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Politicizing the Absence of Sex: Asexuality as a Tool for Radical Feminism

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Politicizing the Absence of Sex:

Asexuality as a Tool for Radical Feminism

Sexual practices are governed by the state and society. Opinions on who, when, how, and why a person should be having sex are policed around the world, and those who choose not to have sex are not free from such rigid expectations. According to the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network “an asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sexual activity, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations”. Asexuality as a phenomenon is rejected by queer studies, and both positive and negative sex politics, and is frequently and neglected ignored in relation to radical feminism. In this essay I will discuss how asexuality challenges erotic sexual normativity while also providing an opportunity to revise radical feminism. Positioning radical feminism in the context of Gayle Rubin’s analysis, I will utilize Chu’s article as a basis for my argument, with reference to Milks, Przybylo and Sinwell.

As Rubin puts it, “in Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously” (310). To different degrees depending on their individual sexual practices, people are expected to engage in sex. “Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value.” (279). Healthy relationships conventionally have a sexual component, and when they do not, or the sex is non-traditional, the relationship is looked down upon. As such, “a queer reading of

asexual identity might find that asexuality is a radical identity because of its distance from the sexual norm” (Chu 80). This conversation is one that is necessary for feminist, political and social discourse: “feminist and queer critiques remain necessary because sexual and gender hegemonies continue to shape society” (Chu 79). Eroticism is expected, it is compulsory and normative. Asexuality however, challenges these norms simply by existing. Radical identity politics have neglected to consider asexuality, it “has been invested in the toppling of compulsory heterosexuality but has not expressed much commitment to resisting compulsory eroticism” (80). In rejecting compulsory eroticism, asexuality is inherently radical.

From a political standpoint, asexuality can be viewed as dangerous. The laws that are put in place around to govern sexual practices (and, perhaps more so, the people who practice them) rarely have the same power to control asexual people. Few are aware of the way their sexual lives are regulated, and “the state routinely intervenes in sexual behavior at a level that would not be tolerated in other areas of social life” (Rubin 288). To an extent, “asexual individuals, in removing themselves from sexuality, are exempt from complicity in heteronormativity and gender oppression, and the governmental institutions that undergird both” (Milks 111). Such a potential loss of control frightens society. “Sex is also a marked category. Small differences in value or behavior are often experienced as cosmic threats” that need to be supervised, regulated or eradicated completely (Rubin 279). It must be stressed however, that these politics are not solely about sex, “disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity.” (Rubin 267). Utilizing Przybylo’s term “sexusociety”, which serves to situate sex and sexuality as a central feature in everyday life, Milks argues that “asexual politics functions to simultaneously disorient and reinforce

sexusociety” (112). Serving as a reminder of the state’s interference in sexual practice, while concurrently rejecting its efforts, sets asexuality apart as an effective tool for radical feminism.

This radicalization of asexuality does not only apply to heteronormative circles. Asexuality equally challenges the norms in queer studies. “Given LGBTQ studies’ focus on deviance through sexual activity, the norm of compulsory eroticism is strongly entrenched in LGBTQ cultures” (Chu 80). Rejecting this notion, asexuality stresses individual inclinations as a cause worth striving for, regardless of sexual desire. “Asexuality challenges the common reliance on positivist models of identity that assume monolithic identity categories and instead encourages each individual to negotiate identity based on their own preferences and desires” (Chu 84). Denouncing sexual essentialism and emphasizing unique needs and wants, the asexual community reminds queer and feminist scholars of the need to advocate for agency – even if that agency offers the option to not act. As such, asexuality highlights normative flaws in queer studies and encourages a more inclusive environment for activism. Asexuality discourages compulsory eroticization in both the queer community and the straight community as not only an act of identity but also a means of politicization.

In most radical feminist studies, asexuality is ignored. Traditional forms of resistance “mark asexuality as invisible and as less worthy of critical attention because it is supposedly not “radical enough” in its transgression of the cultural limits placed on eroticism” (Chu 80). The notion of *not acting* is not viewed as an adequate form of action. The history of feminism leads to this as “most radical thought about sex has been embedded within a model of the instincts and their restraints” (Rubin 277). Asexual individuals however stress the value of not engaging as a form of inherent engagement. Similar in theory to individuals taken a vow of silence in order for

their complaints to be heard, the act of rejecting to abide to an allosexual spectrum disrupts the sexusocietal constraints and boundaries placed upon people.

