SEXUAL POLITICS

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There are no clear or well-defined relationships between men, women, classes, and races. It is precisely because they can be clearly defined that their interrelation is so intricate and confusing.

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Sexual Politics

by Kate Millet

Is it possible to regard the relation of the sexes in a political light at all?

It depends on how one defines 'politics'. I do not define the political area here as that narrow and exclusive sector known as institutional politics of the Democrat or Republican -- we all have reason to be tired and suspicious of them. By politics I mean power-structured relationships, the entire arrangement whereby one group of people is governed by another, one group is dominant and the other subordinate.

It is time we developed a more cogent and relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships not yet considered in our institutional politics. It is time we gave attention to defining a theory of politics which treats of power relationships on the less formal than establishmentian grounds of personal intercourse between members of well defined and coherent groups -- races, castes, classes and sexes. It is precisely because such groups have no representation in formal political structures that their oppression is so entire and so continuous.

In the recent past, we have been forced to acknowledge that the relationship between the races in the United States is indeed a political one -- and one of the control of a collectivity defined by birth, by another collectivity also defined by birth. Groups who rule by birth are fast disappearing in the West and white supremacists are fated to go the way of aristocrats and other extinct upper castes. We have yet one ancient and universal arrangement for the political exploitation of one birth group by another -- in the area of sex.

Just as the study of racism has convinced us that there exists a truly political relationship between races, and an oppressive situation from which the subordinated group had no redress through formal political structures whereby they might organize into conventional political struggle and opposition -- just so any intelligent and objective examination of our system of sexual politics or sex role struc-
ture will prove that the relationship between the sexes now, and throughout history, is one of what Max Weber once termed 'Herrschaf', or dominance and subordination -- the birthright control of one group by another, the male to rule and the female to be ruled. Women have been placed in the position of minority status throughout history and even after the grudging extension of certain minimal rights of citizenship and suffrage at the beginning of this century. It is fatuous to suppose that women - white or black - have any greater representation now that they vote than they ever did. Previous history has made it clear that the possession of the vote for 100 years has done the black man precious little good at all.

Why, when this arrangement of male rule and control of our society is so obvious, is it never acknowledged or discussed? Partly, I suspect, because such discussion is regarded as dangerous in the extreme -- and because a culture does not discuss its most basic assumptions and most cherished bigotries. Why does no one ever remark that the military, industry, the universities, the sciences, political offices and finance (despite absurd declarations to the contrary on the evidence that some little old lady owns stock over which she has no control) -- in short, every avenue of power in our culture, including the repressive forces of the police -- is entirely in male hands? Money, guns, authority itself, are male provinces. Even God is male -- and a white male at that.

The reasons for this gigantic evasion of the very facts of our situation are many and obvious. They are also rather amusing. Let's look at a few of the thousand defenses the masculine culture has built against any infringement or even exposure of its control. One is to react with ridicule and the primitive mechanism of laughter and denial. Sex is funny -- it's dirty -- and it is something women have. Men are not sexual beings -- they are people -- they are humanity. Therefore, any rational discussion of the realities of sexual life degenerates as quickly as men can make them into sniggering sessions, where through cliches so ancient as to have almost ritual value, women who might be anxious to carry on an adult dialogue are bullied back into 'their place'.

At the level of common attitudes, sex - and particularly that very explosive subject of the relationship of the sexes - is a subject closed to intelligent investigation and accessible only to persiflage and levity.

The second evasion our culture has evolved is via folk myth. From

Dagwood to the college professor, sex is folklore and the official version of both is that the male is the 'victim' of a widespread conspiracy. From the folk figure of Jiggs or Punch to the very latest study of the damage which mothers wreak on their sons, we are assailed by the bogey of the overbearing woman -- woman as some terrible and primitive natural evil, our twentieth-century remnant of the primitive fear of the unknown, unknown at least to the male, and remember that it is the male in our culture who defines reality. Man is innocent, he is put upon, everywhere he is in danger of being dethroned. Dagwood - the archetypical henpecked husband - is a figure of folk fun only because the culture assumes that a man will rule his wife or cease to be very much of a man. Like a dim-witted plantation owner who is virtually controlled by his far cleverer black steward or valet, Dagwood is a member of the ruling class held up both to scorn and to sympathy -- scorn for being too human or too incompetent to rule, yet sympathetic because every other member of the privileged group knows in his heart how burdensome it is to maintain the illusory façade of superiority over those who are your natural equals.

