

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 18**  
**Thinking Gender and Homosexuality in Gayle Rubin**


Welcome dear participants to this module. In the previous module we had introduced Gayle Rubin and discussed one of our major essays that had introduced her concept of sex and gender system. In today's module we will discuss her second significant essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" which was published in 1984.



This essay proved vastly influential in shaping discussions of sex and sexuality in the succeeding decades. In particular, early queer theorists of the late 1980s, in early 1990s found inspiration in her differentiation of gender from sexuality.

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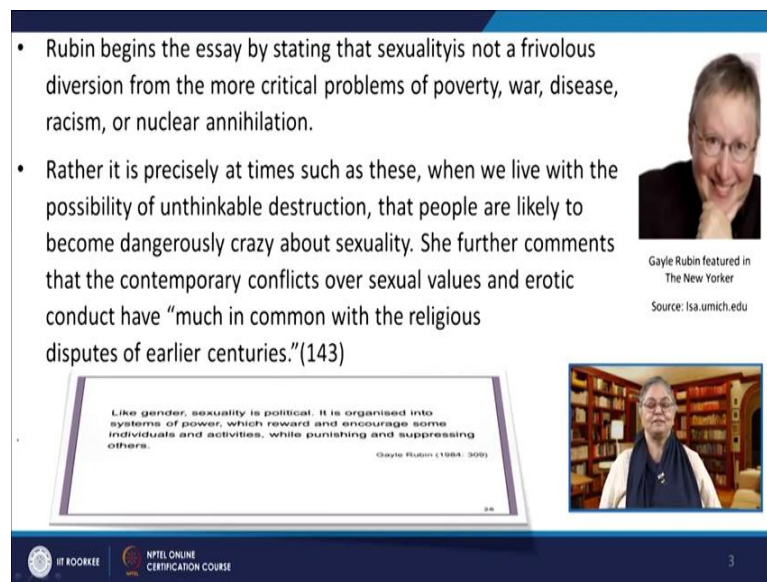
"Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984)

- The essay has seven parts. The outline is as given:
  - Section 1- The Sex Wars
  - Section 2- Sexual Thoughts
  - Section 3- Sexual Transformation
  - Section 4- Sexual Stratification
  - Section 5- Sexual Conflicts
  - Section 6- The Limits of Feminism
  - Section 7- Conclusion



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• Rubin begins the essay by stating that sexuality is not a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, or nuclear annihilation.

• Rather it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality. She further comments that the contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have “much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries.”(143)

Like gender, sexuality is political. It is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others.  
© Gayle Rubin (1988, 2009)

Gayle Rubin featured in The New Yorker  
Source: isa.umich.edu

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This essay has 7 parts and the outline is given here, we shall discuss it in brief. Rubin begins this essay by stating that sexuality is not a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems say of poverty, war, diseases, racism or even nuclear annihilation.

Rather she says that it is precisely at such critical times as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality. She also comments that the contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have and I quote “much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries” unquote.

Rubin scrutinizes the historical periods in which sex rises to the level of a panic in American society. She begins with a focus on the late 19th century when morality crusaders attacked what they considered as obscene. The stance then infiltrated into the legal psyche. Rubin says that the first 1873 federal anti-obscenity law in the US had banned contraceptives, also the abortifacient drugs and devices. And strangely information about them severely impacting women.

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- Rubin believes that the consequences of those nineteenth-century moral paroxysms have left a deep imprint on society's attitudes about sex, medical practice, child-rearing, parental anxieties, police conduct, and sex law.
  - She refers to Judith Walkowitz, a British historian, who emphasised on the vast discrepancy between lurid journalistic accounts and the reality of prostitution; and described how public discourse on prostitution redefined sexuality in the late nineteenth century.
- Another period of sex panic was the 1950s where major shifts in organisation of sexuality took place. Earlier, there were two perceived sexual perversions: homosexuality and the "sex offender."
- The meaning of sex offenders kept on changing gradually: "sometimes it applied to rapists, sometimes to 'child molesters', and eventually functioned as a code for homosexuals"(145).



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Rubin goes on to say that the consequences of these 19th century moral paroxysms have left a deep imprint on the society's attitudes towards sex, medical practice, child-rearing, parental anxieties, police conduct, and the sex law. She also refers to Judith Walkowitz, a US based British historian, who emphasized on the vast discrepancy between lurid journalistic accounts and the reality of prostitution; and described how public discourse on prostitution redefined sexuality in the late nineteenth century.