The basis of sex politics focuses on the agency (or lack thereof) to engage in diverse sexual practices. Rubin stresses that “one of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way” (283). Like most sexual minorities, asexuals are rarely among those considered to be engaging in appropriate sex. Asexuals have stressed the need to bring the conversation about sexuality beyond the constraints of a sex-based discourse. “Asexuals have proposed new ways of understanding not just asexuality, but also sexuality, romance, eroticism, orientation, attraction, desire, and sexual identity; they have also articulated a range of (a)sexual political theories, including new forms and new critiques of sex-positivity and sex-negativity” (Milks 101). In reminding scholars and activists of the multi-faceted and intersectional nature of sex politics, asexual individuals challenge the “notion of a single ideal sexuality [which] characterizes most systems of thought about sex.” (Rubin 283). Not simply about a disinterest in sex, “asexual theory raises questions about the ways everyone may experience sexual activity, arousal, sensual attraction, desire, intimacy, romantic attachments, erotic attachments, and kinship” (Chu 93). Asexual theories strive to introduce a more well-rounded and versatile conversation about sexual practices and the structures that alter them.

Asexuality need not even be practiced to be radical, “the mere process of explaining what asexuality is radically alters the vocabulary necessary for talking about eroticism, sexuality, or sexual orientations” (Chu 89). It is not solely the desire to not engage in sex that makes asexuality unconventional but also the conversations it facilitates. “Asexuality itself enables a rethinking of sexuality beyond its seemingly necessary relationship to sexual desire directed

toward an object” (Sinwell 164). Asexuals analyze the cultural obsession with sex and critique the linguistic and lexical structures that maintain limiting frameworks. For example, “the recent politicization of non-repressive asexuality reveals the ways in which “(repressive) sex-negativity” has been weaponized and “(transgressive) sex-positivity” has been distorted and made compulsory” (Milks 101). This commentary is only possible from the perception of an individual who does not subscribe to (and therefore does not demonize) either policy. Rather, “asexuality puts into question the links between sexuality, sexual attraction, and desire, and it also challenges the meanings of intimacy, romance, sexual acts, and sexual relationships.” (Sinwell 163) Asexuality challenges the language used in sex-based discourse by encouraging new coinages such as “sex-neutrality”, which refers to, as Milks puts it:

respecting all forms of consensual sex and viewing sexual variation as benign.

From an asexual political perspective, this rhetorical move makes sense

because the term “sex-positive” linguistically seems to erase or ignore

asexuality; “sex-neutrality” evokes the same respect for diversity originally

implied by sex-positivity without assuming sexual desire or suggesting sex is

inherently positive (114).

The goal of creating more versatile language is one that aids everyone. To make societal change, one must assess the seemingly static social systems that keep boundaries in place. The way one uses language is one of such structures that queer and feminist theories have long been fascinated in challenging.

Rubin suggests that “a radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression” (275). Asexuality, by “linger[ing] in an equally vulnerable and potent liminal space” does just that (Przybylo 225). “Constructed as inherently

sex-negative, repressive, or just not real, asexuality is understood within sex-positive discourse as a form of immature sexuality and an alarming remnant of sexual repression” asexuality describes the limitation of compulsory eroticism (Milks 109). It denounces the understanding that “being pro-sex evidently means supporting a form of compulsory sexuality” asexuality pushes for more inclusive sex-based discourse (Milks 109). Asexuality identifies and describes the flaws in “movement[s] [that see them]self as against asexuality , rather than the system of hegemonic practices— including many that are not focused on sexuality —that threaten sexual freedom and thereby constrain our choices, erotic and otherwise.” (Milks 109). Asexuality – by existence and action – is inherently radical.

To conclude, by disrupting sexsocial expectations, challenging linguistic norms and advocating for individualized and agency based identity politics, asexuality works as a tool for radical feminism. Asexuals encourage intersectional analysis of sex politics and dissuade scholars from accepting compulsory eroticism as a structure that need be upheld. In straight and queer communities alike, asexuals strive to assess and criticize normative structures and expectations. By demanding acceptance and visibility, asexual individuals remind activists of their existence and urge them to fight for sexual agency in all forms. Asexuality challenges the limitations of traditional radical feminist scholarship that does not acknowledge asexual individuals.

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