The fantasy of the male victim is not only myth, it is politically expedient myth, myth either invented or disseminated to serve the political end of a rationalization or a softening and partial denial of power. The actual relation of the sexes in our culture from the dawn of history has been diametrically opposite to the official cult of the downtrodden male -- yet our culture seeks on every level of discussion to deny this. To the logical charge of oppression which any objective view of the sex structure would bring up, masculine society has a fascinating tactic of appropriating all sympathy for itself. It has lately taken up the practice of screaming out that it is the victim of unnatural surgery... it has been 'castrated'. Even Albert Shanker has discovered of late that black community control, the Mayor, and the Board of Education have performed this abomination upon his person. To those in fear of castration, one word of comfort. The last instance of its practice on a white man in western culture was the late 18th century when the last castrati lost a vital section of his anatomy in the cause of the art of music -- at the hands of another male, I must add. For castration is an ancient cruelty which males practice on each other. In the American South it was as a way to humiliate black victims of the Klan. In the Ancient East it was as a barbarous form of punishment for crime. In the courts of the Italian Renaissance castration was a perverse method of providing soprano voices for the Papal Choir. It was felt that women were too profane to sing the holy offices, so to supply the demand for the higher musi-
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cial register, eunuchs were created through putting young men to the knife.

As the practice of physical castration has been abolished, it is clear that the word in current usage must be accepted in a metaphoric rather than a literal connotation, if we are to make any sense of the fantastic anxiety which assails contemporary male egos; for on the other hand, in the media and in the culture both high and low, men today have come to see the terrible specter of the 'castrating female' all about them, and their paranoid delusions are taken for social fact. Having, in a confused way, associated his genitalia with his power, the male now bellows in physical pain and true hysteria every time his social and political prerogatives are threatened. If by castration is meant a loss through being forced to share power with oppressed groups deprived of power or even of human status, then there are many white men in America who will suffer this psychic operation, but it will be the removal of a cancer in the brain and heart, not of any pleasurable or creative organ. To argue that any woman who insists on full human status is a 'castrating bitch' or guilty of the obscure evil of 'penis envy' (only the most consummate male chauvinist could have imagined this term) is as patently silly as to argue that dispossessed blacks want to become white men -- the issue is not to be Whitey but to have a fair share of what Whitey has: the whole world of human possibility.

While I am fully aware that equal rights entails equal responsibility, there are some things Whitey has which I am very sure I don't want, for example a Green Beret, a Zippo for burning down villages, the ear of a dead peasant, or the burden of the charred flesh of a Vietnamese child. Nor do I have any interest in acquiring the habits of violence, warfare (unless in the just cause of self-defense, a cause I cannot foresee ever happening in American foreign policy), or the white man's imperialist racism, or rape, or the capitalist exploitation of poverty and ignorance.

Because of the smokescreen of masculine propaganda one hears endless cant about 'castration', whereas real and actual crimes men commit against women are never mentioned. It is considered bad taste or unsportsmanlike - to refer to the fact that there are ten thousand rapes or crimes against female personality - in New York City each year -- and of course I speak only of those instances which are reported, probably one-tenth of those which occur. It is also generally accepted that to regard Richard Speck and so many others like him in anything but the light of exceptional and irrelevant instances of individu-
al pathology, is another instance of not playing fair. But I submit that Speck merely enacted the presuppositions of the majority of male supremacists of the sterner sort -- and they are legion. That his murders echo in the surrealist chambers of masculine fantasy and wish-fulfillment is testified to by every sleazy essay into sadism and white slave traffic on the dirty movie belt of 42nd St. in Manhattan, and in the anti-social character of hard core pornography. The Story of O tells it like it is about masculine fantasy better than does Romeo and Juliet. So does the Playboy, chortling over the con-game he has played on that Rabbit he dreams of screwing -- the Bunny, or woman reduced to a meek and docile animal toy.

