women from all interactions with men, they did promote women mobilizing with other women while limiting contact with (non-feminist) men. One wonders, then, about the implications of radical feminism advocating a total removal from all interactions with men; going far beyond the sexual realm, such extremity might indeed inspire new modes of anarchist thinking (e.g. Can ‘freedom from’ extend to freedom from coexisting with men altogether?).

Why produce even females? Why should there be future generations?... Why should we care what happens when we're dead? Why should we care that there is no younger generation to succeed us?... Eventually, the natural course of events, in social evolution, will lead to total female control of the world and, subsequently, to the cessation of the production of males and, ultimately, to the cessation of the production of females. (Solanas, 1996 [1968]: 35)

Thus, while Solanas offered a non-communal anarchist vision of a world progressing toward nihilism, Cell 16 offered envisioned asexuality as having anarchist potential to threaten cultural institutions by helping women reclaim control over their bodies and sexualities.

Part III: Asexuality as a political identity and strategy of reform

When examining asexuality and separatism, their political use differs greatly from their implications for pathology, identity, and sexual classification. Most existing research on asexuality, for example, asks questions that have relatively little social and political significance. For example, some studies address prevalence rates, with most research reporting that between 1 and 6 per cent of the American population describe themselves as asexual, with numbers rising consistently during the past five years (Bogaert, 2006; CNN, 2004). Additionally, some research asks whether asexuality represents a stable sexual identity, a diagnosable mental illness, or a new form of sexual community. Battles continue about how to define 'true' or 'real' asexuality (Bogaert, 2006). Some conceptualize asexuality as a unique, stable, lifelong orientation, even for those who maintain long-term relationships or marriages (as social desirability and economics drive asexuals into relationships despite lack of sexual attraction or arousal). Others envision asexuality as a transitory choice that responds to one's life circumstances and changes in sexual desire throughout the lifespan (Bogaert, 2004, 2006), citing that asexuals often still masturbate even denying traditional sexual attraction (Prause and Graham, 2007). Because asexuality has risen in numbers recently, it may also constitute its own under-recognized identity category and therefore maps onto gay and lesbian rights struggles (Scherrer, 2008). Nevertheless, such conceptualizations largely ignore the political or anarchic implications of asexuality, with virtually no studies addressing its gender, race, and class implications.

Most research situates asexuality within models of classification, diagnosis, and pathology by asking: Can asexuality represent good mental health? Should we add a fourth category to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual continuum? Should those who have infrequent or nonexistent sexual activity be classified as asexual, mirroring labels often assigned to disabled communities (Milligan and Neufeldt, 2001)? Such framing ignores

the choosing of asexuality as a political gesture that undermines gender hierarchies by denying access to women's bodies (as with radical feminism), or, particularly for women, as a response to real and pervasive gendered inequalities. Perhaps we should more pointedly ask: How does asexuality differ between men and women, between those with different political orientations, and between those with power and those without power? When people of color, women, the working class, and other disempowered groups choose asexuality, does it carry different meaning than when hegemonically powerful groups (e.g. white people, men, high SES groups and so on) choose asexuality? If sexual identity fluctuates throughout the lifespan (Diamond, 2003), might people also choose asexuality to assert independence, autonomy, and changing sexual priorities? Further, might asexuality represent a logical, even empowering, response to oppression?

Social science research on sexual satisfaction and pleasure readily presents women as less satisfied and orgasmic than men (Baumeister and Tice, 1998; Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 1997; Laumann et al., 1994; Sprecher and Regan, 1996). Women fake orgasm in response to (male) partners' demands to support egos or to end sex (Roberts et al., 1995; Wiederman, 1997). Women also experience innumerable social inequalities in other aspects of their lives, including work, families, economics, education, military, sports, and media. Given this, framing women's choice of asexuality as a political decision based on sexual oppression makes sense. Asexuality represents a viable response to the gendered culture of sex by allowing women to deconstruct oppressive institutions and assert bodily control (something denied to women through institutions like government and family). In other words, even non-radical/non-anarchist women may adopt asexual identities or periods of celibacy in response to real inequalities, and future research should address these choices in light of gender, power, and resistance.

