The social construction of heterosexuality as a means of women's oppression: the feminist critique of sexuality.

Abstract:

Feminist discourses of sexuality have famously problematized the dominant model of sexual relationships between the sexes, one that Rich (1980) has defined heteropatriarchal. Moreover, rather than accepting the idea that has dominated theoretical approaches to sexuality for a long time – namely the conception of heterosexuality as a natural, pre-social fact, feminist academics have insisted that sexuality is a social product. This paper explores the feminist critique of sexuality – heterosexuality in particular – as a means for the survival of the oppression of women and their subordination to men. It is argued that while it is often assumed that contemporary female sexuality is a liberated and empowered one, a more in-depth analysis lends credibility to Rich’s theory. In fact, I suggest, the objectification of lesbian sexuality for male pleasure that has become increasingly popular in both pornography and mainstream popular culture in the last decade, lends credibility to Rich’s theory. Furthermore, following a Gramscian approach and the theory of Gill (2003), I argue that while acknowledging women’s agency in the construction and performance of their sexuality, it is still possible to problematize it as heteropatriarchal. My thesis is illustrated through an analysis of the increased mainstreaming of ‘porn culture’ and the glamourization of strippers through popular movies such as Moulin Rouge (2001) and Burlesque (2010) and the popularity of celebrities like Dita Von Teese.
In this essay, I will explore and discuss the feminist critique of the heteropatriarchal model of sexuality. This paper will start with a brief discussion of the social constructionist approach to the study of sexuality, which has questioned the naturalness of the dominant model of heterosexual relations and has allowed a critical feminist analysis to emerge. I will focus particularly on the critique of heterosexuality as a means of male dominance, as discussed by Rich. In the discussion, I will provide contemporary examples which, I suggest, support her theory. Another theme explored in this paper is that of pornography as a tool for the construction of sexuality that embodies the supremacy of men: as several feminists have highlighted, the pornographic iconography has been mainstreamed to the media and popular culture. The theorized shift from sexual objectification to subjectification, proposed by Gill will also be analysed.

Sexuality can be broadly defined as an individual trait that finds expression in sexual activities and intimate relationships (Collins Dictionary of Sociology, 2000).

Prior to the 1960s sexuality was, for the most part, treated as a pre-social fact, rather than as a social product. In fact, it was only after the emergence of the social constructionist sociological perspective, the rise of the feminist and gay movements that the idea sexuality was a product of nature has been challenged (Jackson and Scott, 2010). As Weeks puts it “biology conditions and limits what is possible, but it does not cause the patterns of sexual life” (2010, p.20) Thus, in sociological definitions, the social and cultural origin of sexuality has been stressed (Collins Dictionary of Sociology, 2000).

The idea that the way in which we live our sexuality is socially shaped has allowed the proliferation of a feminist discourse that has questioned the naturalness of the dominant model of heterosexuality, termed by some feminists ‘heteropatriarchal’ (Kitzinger, 1994), which is based on the primacy of heterosexuality and male dominance.

Adrianne Rich famously suggested heterosexuality is nothing less than a social and political institution that serves to reproduce female oppression and ensure men’s physical, economical and emotional access to women (Rich, 1980). Rich pointed out that through the myth of complementarity of the sexes the heterosexual relationship is romanticized to the extent that it comes to represent the ultimate female aspiration and she maintained that constructing heterosexuality as natural ensures the invisibility and the implicit ‘othering’ of lesbians: their
construction as un-natural, deviant women. Furthermore, as Kitzinger (1994) pointed out, while engaging in heterosexual activity does not have particular implications for that person’s identity, engagement in sexual intercourse with someone of the same sex results in the labelling of that person as homosexual. Thus, those who transgress the dominant - heteronormative – conception of sexuality are forced to interrogate and redefine their sexual identity, in order to fit within the strict, essential boundaries with which sexualities are constructed.