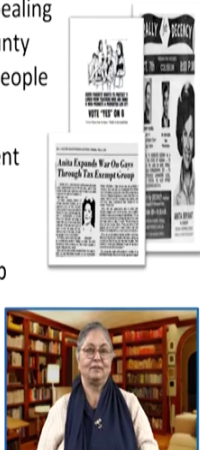
Another period of sex panic according to Gayle Rubin was the 1950s where major shifts in organizations of sexuality took place. Earlier to it, there were two different types of perceived sexual perversions: the first was homosexuality and the second was of being a "sex offender."

Rubin points out that the meaning of the term sex offender is started to change gradually: first it was applied to rapists, then it was applied to child molesters and eventually it came to function as a code for homosexuals. In its bureaucratic medical and popular versions, the sex offender discourse tended to blur distinctions between violent sexual assault and illegal, but consensual acts such as sodomy.

From the late 1940s, until the early 1960s, erotic communities whose activities did not fit the postwar American Dream drew intense persecution. Homosexuals were the objects of federal witch hunts and purges.

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- These sex panics are often defended, Rubin notices, by appealing to the need to protect children. The motto of the Dade County campaign was “Save Our Children,” with the image of gay people trying to recruit and pervert schoolchildren.
- In many instances of “sex hysteria,” the image of an innocent child needing to be protected from the evils of sexuality is actually used to police the actions of adults.
- Commenting that for over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children, Rubin says that the success of the anti-gay campaign sparked an extensive movement to compress the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior.



The collage includes a newspaper clipping with the headline 'Save Our Children' and an illustration of a man and a child. Another clipping has the headline 'Anti-Gay War on the Gay Through Tax Exempt Group'. A third clipping has the headline 'Anti-Gay War on the Gay Through Tax Exempt Group'. A photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a dark jacket, is shown in the bottom right corner of the collage.



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Rubin also points out that these sex panics are often defended, by appealing to the need to protect children. The motto of the Dade county campaign was “Save Our Children,” with the image of gay people trying to recruit and pervert school children. In many instances of “sex hysteria,” the image of an innocent child needing to be protected from the evils of sexuality is actually used to police the actions of adults.


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- The queer theorist Lee Edelman, in his book *No Future*, has argued that in American society, politics always organizes around “saving the children.”
- The resultant stringent ideologies and laws mandated new restrictions on abortion, sex education and homosexuality.
- Rubin cites the Family Protection Act (FPA)/Teen Chastity Program, which was introduced in Congress in 1979. It was considered as a broad assault on feminism, homosexuals, non-traditional families, and teenage sexual privacy (Brown, 1981), providing incentives to girls for chastity, also for heterosexuality!



Lee Edelman  
Source:  
Pittsburghphilosophy



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We can also refer to the queer theorist Lee Edelman, who in his book ‘No Future’, has argued that in American society, politics always organizes around “saving the children” quote unquote. The resultant stringent ideologies and laws mandated new restrictions on abortion, sex education and homosexuality.


Rubin cites the Family Protection Act (FPA or what is also known as the Teen Chastity Program), which was introduced in Congress in 1979. It was considered as a broad assault on feminism, homosexuals, nontraditional families and teenage sexual privacy, as it provided incentives to girls for chastity, also for heterosexuality.

Periods such as the 1880s in England and the 1950s in the US recodify the relations of sexuality. The struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, ideologies which in turn affect the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded.


In America, politicians of all affiliations argued that their policies are in the best interest of children who are our future. A consequence of this framing is that politics can only imagine a sex and a sexuality that produces children. People who have sex in ways that are not reproductive are in a sense outside politics, it is this arrangement that Rubin is arguing against.

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- In the second section of the essay, "Sexual Thoughts," Rubin theorizes common principles underlying the set of historical sex panics.
- She wants a "radical theory of sex" that can "identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression"(149).
- In the last five years according to Rubin, historical and theoretical scholarship has challenged sexual essentialism.
- Gay history, particularly the work of gay activist and historian Jeffrey Weeks, "has led this assault by showing that homosexuality as we know it is a relatively modern institutional complex" (Rubin, 1984).



Jeffrey Weeks  
Source: Notches



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In the second section of the essay, "Sexual Thoughts", Rubin theorizes common principles underlying the set of historical sex panics. She wants a "radical theory of sex" that can "identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression." In the last five years before the publication of her article according to Rubin, historical and theoretical scholarship has challenged sexual essentialism.



Gay history, particularly the work of gay activist and historian Jeffrey Weeks, "has led this assault by showing that homosexuality as we know it is a relatively modern institutional complex" as a starting point Rubin turns to theories of constructivism that have combated ideas of sexual essentialism.

The idea of sexual essentialism is that sex is natural and independent of social and historical institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of western societies which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, a social and also transhistorical. Dominated for over a century by medicine, psychiatry and psychology the academic study of sex has reproduced essentialism.


In contrast, constructivists show that society creates the meanings we attach to sex, including what we think is natural and what we think is not natural. Looking at how society constructs sex is an important first step in social movements.

