

DESIRE AND SEXUALITY

Reviewed by
Kim Back and
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DESIRE: The Politics of Sexuality, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell & Sharon Thompson. Virago Press, 1983. \$16.95, paperback. 429 pages.

There's something happening to the debate around sexuality within the Women's Liberation Movement — for a start it's been reopened. Sex is on the agenda again and in a way which breaks the silence (around sexual practice and desire) that has permeated much of the movement in recent years. *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* is one of a number of books/articles published recently which address this problem and ask us to re-examine some of the major assumptions which have developed within feminist sexual politics — in this sense it is a very challenging collection of articles.

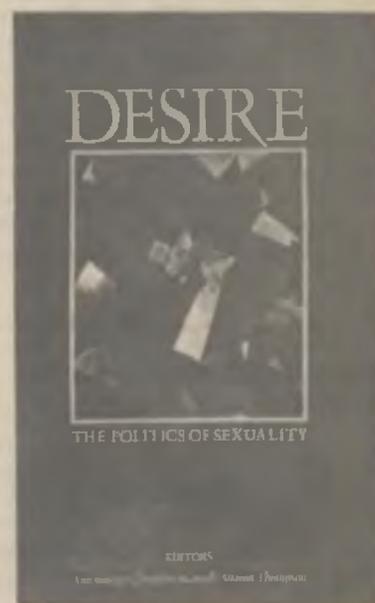
Desire — in examining the feminist challenge to the oppressive aspects of heterosexuality, marriage, love, romance, role-playing — shows how some of us have backed ourselves into a corner. The developing implication that we could find our "true" (innate?) women's sexuality by simply (!) liberating ourselves from these oppressive relations produced a stalemate around sexual politics within the movement. A hidden agenda emerged in which the public face of the movement often denounced certain sexual practices as "politically incorrect" while, privately, we struggled to get our often "secret" desire to match our political aspirations.

The original work of the movement to make sex/personal life and a public/political question inspired

thousands of women. But this particular aspect of feminist politics became impossible to sustain as valid criticisms of men's power over women (often expressed in sexual relations) developed into fairly rigid moral pronouncements about how women should or should not live their lives. As Rosalind Coward points out in the preface to *Desire*, what is "at issue here is the question of just how easy (and desirable) it is to proscribe a new form of sexual practice purged of all the patterns of desire characteristic of oppressive heterosexual relations. After all, some women are asking, is sexual *desire* absolutely the same thing as sexual *relations*, and if it's not, aren't there ways of changing sexual relations without getting into the quicksand of telling women what they should be feeling?"

It is this dilemma which *Desire* addresses. The editors and many of their contributors argue for the development of a feminist sexual politics based, not on what *desire should be*, but rather what it *is* — how it is constructed, the power of its construction, *if* it can be changed, *how* it can be changed. They argue for a politics which sees these possibilities around desire as historically/culturally and race and class specific. There's a move in the book "towards seeing sexual practices not in isolation but in the context of other social structures. This move is designed to allow us to *assess* sexual activity, not as being "progressive" or "not progressive" in and of itself, but in relation to other historical forces — the intervention of the state, the power which men have over women, the divisions between races and classes".

The articles in *Desire* re-wideranging and cover such issues as and sexual morality, porno-



graphy, fantasy, capitalism and gay identity, the relationship between power and desire and the erotic dimensions of domination/submission. A lot of it is heavy going which doesn't necessarily make it widely accessible, but articles such as "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different" by Ann Snitow make for an exciting read as we travel through the "set of relations, feelings and assumptions that *do* indeed permeate our minds" and account for much of the mass appeal (and big business!) of "Mills and Boon".

The debate with which *Desire* is concerned has raged over the last few years around such "controversial" issues as sadomasochism, pornography and paedophilia but these issues themselves have broader implications for the development of a new sexual politics within the women's liberation movement. We can move beyond the

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impasse of being classified as either "for" or "against" these sexual practices if we are willing to take a much closer look at the **complex** patterns of power and desire in our sexual relationships.