For the extent and depth of the male's hatred and hostility toward his subject colony of women is a source of continual astonishment. Just as behind the glowing mirage of 'darkeys crooning in the twilight' is the reality of the block, the whip, and the manacle, the history of women is full of colorful artifact: the bound feet of all old China's women, deliberately deformed that they might be better controlled (you can work with those useless feet, but you cannot run away); the veil of Islam (or an attenuated existence as a human soul condemned to wear a cloth sack over her head all the days of her half-life); the lash, the rod, the rope; domestic imprisonment through most of the world's history; rape concubinage, prostitution... yes, we have our own impressive catalog of open tyrannies. Women are still sold in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. In Switzerland, they are even today disenfranchised. And in nearly every rod of ground on this earth they live only via the barter system of sex in return for food and security -- and often very little of the latter. Like every system of oppression, male supremacy rests finally on force, physical power, rape, assault and the threat of assault. As a final resource when all else has failed, the male resorts to attack. But the fear of force is there before every woman always as a deterrent -- dismissal, divorce, violence -- personal, sexual, or economic.

As in any society in a state of war, the enforcement of male rule which euphemism calls 'the battle of the sexes', is possible to maintain only through the usual lies convenient to countries at war -- The Enemy is Evil -- the Enemy is not Human. And men have always been able to believe in the innate evil of woman. Studies of primitive societies -- just as studies of our own religious texts illustrate over and over the innumerable instances of taboos practiced against women. A group of aborigines agree with Judaism in the faith that a menstruating woman is 'unclean', taboo, untouchable. Should she have access to weapons or other sacred and ritual articles of the male, she will place a hex or a spell upon them that
their masculine owners will not survive. Everything that pertains to her physical make-up or function is despicable or subversive. Let her go outside the village and inhabit a hut alone and without food during her period -- let her be forbidden the temple, even those outer precincts assigned to her, for a specified number of days after, as the Gospels coolly inform us, she has given birth to the very saviour of the world -- for she is still dirty. Dirty and mysterious. Have you ever thought it curious that nocturnal emissions were not regarded as either dirty or mysterious, that the penis was (until Industrialism decided to veil it again for greater effect) never considered as dirty, but so regal and imperious that its shape is the one assigned to sceptres, bombbs, guns, and airplanes? In history, vast numbers of peoples have worshipped the phallus openly.

It may also be true that even larger numbers of peoples once worshipped the womb or the fertility powers of the earth. It may also be true that one of the many causes for the commencement of that now-universal oppression and contempt for women lay in the male’s very fear of the female’s powers of giving life and perhaps inspired that enormous change in world affairs we call the patriarchal take-over. Living so close to the earth, without having yet developed toys of his own in warfare and the rise of princely city-states full of tolling slaves building him empty monuments, and unaware of his own vital role in conception, the male may well have cast glances of fearful envy on the woman and what was, in those conditions, her rather miraculous capacity to bring another human life out of her very belly -- and seen in it a connection with the phases of the moon and the seasons of the earth’s vegetation -- and stood both in awe and in terror, and finally in hatred, and decided to cast this function down from what he rather naturally assumed was its collusion with the supernatural, the terrible, and the uncontrollable forces of nature -- and denigrate it to the level of the bestial, the filthy, the pernicious and the obscene. And thus totem was appropriated by the male and taboo assigned in a thousand ways to operate against the female.

Having vitiolated all effects of the female power, the male set about aggrandizing his own. Having finally appropriated all access to the supernatural for himself, he established an alliance with the new male god (both his brother and his father, depending on auspicious or inauspicious circumstance), he then proceeded to announce his kinship with the divine through a long and impressive list of patriarchs and prophets, high priests and emperors. Now that he had gone into partnership with God, the male set himself up as God to the female. Milton puts it this way: ‘He for God only, she for God in him.’

