

# Feminism & ‘Moral Panics’

The AIDS hysteria cannot be seen in isolation from the more general right-wing ideological offensive. Preaching a gospel of unregulated greed in the marketplace, the Reaganite right simultaneously aims to reimpose Victorian standards of compulsory sex-morality on everyone. In an essay entitled “Thinking Sex,” (included in *Pleasure and Danger, Exploring Female Sexuality*, 1984) anthropologist Gayle Rubin dates the present anti-sex campaign to the 1977 effort by singer Anita Bryant to overturn a gay-rights ordinance in Miami and compares it to earlier “moral panics” such as the “white slavery” hysteria of the 1880s, the anti-homosexual campaigns of the 1950s and the child pornography panic of the late 1970s. She writes:

“Because sexuality in Western societies is so mystified, the wars over it are often fought at oblique angles, aimed at phony targets, conducted with misplaced passions, and are highly, intensely symbolic. Sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection. During a moral panic, such fears attach to some unfortunate sexual activity or population. The media become ablaze with indignation, the public behaves like a rabid mob, the police are activated, and the state enacts new laws and regulations. When the furor has passed, some innocent erotic group has been decimated and the state has extended its power into new areas of erotic behavior.”

A feminist herself, Rubin attacks the alliance between the right-wing and such anti-sex feminists as “Women Against Pornography.” She notes that the feminist movement has polarized into two currents: “One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women’s sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active....The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse.” At its extreme, this grouping espouses a grotesque parody of repressive, family-centered sexuality with its advocacy of monogamous lesbianism, while proscribing nearly all other sexual activity as being tainted with male dominance. “Even sexual fantasy during masturbation is denounced as a phallicentric holdover.”

Rubin goes on to say:

“anti-porn rhetoric is a massive exercise in scapegoating. It criticizes non-routine acts of love rather than routine acts

of oppression, exploitation, or violence. This demon sexuality directs legitimate anger at women’s lack of personal safety against innocent individuals, practices, and communities. Anti-porn propaganda often implies that sexism originates within the commercial sex industry and subsequently infects the rest of society. This is sociologically nonsensical. The sex industry....reflects the sexism that exists in the society as a whole....A good deal of current feminist literature attributes the oppression of women to graphic representations of sex, prostitution, sex education, sadomasochism, male homosexuality, and transsexualism. Whatever happened to the family, religion, education, child-rearing practices, the media, the state, psychiatry, job discrimination, and unequal pay?”

A good question. The answer is that such issues are submerged in a movement that situates the basic division in society between the sexes. As Marxists we unequivocally reject this feminist axiom and assert that the root of oppression lies in the division of society into antagonistic classes, i.e., in the requirements of the tiny handful of capitalists who have appropriated the productive capacity of society to maintain their rule. Those fake-leftists who try to bridge this gap with a hyphen (designating themselves “socialist-feminists”) capitulate to the sectoralism of which feminism is but one possible variant. In so doing they soon find themselves “critically” supporting such fundamentally reactionary initiatives as calls on the state for more cops to make the streets safe (the political thrust of “Take Back the Night” mobilizations) or for the closing of porn shops.

Sexual oppression in capitalist society rests on the twin pillars of the family and the state. The fundamental role of the family is to produce and socialize the next generation of wage laborers for capital. The family naturally bulwarks the hierarchical social order of which it is the basic unit. The repression of homosexual and other forms of “deviant” sexuality serves to channel libidinous energy into the socially-approved heterosexual monogamous nuclear family. Nothing fundamental in this equation will change short of the wholesale re-ordering of society which smashes the material underpinnings of women’s oppression and assumes social responsibility for childcare and housework. This can only be achieved through a social revolution led by the working class, uniting behind it all the oppressed and downtrodden of this society. ■