

## **The Privilege of Heterosexuality and its Consequences**

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7. What does it mean to say that heterosexuality is privileged and what are the consequences?

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Sexual relations between men and women are normal. They are natural. Within the right context, they are morally right. These assumptions betray the privileged nature of heterosexuality. To ascribe such descriptors as natural, normal, and moral means by extension, that other expressions of sexuality are unnatural, abnormal and morally repugnant. Within modern Western society these assumptions about heterosexuality can lead it to a privileged status, creating problems for both heterosexuals and homosexuals who find themselves on the wrong side of these assumptions.

The true question, then, is whether or not heterosexuality is privileged. The assumption of heterosexuality has become so ingrained in the collective consciousness, that homosexuals can be excluded from certain aspects of society. Marriage is but one example: in countries like the United States, where a supposed separation between church and state exists<sup>1</sup>, the state acceptance of a religious institution called marriage—and its scripture-based restrictions—bars homosexuals from the benefits of inheritance and tax breaks accessible to heterosexuals. Gender-based athletic teams, female (and homosexual) exclusion from military forces, and same-sex residences in schools—these divisions of society all assume that boys like girls and girls like boys, the two should be separated and no more discussion need occur. Judith Butler describes this as the heterosexual matrix: “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (Segal 1994:190). Essentially, in our society, to be male requires attraction to females and to be female requires attraction to men.

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<sup>1</sup> This fact can be debated: the Bill of Rights establishes that the government cannot create laws impinging upon religious practice. Complete separation is merely the assumed spirit of this clause.

When an individual breaks out of the matrix, either by acting on a desire with another of the same sex or simply by making choices of fashion or attitude deemed not of his or her gender, it causes a moral panic in others. Things as simple as a man using a soldier's carry-all—the military version of a woman's purse—may lead to confusion and distress, even ridicule, by others. This 'gender trouble' as Segal describes it, comes from “transcending binary restrictions, from within the power dynamics of sexuality itself” (1994:191). An individual must be sexuality identified as normal or aberrant before social intercourse can continue.

The delineation of sexuality as normal (heterosexuality) or deviant (any other form of sexual expression) has been institutionalized in our society. As Bilton *et al.* explains, “in many workplaces, for example, heterosexuality is alluded to in the way people look and dress, in the practice of sexual harassment, in ‘secret’ affairs and in jokes and gossip” (2002:154). In this and many other environments, homosexuals do not easily fit into the rubric and must do so by becoming “the gay guy” in the office, hall of residence, etcetera.

In a culture where homosexuality, even if legal and socially acceptable on some level, needs to be identified and categorized, homosexuals cannot receive the same privilege as heterosexuals. Rich suggests that homosexuality is compulsory in that it is “imposed, managed, organised, propagandised, and maintained by force” (Bilton *et al.* 2002:154). In our society, free expression of homosexuality is relegated to certain havens (such as separate nightclubs, male dancers and women's professional golf). Consequently, homosexuals, while free to practice their lifestyles, do so in a marginalized and oppressed manner.

The assumption of heterosexuality as natural and appropriate creates inequalities for homosexuals within the diction of social policy. In the UK, consensual heterosexual relations can take place at 16 years of age and while homosexual relations are illegal until 18 years of age.

No laws, however, exist governing lesbian sex. Carabine posits that this does not imply tacit approval of lesbianism, but instead creates “a discourse in which ‘real’ sex is heterosexual, penetrative and focused on male sexuality, with men as sexual initiators” (Richardson 1996:65), and that sexuality between women is therefore not ‘real’ sex. She continues to point out the diction of Family Claim forms and the tax advantages for married couples distinctly purports a preference for heterosexuality. In these examples, Carabine illustrates how Western culture has been wired to the assumption of heterosexuality in its cultural policies. Intentional or not, these policies have become a hindrance to modern non-heterosexuals.

The oppression of homosexuality in Western culture has led to many cultural changes as well in order to hide homosexuality—as something so terrible it had to be swept out of public view. Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for it; ‘hes’ and ‘hims’ in A.E. Housman’s love poems, published posthumously, were changed to ‘shes’ and ‘hers’. Artistic expression is just one of the ways in which society has been deceived due to heterosexuality’s privilege and homosexuality’s requisite marginalization.

Homosexuals are not the only ones who suffer from heterosexual privilege. Fear of homosexuality being contagious to young people has forced many heterosexuals to carefully monitor their own behavior. Gendered behavior has become doubly oppressive because of modern cultural associations with sexuality relating to behaving like the opposite gender. The necessity to closely monitor one’s behavior and concurrently have it monitored by society has created a confidence crisis, where heterosexuals must fear that “naughty demon in the closet”.

It is not uncommon, especially among the young, for the saying “that’s gay” to be used as an insult. Many young men consciously construct an ultra-masculine identity for themselves in

order to avoid ridicule and homosexual suspicion. This fear of homosexuality comes from its classification as outside that of normality.