In some cultures females were allowed to participate on an inferior level as figures of identification for human females -- useful in encouraging them to an enforced cooperation in their own control. So they can see themselves as honored through the rapes of Jove on Europa and Leda, favored in divine seduction scenarios as an endless series of wood nymphs, possibly debased versions of other tribal goddesses at loose ends now their patriarchal reign had ended -- or incarnate in that first troublesome woman, Juno, the insubordinate wife.

But in sterner patriarchal societies such as the Judaic and Christian there was never any kidding around about goddesses. Christianity did not elevate the Virgin to goddess status until the 12th Century, and the Protestants de-throned her a mere four hundred years later. The device of making her both virgin and mother not only excites admiration for its ingenuity but astonishment as its perfection of effect -- here is divine or nearly divine woman completely relieved of that insidious sexuality by which woman herself has always been defined.

Mere mortal women in the Christian ages were continuously assured of their inherent evil and inferiority by a whole procession of fanatic male supremists -- from Paul, who found even the exhibition of their hair in church a powerful provocation and an indecent enticement to hellish practices more apparent in his mind than in others (such it is to represent the sexuality of the whole race in only one half of it), to Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, and a whole parade of ascetics, hermits, and other non-participating types who have projected their own teeming sexuality onto the female. For so strong is the hold of the Christian assumption through Eve and other notable exempla that the ‘evil’ of sex was introduced via the female alone, that today even Women think of Women when they think of sex, sexiness, sex objects, sexuality, and sex symbols -- a state of rather surprising paradox in a society which rigidly enforces heterosexuality for women.

Judaism is even more punctilious than Christianity in the matter of male supremacy. First thing in the morning every male Jew is enjoined to thank God for creating him a male and therefore a superior order of being. I have never been informed as to what Jewish women are instructed to say on such occasions of coming to consciousness --
perhaps it is some little bit of advice to themselves not to fall into the much-satirized posture of the overbearing Jewish mother.

Of course it is not surprising that religion as we know it takes the enforcement of male supremacy by divine fiat as part of its function in a patriarchy. So too does literature, all traditional and contemporary notions of government, those platitudes which currently pass for social science -- and even, despite the influence of the Enlightenment, science itself cooperates in a number of transparently expedient rationalizations in maintaining the traditional sexual politics on grounds so specious as to have a certain comic charm.

A further way in which contemporary masculine culture refuses to face the issue of sexual politics is through the reduction of the two sexual collectivities of male and female into an endless variety of purely individual situations, whereby all cases are unique -- each a delicate matter of adjustment of one diverse character to another, all of them merely the very private matter of one-to-one relationships. That this is so largely our favorite method of portraying sexual relationships today - since Freud and the development of the very private science of psychoanalysis - is probably due in good part to the convenience it offers in shielding us from the unpleasant reality of sexual relations should we begin to view them on general or class/ caste terms as we have learned to see race. For we know very well now that race is not a matter between one employer and his 'boy' or one family and its 'maid', but it is to be perceived in the far more pertinent light of one race's control over the other.

The Individual Case translates our older myth of the dangerous Female into a newer but by now rather shop-worn cliche of the bitch stereotype -- the most stock figure of the contemporary media. It is interesting to note how this bitch leads one to fancy - without ever coming right out and saying it - that all women are bitches. It is puzzling, too, how, as woman - with woman's minority status and therefore a creature completely out of the male power structure - she is arbitrarily and unjustly blamed for nearly every fault in American life today -- and turned into a veritable symbol of the Hateful Establishment. As beauty queen, the male establishment is willing to allow woman a place as mascot or cheerleader -- but it is a long way from admitting her to any personal stake in the establishment's show. As a girlfriend or a wife, she may participate vicariously for a time, but she is easy to replace and the trade-ins on old models of wife and mistress is pretty brisk. She may sleep with so many thousands a year or such and such an office, but she is dreaming if she ever fancies such glory is her own.