Rich developed her theory in the late 1970s, at a time when homosexuality in general was more stigmatized than it is today; indeed, in the contemporary Western World to a bigger or lesser degree depending on the country, homosexuality, while not completely de-stigmatized, has become more socially accepted; the LGTB movement has undoubtedly been successful in the campaigns for the legal recognition of these groups’ rights. However, I suggest that it is possible to see the persistence of an androcentric construction of sexuality in the way pornography and the media have redefined lesbians’ sexuality as an object for male pleasure. In her review of Spike Lee’s movie “She hate me”, in which a man is asked by his former girlfriend, now in a lesbian relationship, to impregnate her by having sex with her in exchange for $5000, Barton (2005) notes how far from lesbian reality the women in question are represented. In particular the idea that a lesbian would so easily accept heterosexual intercourse, which in the movie is also followed by her orgasm, is both outrageous and unrealistic for Barton. She in fact claims that this depiction resembles the pornographic – objectifying – portrayal of lesbians: “filmmaker represents lesbians as slutty wanna be hetero bitches who just need to get laid” (Barton, 2005, p.80). The male character in fact is harassed by a conspicuous group of attractive lesbians who are eager to have sex with him to become pregnant and who seem to enjoy it as well.

This objectification of lesbian sexuality has become a popular theme in advertising and popular culture: in 2003, during a performance at Video Music Awards pop-star Madonna engaged in a seemingly lesbian kiss with singers Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. At MTV Music Awards, actress Sandra Bullock did the same with Scarlett Johansson. These women, far from empowering lesbian sexuality, are performing for the male gaze, they are enacting a popular male fantasy. One of the male and female adolescents interviewed by Levy (2005) has
confirmed this: speaking of school dances, they admitted that performance of so called ‘girl-on-girl action’ is a popular trick used by girls to attract male attention. Thus, it could be argued, the trend I have described above might lend credibility to Rich theory: while the lesbian experience is surely not invisible anymore, it has been re-subjected to the heterosexual, androcentric eroticism and reconstructed as a male fantasy, as if there were no sexual space in which women could escape the male objectifying gaze. Importantly, there is no evidence that something similar has happened for male homosexuality.

The feminist problematization of heterosexual sex has been criticized from outside and within and the women’s movement. Several commentators have insisted that this view strips women of their agency and denies the validity of the experiences of the many women who say they enjoy and freely chose to engage in heterosexual activity with men. However, this criticism is based on a rather superficial, simplistic idea of the ways in which enforcement and compulsion work (Kitzinger, 1994). Indeed, there are many sociological theories that conceptualize power not only in terms of open, forcible coercion, but rather in terms of being able to shape the preferences, the choices and the aspirations of a social group in a way that they will actively consent and participate to their own oppression.

One of these theories is that of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who has developed the concept of hegemony to account for the role of human agency in the conditions of the oppressed. Gramsci (1971), in fact, argued that the group that holds a dominant position in society, holds the power to shape the ideology of the dominated groups through their control of political, economic, cultural and religious institutions. Thus, being in such position, they hold the power to persuade the oppressed group(s) who then espouses the values and worldviews of their oppressors. In this way, Gramsci explained why the subordinated group – the proletariat, in the case of Marxist analysis – failed to attempt a revolution and consented to the system that oppressed them, through this mechanism of persuasion. Unsurprisingly this concept has been used by feminist to analyse the nature of gendered oppression (Ledwith, 2009). The hegemonic power enjoyed by men over women, it has been argued, allows men to control women in a more subtle way than open, forceful coercion. Thus, applying this analytical perspective to the social construction of sexuality it can be argued that female sexuality has been defined in a way that reproduces, but at the same time obscures, gendered power relations.
This theoretical viewpoint then does not deny women’s agency, it does not deny the idea that women might actively choose – in the absence of explicit compulsion – to have sexual intercourse with men and to find it pleasurable. However, it is remarked, “heteropatriarchal power promotes, cultivates and nurtures heterosexual ‘pleasure’” (Kitzinger, 1994, p.201). Thus, under conditions in which men enjoy a hegemonic power, sex is the means through which female subordination is made sexy, is turned into eroticism (Jeffreys, 1990). Importantly, it is not only pleasurable for men, but for women too. As women are born into an unequal society, in which they are subordinate to men, Kitzinger (1994) and Jeffreys (1990) point out, their sexuality is shaped by their position and so, they internalize – that is they learn to enjoy – sex which is both the result and the reproduction of male supremacy.