The section from *Desire* entitled "Domination, Submission and the Unconscious" seeks to explore these complexities in a way which might enable women to recognise/use power and powerlessness for its erotic possibilities — for our own pleasure. In such a schema, heterosexual relations, for example, are not simply power plays by men where women must be condemned for "sleeping with the enemy", but rather can be seen as dynamic relationships which it is possible for women to enter with a relative degree of autonomy, and as strategies around their own personal/sexual

pleasure. The article from this section entitled "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination" by Jessica Benjamin is brilliant and outlines the complex interplay around domination/submission which permeates much of our sexual and personal relationships.

Most importantly — in reading *Desire* you get the feeling of breaking new ground. The argument for a different feminist sexual politics has implications for women's relationship to political change, for differences between women that may be class or race based and for the possibilities of coalition work with other oppressed groups. As Rosalind Coward points out in the preface, "it may seem far fetched to suggest that a discussion of sexual pleasure contains these implications". But the long term effects of such a discussion **does**

open new ground for the women's movement. "It may become possible to talk about feminism once again in terms of attitudes towards friends and work **as well** as sex, and to be able to evolve politics towards women and the family, **and** respond to pressing issues such as racism — all issues which have been swamped in the quest for purity of sexual position. It would be pleasingly ironic if, in pursuing an understanding of sex, it should free us from the tyranny of sex"

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not want to know their neighbours, and anonymity for them means freedom, not anomie. Others want the isolation provided by an acre block on the edge of the city. Are such preferences beyond the scope of socialism?

How can housing be allocated fairly and efficiently under the shelter title system without the establishment of a large, and possibly authoritarian, bureaucracy? How can supply of housing keep up with demand without the creation of the ugly and depressing mass housing estates which are a feature of existing socialist cities? Any future expansion of the Alternative Melbourne project would have to discuss these issues.

A city is also a political-economic entity, but the collective's discussion of the shape of industry in the future Melbourne is much less adequate than their discussion of the shape of the metropolitan community. They freely admit that their performance in this respect is "disappointing" — something that reflects, not so much their inadequacies as their lack of information, the difficulties involved, and a general failing of the left to come to terms with the problems of industry.

Their general principles of economic organisation are in line with their socialist ideal: A mixed economy, so they argue, will best allow for individual diversity and the general social good. Large industries, especially multinationals, must be brought under the control of the community but, in addition, there will be room for co-operatives and small businesses to respond to the demands of individual consumers. On the other hand, "free market ideology must never be permitted to swamp the conscious promotion of democratically decided values or regulate allocation of resources". How exactly this is to be ensured is left mostly to our imaginations.

The industry section in particular — and to some extent, the whole program — suffers both from being too general and too specific.

It is too general in that it never really deals with *Melbourne* — that unique entity with its own history, cultures, landmarks, styles of life. The proposals which are made would apply equally well to virtually any city in the developed world (with the exception of some proposals concerning trams). This generality is, in some respects, an advantage — you don't have to live in Melbourne in order to appreciate and apply the program. But it is also a weakness. Any socialist program which aims to

promote both diversity and community should concern itself with the question of how the unique features of a particular city can be preserved and developed. But this is another, much larger, project ...

At the same time, the program suffers from its specificity — its attempt to focus on a unit which is merely a dependent part of a much larger whole. Everyone, including the collective, will agree that you can't have socialism in one city. A socialist Melbourne requires, at the very least, a socialist Australia — an economic and political structure which makes possible the kind of developments envisioned for a future Melbourne. Planning a socialist Melbourne depends on planning a socialist Australia.

But that, too, is another project. Formulating a vision of a future socialist society must begin somewhere, and the Socialist Alternative Melbourne Collective have made a credible beginning. In doing so, they have contributed significantly to the achievement of unity among progressive people, which is also the prerequisite of socialism.

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