For the purpose of male propaganda, one of the most felicitous effects of the Individual Case myth is that it immediately translates any resistance to the present political situation in sex relations into a damming conviction of the sin of neurosis. As Psychology has replaced religion as the conformist force in social behavior, it has branded any activity at odds with the status quo (which, by the way, it has taken to be 'normality') as deranged, pitiable or dangerous behavior. By this criterion, current 'normality' in the United States is racism, police brutality and ruthless economic exploitation. This is what happens, if, like the Shriners, you take 19th Century social life as both the State of Nature and the State of a Healthy Society. Any woman who fails to conform to the sterile stereotype of wife and motherhood as all and only, or who fails to bow in elaborate deference to male authority and opinion on any and all questions, is clearly off her nut. Men have said it.

One other device to maintain the current and traditional sexual politics is to claim that the whole thing has already been settled a long time ago - 'we gave you the vote', as the male authoritarian puts it with such stunning arrogance; 'we went to the polls and elected you into the human race because one day you mentioned the oversight of your exclusion and, obliging fellows that we are, we immediately rectified this very trivial detail.'

The foregoing is both a distortion of history and a denial of reality. Women fought hard and almost without hope, driven to massive and forceful protest which has served as a model both for the labor movement and the black movement. They struggled on against overwhelming odds of power and repression for over one hundred and fifty years to get this worthless rag known as the ballot. We got it last of all -- women, black and white, are the last citizens of the United States -- and we had to work hardest of all to get it.

And now we have it we realize how badly we were cheated -- we had fought so long, worked so hard, pushed back despair so many times that we were exhausted -- that we just said: 'Give us that and we will do the rest ourselves.' But then we didn't realize, as perhaps blacks never realized until the Civil Rights Movement, that the ballot is no real admission to civil life in America; it means nothing at all if you are not represented in a representative democracy. And we are not represented now any more than black people... both groups have only one Senator -- one Tom aspie. The United States has fewer women in public office than almost any nation in the
world -- we are more effectively ostracized from political life in this country than any other constituency in America, and we are 53% of its population. Political nominees announced their intention of helping asthmatic children and the mentally retarded of every age, if elected -- but not a word about women -- half the population -- but not a word -- the largest minority status group in history. But not one word.

It is time the official fallacy of the West and of the United States particularly -- that the sexes are now equal socially and politically -- be exploded for the hoax it really is. For at present any gainsaying of this piety is countered with the threat that 'women have got too much power', 'they're running the world', and other tidbits of triviality which the speaker, strange as it may seem, might often enough believe. For the more petty male ego, like that of the cranker or the Union man in the North who voted for Wallace, in his paranoia is likely to believe that because one woman or one black man in millions can earn nearly as much or even a bit more than he does, the whole bunch are taking over that sordid little corner of the world he regarded as his birthright because he was white and a male, and on which he had staked his very identity -- just because it prevented him from seeing himself as exploited by the very caste he had imagined he was part of and with whom, despite all evidence to the contrary, he fancied he shared the gifts of the earth and the American dream -- Nightmare that it is.

The actual facts of the situation of women in America today are sufficient evidence that, white or black, women are at the bottom unless they sleep with the top. On their own they are Nobody and taught every day they are Nobody and taught so well they have come to internalize that destructive notion and even believe it. The Department of Labor statistics can't hide the fact that this is a man's world -- a white man's world: the average year-round income of the white male is $6,704, of a black male $4,277, of a white female $3,991, and of the black woman $2,816. As students you live in a Utopia -- enjoy it, for it is the only moment in your lives when you will be treated nearly as equals. When you get married or get a job you will be made to see where power is, but then it will be too late. That is why you should organize now: look at your curriculum and look at your housing rules -- that's a start at realizing how you are treated unfairly.