With many heterosexuals “it is noticeable that a great deal of effort is spent in reinforcing [their] sexual preference” (Bilton *et al.* 2002:154). According to Hall, “insecurity about sexuality may be one of the motivations that drives some men to seek power over women in other respects” (Bilton *et al.* 2002:156). From a biological standpoint, heterosexual males face a challenge in reproduction as well, as they rely on females to transmit their genetic material. As Jones explains,

[Sex cells] come in large and small varieties and the males make the small ones. They put their bets on an outsider: on a single winner among billions at the post, each stripped down ready to face a risky gallop to the line. Their spouses, in contrast, stake their all on a few more-or-less safe bets. Every egg has a fair chance of a plod around the sexual racecourse, but each carries, as a massive weight penalty, the goods needed to make an embryo. Those who make sperm take a free ride at the expense of their opposite numbers ... instead they use female flesh to copy their own DNA. (2003:12)

Jones explains that “males are, in many ways, parasites upon their partners” (2003:19). Males must dominate females in society in order to ensure their continued necessity. Biologically, the radical lesbian feminists are correct: the act of sex involves incomplete males asserting their DNA upon otherwise complete females. It also, however, gives clues as to the moral panic caused by homosexuality.

This may explain why, in part, Western patriarchal society makes homosexuality an insult. Men are constantly berated, “are you gay or something?” which illustrates the cultural

fear of the end of the filial line, the inability to mate and continue. Meanwhile lesbians—who choose not to mate with males—are described as masculine, butch, angry by a patriarchal society; they exist as obstacles to continued male survival.

Cultural panic may only increase, as technological advances move closer to a world in which men are obsolete. Current science allows women to be inseminated without intercourse and sperm to be dyed and sorted by the chromosome they carry. Perhaps in the near future—in much the same way as a fertilized egg can be placed within a host womb—a woman's gene sequence may be inserted in host testes, allowing the creation of billions of sperm, insemination and birth with men completely removed from the process. The bar for this happening, and indeed masculinity's lifeline, is the social stigma of homosexuality.

Heterosexuality's privileged nature and the marginalization of the homosexual as 'other' includes a power dynamic that creates political struggles and associations. Segal describes lesbianism in the seventies as commingling with feminism such that to be a true feminist meant to be a lesbian as well (1994:173). Even more recently, female homosexuality still coincides with politics: Nicola Humberstone, in her article "Lesbians Framed," criticizes one of the few emerging representations of homosexuality in British mass media—the *OUT* programmes on the BBC. She accuses them as taking "the feminism out of lesbianism" (Harne & Miller 1996). The view that lesbianism offers women a chance for freedom disappears, replaced by the claim that any true feminist is a lesbian.

As seen above, situating homosexuals as a marginal group galvanizes anti-mainstream scholarship and radicalizes it, potentially pushing it into absurdity. Radical lesbian feminists view socially constructed heterosexuality as destroyable, and often consider lesbianism the only true feminism in that it completely snubs male-dominated sexuality. Constantly equating

lesbianism and feminism destroys the integrity of lesbianism as a legitimate practice. These newly awakened, radical feminist lesbians are “concerned not so much with sexuality or desire as about bringing their sexual feelings into line with their goal of creating a strong women’s community of resistance” (Segal 1994:171). If women, as feminists, are expected to join the ranks of lesbians then lesbianism itself is a purely political ideal—not a natural, possibly biological, facet of a human identity.

While radical lesbian feminists constantly war against their brethren “sleeping with the enemy” as such a chronic problem, it perhaps indicates these women simply are not lesbians, and that heterosexuality may—whatever the cause—be more than simply a social construction. Segal quotes two feminist writers, Sandra Bem and Sandra Bartky, one which—although monogamous for many years—refuses to admit to being heterosexual, the other lamenting being incapable of sexual attraction to women (1994:215). This self-deception, taken up in sacrificial pursuit of feminism, takes credibility away from their movement. In Lynne Harne and Elaine Miller’s *All the Rage: Reasserting Radical Lesbian Feminism*, academics are continually chided for defending heterosexuality (1994); this sort of sexual fascism creates a mirror-image of the heterosexual hegemony in current society<sup>2</sup>. The new version simply puts the writer’s platform at the top of an unfair system.

Sexuality is unquestioningly a social construct: definitions of the “appropriate” sexual attitudes and actions differ throughout history and across societal borders. In modern Western society, heterosexuality has become so commonly assumed that it has programmed our language and our actions. We have created an environment where heterosexual privilege—and indeed, oppression—looms so close to our vision that it is at first difficult to see or articulate. Be it the

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<sup>2</sup> Gay writers similarly have self-supporting theories, such as one essay touting, “our understanding of sexism is that in a free society everyone will be gay” (Segal 1994:169). A society in which *every* member was gay would have serious reproductive limitations.

social oppression of the homosexual through legal diction, the fear of heterosexuals to appear as the marginalized, or the galvanization and absurd-liberalization of homosexual activists to create an equally oppressive society, the consequences of heterosexual privilege can be found in many parts of modern life.

Word Count: 1916



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