

# 5. On Sexuality as Work

**Silvia Federici**

**1975**

Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process. It is the necessary complement to the routine, regimentation of the work-week. It is a license to 'go mad,' to 'let go,' so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our jobs.

'Saturday' is the irruption of the 'spontaneous,' the irrational in the rationality of the capitalist disciplining of our life. It is supposed to be the compensation for work and is ideologically sold as the 'other' from work, a field of freedom in which we can presumably be our true selves, have the possibility for intimate contacts in a universe of social relations where we are constantly forced to repress, defer, postpone, hide, even from ourselves, what we desire.

This being the promise, what we actually get is far from our expectations. As we cannot go back to nature by simply taking off our clothes, so cannot become 'ourselves' simply because it is love-making time. Little spontaneity is possible when the timing, conditions and the amount of energy available for love are out of our control. Not only after a week of work our bodies and feelings are numb and we cannot turn them on like a machine. But what comes

## 5. *On Sexuality as Work*

out when we 'let go' is more often our repressed violence and frustration than our hidden self ready to be reborn in bed.

Among other things, we are always aware of the falseness of this spontaneity. No matter how much we scream, sigh, and how many erotic exercises we make in bed, we know that it is a parenthesis and that tomorrow we both will be back in our civilized clothes – we will have coffee together preparing to go to work. The more we know that it is a parenthesis which the rest of the day or the week will deny, the more difficult it becomes for us to turn into 'savages' at the socially sanctioned sex-time and forget everything else. We cannot avoid feeling ill at ease. It is the same embarrassment we experience when we undress knowing that we will be making love, the embarrassment of the morning after, when we are already busy re-establishing distances; the embarrassment (finally) of pretending to be completely different from what we are during the rest of the day.

This transition is particularly painful for women; men seem to be experts at it, possibly because they have been subjected to a more strict regimentation in their work. Women have always wondered how it was possible that, after a nightly display of passion, he could get up already in a different world, so distant at times that it would be difficult for her to re-establish even a physical contact with him. In any case, it is always women who suffer most from the schizophrenic character of sexual relations, not only because we arrive at the end of the day with more work and more worries on our shoulders, but because we also have the responsibility of making the sexual experience pleasurable for the man. This is why women are usually

## 5. *On Sexuality as Work*

less sexually responsive than men. Sex is work for us, it is a duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of giving pleasure, out of getting men excited.

Since we are expected to provide a release, we inevitably become the object on which men discharge their repressed violence. We are raped, both in our beds and in the streets, precisely because we have been set up to be the providers of sexual satisfaction, the safety valves for everything that goes wrong, and men have always been allowed to turn their anger against us, if we do not measure up to the role, particularly when we refuse to perform.

Compartmentalization is only one aspect of the mutilation of our sexuality. The subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labor power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable sexual behavior. In reality, every genuine communication has a sexual component, for our bodies and emotions are indivisible and we communicate at all levels all the time. Sexual contact with women is forbidden because in bourgeois morality anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted. This has meant the imposition of a schizophrenic condition on us, as early in our lives we must learn to draw a line between the people we can love and the people we just talk to, those to whom we can open our body and those to whom we can only open our 'souls,' our friends and our lovers. The result is that we are bodiless souls for our female friends and soulless flesh for our male lovers. And this division separates us not only from other women but from ourselves as well, in the sense of what we do or do not accept in our bodies and feelings – the 'clean' parts that are there for open display, and the 'dirty,'

## 5. On Sexuality as Work

‘secret’ parts that can only be disclosed in the conjugal bed, at the point of production.

The same concern for production has demanded that sexuality, especially in women, be confined to certain periods of our lives. Sexuality is repressed in children and adolescent as well as in older women. Thus, the years in which we are allowed to be sexually active are the years in which we are most burdened with work, so that enjoying our sexual encounters becomes a feat.

But the main reason why we cannot enjoy sex is that *for women sex is work*; giving pleasure is part of what is expected of every woman. Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly it is important not to be stoned to death if we are ‘unfaithful’ or if it is found that we are not virgins. But sexual freedom means more work. In the past we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double work-day, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. And we must enjoy it as well, something which is not expected of most jobs for a bored performance would be an insult to male virility, which is why there have been so many investigations in recent years concerning which parts of our body – whether the vagina or the clitoris – are more sexually productive. But whether in its liberalized or more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine and our economic dependence on men all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is still impossible in our sexual life. Sexual repression in the family is a function of that control. In this sense fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps all act as agents of the state, supervising our sexual work,

## 5. *On Sexuality as Work*

ensuring that we provide sexual services according to the established, socially sanctioned productivity norms.

Economic dependence is the ultimate means of control over our sexuality. This is why sexual work is still one of the main occupations for women and prostitution underlines every sexual encounter. Under these circumstances, there cannot be any spontaneity in sex for us nor can sexual pleasure be more than an ephemeral thing for us.

Because of the exchange involved and the duty to give pleasure to men, sexuality for women is always accompanied by anxiety and it is the part of housework most responsible for self-hatred. In addition, the commercialization of the female body makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with our body regardless of its shape or form. Few women can happily undress in front of a man knowing that they will be ranked according to highly publicized standards of beauty that everyone, male or female, is well aware of, as they are splashed all around us on every wall in our cities, and on every magazine or TV screen.

Knowing that our looks we will be judged and that in some way we are selling ourselves has destroyed our confidence and our pleasure in our bodies. This is why, whether we are skinny or plump, long or short nosed, tall or small, we all hate our body. We hate it because we are accustomed to look at it from the outside, with the eyes of the men we meet, and with the bodies-market in mind. We hate it because we are used to think of it as something to sell, something that has become almost independent of us and that is always on a counter. We hate it because we know that so much depends on it. Depending on it, we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or work outside the home), we can gain a certain amount of social power, some company

## 5. *On Sexuality as Work*

to escape the loneliness that awaits us in this society. And our body can turn against us, we may get fat, get wrinkles, age fast, make people indifferent to us, lose our right to intimacy, lose our chance to be touched or hugged.

In sum, we are too busy performing, too busy pleasing, too afraid of failing, to enjoy making love. The sense of our value is at stake in every sexual relation. It is always a great pleasure if a man says that we are good in bed, whether we have liked it or not; it boosts our sense of power, even if we know that afterwards we still have to do the dishes.

We are never allowed to forget the exchange involved, because we never transcend the value-relation in our love-relation with a man. 'How much?' is the question that governs our experience of sexuality. Most of our sexual encounters are spent in calculations. We sigh, sob, gasp, pant, jump and down in bed, but in the meantime our mind keeps calculating 'how much': how much of ourselves we can give before we lose or undersell ourselves, how much will we get in return. If it is our first date, it is how much can we allow him to get: can he go up our skirt, open our blouse, put his fingers under our brassier? At what point should we tell him to stop, how strongly should we refuse? How much can we tell him that we like him before he starts thinking that we are 'cheap'? Keep the price up, that's the rule, at least the one we are taught. If we are already in bed the calculations become even more complicated, because we also have to calculate our chances of getting pregnant, so that, through the sighing and gasping and other shows of passion, we have to quickly run down the schedule of our period. Faking pleasure in the sexual act, in the absence of an orgasm, is extra work

## 5. *On Sexuality as Work*

and a hard one, because when you are faking it you never know how far you should go, and you always end up doing more for fear of not doing enough. It has taken a lot of struggle and a leap in our collective social power to finally being able to admit that *nothing was happening*.