But the oppression of women is not only economic; that's just part of it. The oppression of women is Total, and therefore it exists in the mind -- it is psychological oppression. Let's have a look at how it works, for it works like a charm. From earliest childhood every female child is carefully taught that she is to be a life-long incompetent at every sphere of significant human activity; therefore, she must convert herself into a sex object -- a Thing. She must be pretty and assessed by the world: weighed, judged and measured by her looks alone. If she's pretty she can marry; then she can concentrate her energies on pregnancy and diapers. That's life -- that's female life. That's what it is to reduce and limit the expectations and potentialities of one half of the human race to the level of animal behavior.

It is time we realized that the whole structure of male and female personality is arbitrarily imposed by social conditioning -- a social conditioning which has taken all the possible traits of human personality, which Margaret Mead once, by way of analogy, compared to the many colors of the rainbow's spectrum, and arbitrarily assigned traits into two categories; thus aggression is masculine, passivity feminine, violence masculine, tenderness feminine, intelligence masculine, and emotion feminine, etc. etc. ... arbitrarily departmentalizing human qualities into two neat little piles which are drilled into children by toys, games, the social propaganda of television, and the board of education's deranged whim as to what is proper male-female 'Role Building'. What we must now set about doing is to re-examine this whole foolish and segregated house of cards, and pick it from what we can use: Dante, Shakespeare, Lady Murasaki and Mozart, Einstein and the care for life which we have bred into women -- and accept these as human traits. Then we must get busy to eliminate what are not properly humane or even human ideas -- the warrior, the killer, the hero as homicide, the passive dumb cow victim.

We must now begin to realize and to retrain ourselves to see that both intelligence and a reverence for life are HUMAN qualities. It is high time we began to be reasonable about the relationship of sexuality to personality and admit the facts -- the present assignment of temperamental traits to sex is moronic, limiting and hazardous. Virility - the murderer's complex or self-definition in terms of how many or how often or how efficiently he can oppress his fellow. This has Got to Go.

There is a whole generation coming of age in America who have already thoroughly sickened of the military male ideal, who know they were born men and don't have to prove it by killing someone... or wearing crew cuts. There is also a vast number of women who are beginning to wake out of the long sleep known as cooperating in one's own oppression and self-denigration, and they are banding together,
in nationwide chapters of the National Organization for Women, in the myriad groups of Radical Women springing up in cities all over the country and the world, in the women’s liberation groups of SDS and in other groups on campus, and they are joining together to make the beginnings of a new and massive women’s movement in America and in the world -- to establish true equality between the sexes, to break the old machine of sexual politics and replace it with a more human and civilized world for both sexes, and to end the present system’s oppression of men as well as women.

There are other forces at work to change the whole face of American society: the black movement to end racism, the student movement with its numbers and powers for spreading the idea of a new society founded on democratic principles, free of the war reflex, free of the economic and racial exploitation reflex. Black people, students, and women -- that’s a lot of people; with our combined numbers it is probably 70% of the population or more. It is more than enough to change the course and character of our society, surely enough to cause a radical social revolution. And maybe it will also be the first real Revolution... the first to avoid the pitfall of bloodshed, a mere change of dictators and the inevitable counterrevolution which follows upon such betrayal and loss of purpose.

We are numbers sufficient to alter the course of human history by changing fundamental values, by effecting an entire change of consciousness. We cannot have such a change of consciousness unless we rebuild values -- we cannot rebuild values unless we restructure personality. But we cannot do this or solve racial and economic crimes unless we end the oppression of all people -- unless we end the idea of violence, of dominace, of power -- unless we end the idea of oppression itself -- unless we realize that a revolution in sexual policy is not only part of but basic to any real change in the quality of life.

Social and cultural revolution in America and the world depends on this change of consciousness of which a new relationship between the sexes and a new definition of humanity and human personality are an integral part.

As we awake and begin to take action there will be enough of us and we will have both a purpose and a goal -- the first truly human condition, the first really human society. Let us begin the revolution and let us begin it with love: all of us, black, white, and gold, male and female, have it within our power to create a world we could bear out of the desert we inhabit, for we hold our very fate in our hands.

(November 1968)