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- Rubin argues that Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) has been the most persuasive and exemplary text of the new scholarship on sex.
- Foucault "argues that desires are not pre-existing biological entities", rather, they are constituted "in the course of historically specific social practices"(149).
- He emphasizes the generative aspects of the social organization of sex, rather than its oppressive elements by pointing out that new sexualities are constantly produced.



Source: Vintage      Michel Foucault  
Source: Alexis Duclos



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Rubin also acknowledges that Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* published in 1978 has been the most persuasive and exemplary text of the new scholarship on sex. Foucault has "argued that desires are not pre-existing biological entities", rather they are constituted "in the course of historically specific social practices".


He emphasizes the generative aspects of the social organization of sex, rather than its oppressive elements by pointing out that new sexualities are constantly produced. Rubin argues against the feminist assumption that sexuality is a derivation of gender, while she acknowledges that gender relations have been an important context for the articulation of the sexual system.

She argues that sex and gender are not synonymous and hence the rubric of gender cannot account for sexuality in its entirety.

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- Sexual essentialism is an “ideological formation,” i.e., a system of ideas that influences the ways sexuality is perceived (150). Rubin analyses five other ideological formations that police sexuality.
- These are: sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation.

1. Sexual Negativity: Sex is basically bad, dangerous and inherently sinful. It may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much.
2. The Fallacy of Misplaced Scale: A corollary of sex negativity. It overreacts to sex; heretical sexual acts are punished in the harshest manner.



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Sexual essentialism is an “ideological formation,” that is, a system of ideas that influences the way sexuality is perceived. Rubin analyzes five other ideological formations that police sexuality. And she names them as: sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation.


Sexual negativity suggests that sex is basically bad, dangerous and inherently sinful. It may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much. The fallacy of misplaced scale is a corollary of sex negativity. It overreacts to sex; heretical sexual acts are punished in the harshest manner.



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3. Hierarchical System of Sexual Value: Refers to how some sexual acts are perceived as “good, normal, and natural”, while others are perceived as “bad, abnormal, and unnatural.”

- Rubin comments that the modern western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of erotic pyramid.
- Religious institutions, psychiatric institutions, and popular culture all work together to create this hierarchy.
- Rubin demonstrates that popular culture is “permeated with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, deprived, and a menace to everything from small children to national security”(152).



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The third ideological formation according to Rubin is the hierarchical system of sexual value. It refers to how sexual acts are perceived as “good, normal, and natural”, while some other type of sexual acts are perceived as “bad, unnatural, and abnormal.”

Rubin comments that the modern western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital and reproductive heterosexuals are at the top of erotic pyramid. Religious and psychiatric institutions as well as popular culture work together to create this hierarchy.

And Rubin demonstrates that popular culture is “permeated with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, and unhealthy, that it is deprived, and a menace to everything from small children to national security”. For example, the movies and books of Fifty Shades of Grey are rarely advertised as BDSM or at the very least are shown in the lightest terms of BDSM.

Individuals whose behavior stands high in the erotic hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institution support, and related material benefits. As sexual behaviors or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility and loss of institutional support and perhaps also economic sanctions.

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**The charmed circle:**  
Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

Heterosexual  
Married  
Monogamous  
Reproductive  
Non-commercial  
In pairs  
In a relationship  
Same generation  
In private  
No pornography  
Bodies only  
Vocally

**The outer limits:**  
Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality

Homosexual  
Unmarried  
Promiscuous  
Non-procreative  
Commercial  
Abuse or in groups  
Cruel  
Cross-generational  
In public  
Pornography  
With manufactured objects  
Subdominance

FIGURE 1. The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits

- Rubin offers two representations of “The Sex Hierarchy.”
- The first figure is a set of concentric circles in which the inner circle (*The Charmed Circle*) represents “Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality”.
- The outer circle (*The Outer Limits*) represents “Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality.”

Rubin offers two representations of “The Sex Hierarchy.” The first figure is a set of concentric circles in which the inner circle which has been termed as the ‘Charmed Circle’ by Gayle Rubin represents “Good, normal, natural and blessed sexuality”.

The outer circle which has been termed as ‘The Outer Limits’ represents “Bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality.” We can also look at the notifications which Rubin has provided in these figures which are a part of her essay.

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**“Good” sex:**  
Normal, Natural, Healthy, Holy - “The Line”

Heterosexual  
Married  
Monogamous  
Reproductive  
At home

**Major area of contest**

Unmarried heterosexual couples  
Promiscuous heterosexuals

**“Bad” sex:**  
Abnormal, Unnatural, Sick, Sinful, “Way Out”

Masturbation  
Long term, stable lesbian and gay male couples  
Lesbians in the bar  
Promiscuous gay men at the baths or in the park  
Transvestites  
Transsexuals  
Fetichists  
Sadomasochists  
For money  
Cross-generational

Best ————— Worst

- The second figure describes *The Struggle Over Where to Draw the Line*. It offers a spectrum of sexual acts (also types of people).
- It views certain acts as **good sex** (Normal, Natural, Healthy, Holy), and others as **bad sex** (Abnormal, Unnatural, Sick, Sinful, Way Out).