Many feminists have identified in pornographic material a key tool for the construction of heterosexuality as a relation of domination in which men have the power and women are subjected to it. Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin and Diana E. H. Russell are among the best known feminist activists against pornography. Analysing the increasingly violent nature of pornographic material, which depicts sex in a way which is degrading and abusive for women, Russell points out that “pornography institutionalizes the sexuality that both embodies and enacts male supremacy” (1993, p.69). Dworkin MacKinnon have expressed similar views: pornography constructs sex as the subjugation of women and in doing so it normalises the gendered hierarchy in sexual intercourse, which then comes to be seen as unproblematic, as long as it is enjoyed by both sexes (Cornell, 2000). Pleasure, critical feminist voices such as those mentioned above, insist, must be problematized: as Jeffreys (1990) brilliantly maintains, if women are sexually turned on by their oppression, it becomes much more difficult to resist it.

While in the past pornography was consumed in the private realm, as feminists writers have noted, what we have seen in recent years is the mainstreaming of pornographic material; in fact, the style which had been hitherto limited to the realm of pornography has entered popular culture and is, therefore, gaining growing visibility. Merskin (2003) has noted how the images found in fashion magazines, particularly in advertising; clearly imitate pornographic poses and
gestures. Only a few years ago an ad from Dolce and Gabbana in which a woman, provocatively dressed is surrounded by a group of partially undressed men, one of whom is holding her forcibly down to the ground, spurred a debate over the ambiguity of the picture that seemed to knowingly resemble an imminent gang rape. It should be noted that the ad was controversial primarily because of this alleged reference to sexual violence, rather than the sexual nature of the ad. In fact, as Merskin rightly notes, although much of the material that is seen in this type of advertising is pornographic, as it depicts clear gendered power relations in which the woman is sexually objectified, it is not thought of as such. Indeed, this is what McNair (cited in Attwood, 2006) has termed ‘pornographication’: the widespread use in the field of art and popular culture of an iconography which is typical of pornographic material. These images do not only produce a heteropatriarchal sexuality; they also construct an ideal version of femininity that is strictly bound to being sexually alluring, attractive, and readily available for male consumption (Gill, 2003).

This is part of what Levy has called ‘raunch culture’: one in which women conform themselves to the pornographic script; as she notes in her book ‘Female Chauvinist Pigs’, it is not uncommon to find women who go to strip clubs, who take lap dance classes, who choose a dressing style which is clearly turning them into the sexually objectified females that populate the sex work industry, from pornography to prostitution and strip clubs. Indeed, on Irish Online discussion Forum ‘Boards.ie’ a female user initiated a discussion about strip clubs and many female respondents have spoken of having visited female strip clubs a few times, sometimes with male friends or even with their own partners. While some expressed finding it somehow disappointing or not particularly pleasant, many have described the experience as unproblematic and enjoyable (gargleblaster, 2011)

Interestingly, particularly in the last decade, striptease and burlesque have been glamourized by the media and the film industry: in 2001 Luhrmann’s ‘Moulin Rouge’, starring Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, romanticizes the encounter between the performer and the writer who part of the audience. Moreover, in the early 2000s Heather Renee Sweet, known as Dita Von Teese gained popularity after she appeared on the cover of Playboy and after marrying singer Marilyn Manson. Pin-up style model and dancer Dita Von Teese is famously known as the Queen of Burlesque, a genre whose recent popularity can be attributed to the her
prominence (anom, 2008). Far from being perceived as a sexually objectifying, vulgar sex show, burlesque is perceived as a stylish, elegant form of strip-tease, thanks to the elaborated, often vintage types of costumes that burlesque performer wear. The genre became so popular that in 2010 a movie, by Steve Antin and starring singer Christina Aguilera was filmed. The movie, titled ‘Burlesque’ presents Aguilera as a small town girl who finds a job as a waitress in a burlesque club and then goes on to realize her dream to become one of the dancers herself. The film constructs her as an empowered woman, who achieves personal success, in terms of her social, financial and sentimental status through her affirmation as a burlesque dancer. Thus, it is not surprising that the genre has gained significant popularity to the point that now Burlesque classes are easily available.

