



# The Feminist Sex Wars

THE SCHOLAR AND THE FEMINIST: TOWARDS A POLITICS OF SEXUALITY

Barnard College, New York City, April 24, 1982

# About *off our backs* newsjournal

*off our backs* was a feminist newsjournal in publication from 1970 to 2008.

- Run by a collective of women.
- Covered most events of the women's movement. Was considered the paper of record for the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s.
- Covered international topics pertaining to women's, feminist, and lesbian issues and culture.
- Published early coverage of women in prison, women and disabilities, and women of color (covered first National Black Feminist Organization conference in 1973).
- Covered women's festivals including the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and women's and gay rights marches.
- Published various sides of controversies.

# Coverage of Barnard Conference in *off our backs*

Covered of Barnard conference in *off our backs*:

- Volume 12, no. 6, June 1982: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25774452>
  - Volume 12, no. 7, July 1982: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25774488>
  - Volume 12, no. 8, August-September 1982: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25774545>
  - Volume 12, no. 10, November 1982: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25774662>
- Only covered a few conference sessions.
  - Separated the conference coverage from opinion pieces about the conference.
  - Tried to cover various sides of the debates at the conference.
  - Featured numerous letters in response over the next several issues.
  - Both the conference and the coverage of it were very contentious.

# Contentious Issues Discussed

- Sadomasochism/BDSM
- Erotica
- Lesbian sexuality
- Butch-femme roles
- Pornography
- Prostitution
- “Intergenerational” sex (sex with minors)

# Selected Conference Sessions

- Opening session: “How Feminists Thought about Sex: Our Complex Legacy” with Ellen DuBois, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” with Hortense Spillers, and “The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics 1965-1981” with Alice Echols
- “Beyond the Gay/Straight Split: Do Sexual ‘Roles’ (Butch/Femme) Transcend Sexual Preference?” with Esther Newton and Shirley Walton
- “Concepts for a Radical Politics of Sex” with Gayle Rubin and “Lesbian Sex Mafia Speakout”
- “Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality” with Dorothy Allison, Muriel Dimen, Mirtha N. Quintanales, and Joan Nestle
- Closing session: “Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure” with Amber Hollibaugh, poetry readings with Hattie Gossett, Cherríe Moraga, and Sharon Olds
- Link to conference program: <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/sfxxx/programs/sf09.pdf>

# Organizations/People Involved

## Radical feminist groups

Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism, comprised of:

- *Women Against Pornography*, Dorchen Leidholt, cofounder
- *Women Against Violence Against Women*
- *New York Radical Feminists*

Wrote a pamphlet titled “We Protest” that was passed out at the conference

## “Sex liberal” groups

- *No More Nice Girls*, women writers who published in the *Village Voice*, Ellen Willis was named
- *Samois*, San Francisco-based organization of lesbian sadomasochists, Gayle Rubin was cofounder
- *Lesbian Sex Mafia*, New York City-based group, Dorothy Allison was cofounder

# Critiques from “Sex Liberals”

Sex liberal critiques of radical feminists

- Accusations of being right-wing/conservative
- Accusations of McCarthyism and censorship
- Negative repercussions of conference coverage
  - Barnard administration confiscated “Conference Diary” ([Diary-of-a-Conference-on-Sexuality.pdf](#))
  - One of the speakers was asked by her supervisor if she was a “sex pervert.”
  - Helena Rubenstein Foundation withdrew their ongoing financial support of the “Scholar and the Feminist” conference series.

# Critiques from Radical Feminists

Radical feminists were expressing disagreement; it was not censorship.

Claudette Charbonneau, in an opinion piece in June 1982 issue of *off our backs*, decried: “...the inability to grasp the difference between opposition and censorship. Pointing out that one does not agree and the reasons why one does not agree is not the same thing as censoring. If that distinction is lost, then all possibility of intellectual life, of discussion and inquiry, is lost.”

Sex liberals, not radical feminists, reflect right-wing values.

Charbonneau continued: “I don’t think the positions presented at this conference were the positions of sexual radicals. I think they were sexually conservative positions, assuming that attraction must be based on differences, polarities or dominance.”

# Critiques from Radical Feminists

## (continued)

There was a lack of balance of perspectives in who was included in the conference.

Pamphlet: Conference “promot[es] one perspective on sexuality and silenc[es] the view of a major portion of the feminist movement.”

Dorchen Leidholdt was reported in *off our backs* as saying:

“...if this conference would have been presented by No More Nice Girls or the Lesbian Sex Mafia, then they would have had every right to present only their point of view. But the Scholar and the Feminist is supposed to be representative of the movement.” ...“I’m not protesting their inclusion, but our exclusion. I think the conference legitimizes the S&M movement by giving it approval from the academic worlds. ... This conference was an attempt to wrest the impetus of feminism...into a direction of sexual liberation” as defined by the male left.

# Critiques from Radical Feminists

## (continued)

There was a lack of political analysis by sex liberals.

*off our backs* collective member Fran Moira criticized the closing session for

“...the total failure of the conference to acknowledge that some desires are destructive and the embracing without analysis of all sexual practices that have been challenged as destructive to women.”

Claudette Charbonneau, in her *off our backs* commentary, wrote,

“We are not to be hampered by the unpleasant insights into ourselves and the world around us which a feminist perspective reveals.”

Charbonneau continued, “...it *is* possible for a group of ostensibly intelligent and well-meaning individuals to contenance [sic] notions which actually contradict their principles. For it is a patent contradiction in terms to advocate sexual relationships exploiting power differentials and at the same time to maintain that one is upholding feminist ideas which are based on an opposition to such exploitation.” She concluded that the conference was “undermining the intellectual foundations of the Women’s Movement.”

# Similarities of divisions in “sex wars” and in transgender issues

“Sex liberals” and radical feminists reflect different ideological clusters

1. Idealism vs. materialism
2. Libertarianism: focus on negative over positive liberties

Rather than advocating for systemic change (social, economic, material), liberals focus on

- Freedom
- Accommodation/adaptation
- Empowerment
- Choice/consent

# Radical feminist analysis is still relevant

Letter by Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media in *off our backs*:

“There is evidence that the portrayals of women in pornography have directly encouraged a number of vicious, unsolicited acts. Large numbers of women ... have reported being raped (vaginally and anally), forced into oral sex, and bound or beaten against their will by men who were inspired after viewing these acts in pornography. WAVPM does not believe that these experiences help women to enjoy and appreciate sexual pleasure. WAVPM believes that most of what our culture sees as ‘women's sexuality’ has been defined by men for the pleasure of men. Part of our work focuses on an attempt to create and support alternatives to these depictions.”

# Conclusion: Sex liberal ideology has prevailed in academic since the “sex wars”

- Women’s/gender studies in academia has embraced sex liberal perspective.
- Sex liberal speakers and organizers at the 1982 Barnard conference rose to prominence in academia.
- Sex liberal materials from conference were preserved; radical feminist materials are no longer available.
- Ideological framework informing sex liberal position prevailed.
- Ideological framework of sex liberal position has given rise to transgender ideology.