Asexuality as a social and political choice also destabilizes other aspects of modern life. It undercuts assumptions and attributions about classifying and explaining socio-sexual behavior. For example, the heated debates about gay marriage assume that coupling matters, people have 'natural' inclinations toward sex, and rights discourses should inclusively expand to help others who seek public validation of their 'natural' sexual attraction. Asexuality throws this paradigm off kilter by questioning why the conferral of rights hinges upon sexuality. Could we instead dispense rights like health care and family visitation based on other kinds of non-sexual statuses? Consider that nearly 33 per cent of asexual-identified people marry or cohabitate as a consequence of economic and social necessity (e.g. getting health care benefits and tax breaks) rather than sexual desire per se (Bogaert, 2006). In short, asexuality as a sociopolitical choice reveals the absurdity of basing civil rights on an institution like marriage. Sexuality is not an appropriate underlying basis for rights and privileges; the state must re-evaluate its priorities and categories in a holistic way. Let us ask: Why should sexuality matter this much? Or, taking it one step further, anarchists pose that, because the state cannot divorce itself from institutions like marriage, coupling, and sexuality, we must strip the state of its power altogether.

Similarly, if asexuality becomes a viable sexual identity, this distorts debates about whether gays and lesbians are ‘born’ or ‘choose’ their identity. Asexuals deconstruct and dismantle many underlying ideas in such a debate: first, that all people have sexual inclinations of some sort; second, that these inclinations persist throughout the lifespan; third, that identity is stable; and last, that sexual practices can form identities. Asexual identity asks: Is sexual identity related to partner choice, internal sexual arousal, or self-identity based on gender and social meanings? Can one choose asexuality politically or socially but still identify as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual? Likewise, can one choose heterosexuality, bisexuality, or homosexuality while identifying as asexual? What might this mean for state interventions into sexual life, particularly if the state encourages reproduction and ‘pro-family’ ideologies? How might women’s abstinence from sex threaten the foundations of social institutions like patriarchy, family, work, and the media? Can asexuality subvert heterosexism more than other queer identities do? Such questions suggest that asexuality has much to offer contemporary sexual politics, despite the woeful lack of attention paid to its political significance. These examples collectively reveal the significance of conceptualizing asexuality as a political choice rather than merely a sexual identity based on pathology and normality.

That said, framing asexuality as an idealistic political solution presents some serious problems. Most importantly, asexuality often mirrors conservative tendencies to strip women’s sexual agency and relegate them to prudish figures that easily tolerate lack of sexual pleasure. Further, asexuality dangerously parallels the goals of abstinence-only education and anti-choice agendas, in that suppressing sexual expression is often promoted to unmarried, young, and otherwise disenfranchised people. Additionally, asexuality often aligns itself with spiritual elements of denying the body in order to heighten one’s rational selfhood, hearkening back to the mind/body split imposed upon women to explain their ‘natural’ irrationality and men’s ‘natural’ mental merits. Also, in a more concrete sense, denying sexual attraction and sexual relationships might limit the subversive, social justice implications of our erotic lives (Lorde, 1993).

Ultimately, despite these various limitations, I advocate a reading of asexuality as socially and politically compelling, particularly as we recover the lost or obscured histories of radical feminism. In certain contexts, asexuality aligns itself with women’s conscious efforts to regain control over their bodies, assert sexual agency and autonomy, and redefine institutions that disempower women. In doing so, asexuality has potential as an anarchic force, deconstructing key social institutions while simultaneously rejecting the pro-reproductive, pro-family, pro-patriarchy state priorities. The conscious choice to refuse sex, whether temporary or more stable in length, reveals underlying assumptions behind modern debates about sexual life (e.g. gay marriage, gay identity and so on). Asexuality asks whether sex should matter for social justice, and if so, it demands a closer and more careful examination of our assumptions about the naturalness of sex and the way it maintains the status quo, even in its more liberal manifestations like sexual revolution or ‘free love’. Framing asexuality as a viable and politically significant choice transforms it into a compelling and depathologized

option, particularly as it elegantly mirrors our cultural anxieties, political priorities, and deeply troubled constructions of gender, power, and sexual life.

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