Importantly, Dita Von Teese and the character played by Aguilera embody what has come to be seen, in contemporary Western societies as a liberated sexuality for women; this is what empowered femininity looks like for contemporary women. As Gill (2003) pointed out, in fact, representations that commodify the female body are widespread through the media, clothing and advertising. Unlike in the past, when they were the target of feminist critique, nowadays they are not only seen as unproblematic, but on the contrary, as Levy (2005) points out, they are held up as a proof that we live in a post-feminist society, where women are free to express their sexuality without repression (Levy, 2005). However, while in the past such objectifying depiction of women portrayed women as passive beings on which objectification was imposed, modern representations have turned, Gill has suggested, women into sexual subjects; this shift, from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification (Gill, 2003) constructs femininity in a way which is not less problematic. In fact, it constructs femininity and female sexuality in very constraining terms: rather than freed self-expression, it is nothing more than conformity to the dominant ideal of sexually attractiveness.

The problem with this shift is, Gill (2003) maintains, that it makes objectification and exploitation of the female body more invisible. This is because such sexual commodification is masked as a means to achieve power and self-confidence for women. Indeed, what goes unnoticed in this perspective is that while for men one way of enacting and displaying their power is by being able to grant access to the object of their sexual desire – typically a young, thin, voluptuous woman – for women power is constructed as the ability to embody that desired
object. Thus, for women, the real source of power lies in their compliance with the requirements of males – that is a woman willing to subordinate herself for the pleasure of men. Gill (2003), therefore, points out that women have been socially conditioned to look at themselves through the male gaze and, for this reason, they have become agents in their own objectification.

However, feminist scholars Lamb and Peterson (2012), have suggested that, while it is indeed true that women, particularly adolescents girls, are exposed through the media to damaging messages that construct female sexuality as a commodity, this does not necessarily result in the internalization of a disempowered sexuality. In fact, they have maintained, education to sexuality and increasing media literacy among the young women might help adolescent girls to become more aware of such messages and to become truly sexually empowered.

Nonetheless, Gill (2012) has rebutted, her own research has shown that among young girls there is already, in degrees that vary among individuals, a reflexive and critical approach of the media discourses through which female sexuality is constructed. In sharp contrast with the assumptions that underlies Lamb and Peterson’s support for media literacy, Gill explains that simply being aware of how female sexuality is represented does not result in resistance to such depiction. In fact, even those girls in her study who have shown to be deeply critical of the media, have spoken of their difficulty to overcome their influence. As one of the adolescents participants quoted by Gill has explained, while she dislikes the model of femininity which are portrayed by women’s magazine, she still felt a significant degree of dissatisfaction with their body Thus, as Gill insists, Lamb and Peterson seem to fail to acknowledge that subjectivity is not immune from contradictions: one might indeed know that a certain model is not good for her to follow, but this does not necessarily imply that she will feel free to reject it; not, at least, without any psychological consequences for one’s self-esteem and social status.

In conclusion, this essay has explored a feminist critique of the way in which sexuality has been socially constructed to objectify women and to reinforce and reproduce male dominance and women’s oppression. I have suggested that while Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality might sound outdated in contemporary Western World where both female and male homosexuals have gained more social acceptance and legal rights, the way in which the
pornography and the media have reconstructed lesbian sexuality as a subject for male sexual pleasure, suggests that her theory is still relevant.

Moreover, I have discussed the feminist critique of pornography and pornification of culture, through advertising and more generally popular culture. As the many critical voices in this paper have maintained, the mainstreaming of pornography and the post-feminist, illusory language that depicts sexually objectified women as sexually empowered and liberated has turned women from sexual objects into sexual subjects. As Gill and a Gramscian approach would suggest, this is not a progressive step, but rather one that obscures subtle gendered power relations that lie behind such shift. The challenge that this feminist critique leaves unsolved is in the identification of what constitutes a truly egalitarian sexuality and how it can be achieved.
References


