Drawing the Line: A Feminist Response to Adult–Child Sexual Relations

Mica Nava

The contemporary feminist movement in the United States and Britain and feminist ideas about sexuality developed in large part both out of, and in reaction to, the libertarian and liberation politics of the 1960s. Within the libertarian theoretical frame work, sexuality was understood as an energy and source of pleasure which needed to be freed from societal constraints. Sexual repression was perceived as intimately linked to political authoritarianism: it was both a consequence of it and contributed to its persistence. Thus one of the tasks of socialists was to undermine the prevailing sexual codes, to explore hedonism both for its own sake and for what were considered to be its inevitably progressive political ramifications. Important among the targets of these libertarian critiques were monogamous marriage, the age of consent, legislation relating to homosexuality and abortion, and almost any other sexual taboo which placed limits upon the ‘free’ sexual expression to which every individual was entitled.

Rooted as it was in this tradition, the women’s liberation movement in the early days insisted upon the sexual liberation of women, and mounted a critique of the double sexual standard – of the way in which the constraints of the puritan ethic and monogamy operated most particularly for women. The campaign for free abortion on demand was (in part) an aspect of this general struggle to centrestage women’s sexual freedom and pleasure, as was the focus upon the clitoris as the source of female orgasm. This in turn suggested, at least theoretically, the potential dispensability of men

A. McRobbie et al. (eds.), Gender and Generation
© Erica Carter, Adrian Chappell, Barbara Hudson, Angela McRobbie, Mica Nava, Valerie Walkerdine, Julian Wood 1984
and contributed to a gradual assertion of the radical nature of lesbianism. At the same time the early women’s liberation movement formed alliances with the emerging gay movement because it was considered that homosexuals, both female and male, were also constrained by the existing rigid ‘gender system’ and its ideology (located somewhere ‘out there’). However, alongside these liberationist-feminist celebrations and explorations of sexual possibility in which women were cast as active, initiating and powerful, there developed during the course of the seventies a new sensitivity among feminists to the ways in which sex and sexual relations could be as oppressive as the more conventional targets of feminist attack. In this more sceptical analysis, sex ceased to be perceived as a fundamental drive which needed to be liberated. Instead the nature of sexuality was increasingly understood as socially constructed, as shaped by a range of historical factors among which the differential in social power between men and women was quite central.

This shift away from libertarianism can be seen with hindsight to be associated with a diversity of theoretical and political developments. On the one hand it signalled a (minority) theoretical interest in what, for instance, Freud and Foucault could contribute to a feminist understanding of the production of sexuality. On the other hand, and this was both the dominant and the more directly political response, it ushered in a revival of emphasis upon differences in sexuality between men and women, and upon women as the victims of male power and sexual desire. This kind of perspective underlies the notion of sexual harassment, and draws attention to the way in which unwanted sexual attention from men towards women in, for example, the context of work, constitutes an exercise of power and a form of exploitation. The idea of women as victims of male lust has contributed to the focus of some feminists upon pornography as one of the key supports of male supremacy. It is also evident in the withdrawal of some women into political celibacy and political lesbianism, and in the division of the gay movement along gender lines. There are of course important differences both between and within these more recent concerns of feminism, but what they have in common is the underlying idea of women as often powerless (despite the fact that feminist organisation over these issues amounts to a counterattack), and sexuality, particularly heterosexuality, as often menacing and exploitative. The predominantly liberationist view, with which these more recent analyses are in