

Sheila Jeffreys

at the Lesbian Studies Weekend

(November 2003): This Lesbian Studies Weekend was held at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, in Paddington, Sydney, on 9-10 November, 1991. The following was published in *Lesbian Network* (although I don't remember which issue).

The first part of this article is the text of what I said to introduce Sheila at the Weekend; the second part is a summary of her talk.

SHEILA JEFFREYS is a revolutionary feminist from Britain, who is currently in Australia to set up the first Gay and Lesbian Studies course in the Department of Politics at Melbourne University (although the course is called something more euphemistic, like the History of Sexual Reform Movements). She is the author of *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, published by Pandora in 1986, and *Anticlimax*, published by The Women's Press in 1990, two books which are required reading for every radical Lesbian feminist.

I first met Sheila in London in 1986 at a Sappho meeting. I had gone to the loo—the beer was flowing freely, at least in my direction—and when I came back to my table, there was a new woman sitting there whom I had not seen before. She was talking 19 to the dozen, and was quite, quite uninterruptable. After a while, I realised that she was saying things which made a great deal of sense. At the first opportunity—after all, she had to breathe sometime—I asked her what her name was. She said 'Sheila', and continued to say important things with intelligence, insight and great facility. As I listened to her, I formed a vague suspicion that this might be ... So at the next opportunity I asked 'Sheila who?' She said 'Sheila Jeffreys', and was just taking her next breath when I exclaimed: 'You wrote that lovely book!' The book in question was *Spinster*, which had just been published. What I found lovely about it was its forthright defence of those late 19th and early 20th century feminists who had identified and named male sexual violence against women and girls, and her equally forthright criticism of those historians, many of them calling themselves 'feminists', who denounced our 'first wave' foresters as 'prudes and puritans'.

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As I mentioned earlier, Sheila is a revolutionary feminist. As I understand it, revolutionary feminism, which originated in the UK in the late 1970s, was an attempt to re-radicalise radical feminism which was seen as having gone soft on such vital issues as pornography and male sexual violence against women, and the revolutionary implications of Lesbianism. Sheila was a member of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists group, who were the authors of a paper called 'Political Lesbianism'. This paper was first given at a conference in 1979. It argued that all feminists should be political Lesbians, which the authors defined as 'a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men'. The paper was published in WIRES, the women's liberation newsletter in the UK, and, not surprisingly, created an uproar. (The paper and some of the responses to it were reprinted in a booklet published by Onlywomen Press, and called *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*).

What Sheila says does tend to create uproar because she tells the truth that the conventional don't want to hear. She is honest, courageous, and a long-term battler for women's liberation. I have the great honour and privilege of introducing to you ... Sheila Jeffreys.

THE TITLE of Sheila's paper was 'Lesbian Sex Therapy and the Lesbian Sexual Revolution'. She started by defining the 'Lesbian sex industry' as 'commercialised sex packaged and sold to Lesbians in order to make a profit', and said that Lesbian sex therapy was one form of commercialised sex.

Although Lesbian sex therapy was presented as part of a Lesbian sexual revolution, it was no more liberating for Lesbians than the heterosexual sexual revolution was for heterosexual women, she said, because Lesbian sex therapists were constructing Lesbian sex to resemble the heterosexual model as closely as it could be made to do so. Lesbians were being told that their attitudes to sex were 'erotophobic', 'heterophobic' (i.e. absurdly frightened of heterosexuality), and that they were not very good at sex, at least in comparison with gay men.

She argued that Lesbian sex therapy was an attempt to incorporate Lesbian sexuality into

the male supremacist model of sexual desire as the eroticising of difference, i.e. of power. Lesbians were a bit of a loose wheel, she said, because they weren't tied into this system. What Lesbian sex therapy does is to reconstruct Lesbian desire to fit into the system of eroticised inequality that is sex under male supremacy.

She reminded us that Lesbians were 'just rolling along' in the 70s, sometimes doing terrible things like discussing whether or not we should even fancy each other, whether or not fancying was in line with Lesbian feminist politics and ethics. Such behaviour did not fit at all well into a system of eroticised domination and subordination.

Sheila listed a number of the values within Lesbian sex therapy, values which are antithetical to Lesbian feminist politics.

The first of these is sexual liberalism, the idea that sex should not be subjected to political analysis, that it was individual and private and had no relevance to the world outside the bedroom. This fits with the requirements of male supremacy, because it is vital for the continuation of male supremacy that sex be outside political critique.

The second value underlying Lesbian sex therapy is the approval and validation of erotic inequality. Lesbian sex therapists appeal to 'science' to justify sadomasochism as 'natural, human' sexuality, and there are many Lesbian sex therapists who teach s/m practices to Lesbians to 'enhance' a sexual relationship, to 'revive flagging sexuality' and to 'inject new eroticism' into relationships.

Another value concerns the idea of sexual 'need'. Lesbian couples who do not do 'it', or do not do 'it' enough, are supposedly lacking something vitally important for their health and well-being. The 'problem' is labelled 'erotophobia', and bears a striking similarity to the 'frigidity' from which heterosexual women supposedly suffered during the last sexual revolution.

Another value is that of objectification. Lesbian sex therapists recommend fantasy as a way of drumming up erotic desire. They insist that everyone has a 'right' to her fantasies, even if

her lover might object, in which case the fantasiser has a 'right' to keep her fantasies secret. They also recommend the use of pornography. They favour the separating of sex from love, engaging in one-night stands, and using prostitutes for sexual gratification.

Yet another value is anti-Lesbianism. Lesbians are seen as woefully deficient sexually in comparison with men. Sheila quoted one Lesbian sex therapist as saying that Lesbians needed to 'get more male'. The use of dildoes is highly recommended, and women who complain that they are too large and hurt, are told to use stretching devices to enlarge their vaginas to accommodate them.

The last value mentioned by Sheila is anti-feminism. Lesbian sex therapy contains frequent explicit criticisms of feminists and feminist politics. Some Lesbian sex therapists are aware that there is a contradiction between feminist politics and Lesbian sex therapy. They argue that the feminist political analysis must be 'reassessed', i.e. discarded, and the values of sex therapy substituted instead.

Sheila told us a number of stories about the kind of treatment feminists can expect if we publicly criticise sexual libertarianism:

- There is a magazine in Britain which advertises dildoes. The dildoes come in different shapes and colours (although not different sizes—they are all too large), and these are given different names. One of them was called: 'Sheila, the Spinster's Best Friend'.

- One lesbian feminist in the US, who had criticised s/m, had sent to her office a cardboard box which she thought contained flowers. She and her secretary opened it together, and found that it contained a dildo.

- Sheila was giving a talk at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre, which included a criticism of the eroticisation of self-mutilation, and the stories of women who had experienced it. While she was talking, a number of young Lesbians sat in the front row with their legs wide apart, hitting themselves on the crutch, and chanting: 'Spank my fanny'.

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She did, however, have one heartening story to tell us:

- At a conference in Amsterdam, 30 Lesbian feminists from Britain got together before they went into a sexuality workshop, and discussed what they were going to do. The workshop organiser asked what has become a standard question on these occasions: 'Have any of you here ever had a s/m fantasy?' The purpose of asking this question is to 'prove' that those who raise their hands are 'really' sadomasochists at heart. The 30 British Lesbian feminists all raised their hands, and said as one woman: 'Yes, yes, and how do we get rid of them?'