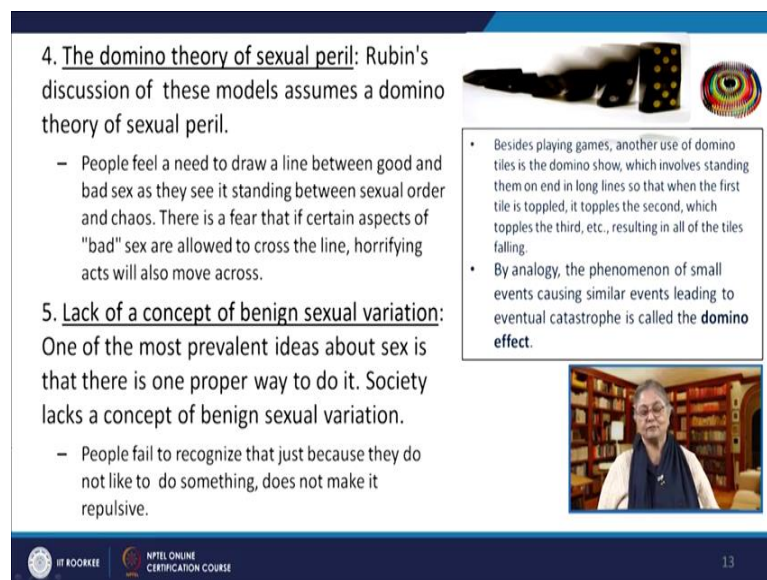
- Rubin identified the multiple ways in which these hierarchies worked, approving or proscribing behaviours and sexualities according to a set of binary oppositions.
- In drawing a “line” between good and bad sex, American society also adopts a “domino theory of sexual peril” (163).

The second figure describes the struggle over where to draw the line. It offers a spectrum of sexual acts and also types of people. And view certain acts as good sex and others as bad sex. Rubin identifies the multiple ways in which these hierarchies worked, approving or prescribing behaviours and sexualities according to a set of binary oppositions.

In drawing a “line” between good and bad sex, American society also adopts a domino theory of sexual peril. Most of the discourses on sex whether they are religious or psychiatric, popular or political delimit a very small portion of human sexual capacity as sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal or politically correct.

The line distinguishes these from all other erotic behaviors which are understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological infantile or politically reprehensible. The line appears to extend between sexual order and chaos on the other hand. It expresses a fear, that if anything is permitted to cross this barrier against the scary sex something unspeakable will skitter across.

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4. The domino theory of sexual peril: Rubin's discussion of these models assumes a domino theory of sexual peril.

- People feel a need to draw a line between good and bad sex as they see it standing between sexual order and chaos. There is a fear that if certain aspects of "bad" sex are allowed to cross the line, horrifying acts will also move across.

5. Lack of a concept of benign sexual variation: One of the most prevalent ideas about sex is that there is one proper way to do it. Society lacks a concept of benign sexual variation.

- People fail to recognize that just because they do not like to do something, does not make it repulsive.

Besides playing games, another use of domino tiles is the domino show, which involves standing them on end in long lines so that when the first tile is toppled, it topples the second, which topples the third, etc., resulting in all of the tiles falling.

By analogy, the phenomenon of small events causing similar events leading to eventual catastrophe is called the **domino effect**.

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So, Rubin’s discussion of these models assumes a domino theory of sexual peril and by analogy the phenomenon of small events causing similar events leading to eventual catastrophe is called the domino effect. And Rubin is referring to this idea only. So, people feel a need to draw a line between good and bad sex as they say it is standing between sexual order and chaos.

There is a fear that if certain aspects of “bad” sex are allowed to cross the line and become more acceptable horrifying acts will also move across. The fifth is the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation: one of the most prevalent ideas about sex is that there is only one proper way to do it. Society lacks a concept of benign social variation. And people fail to recognize that just because they do not like to do something, it does not make it repulsive automatically.

Rubin points out that we have learned to value other cultures as unique, without seeing them as inferior and suggests that we should adopt a similar understanding of different sexual cultures also. Most systems of sexual judgment religious, psychological, feminist or socialist attempt to determine on which side of the line a particular act falls. Only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity.

For instance, heterosexual encounters may be sublime or disgusting, may be free or forced, may be healing or destructive may be romantic or mercenary. But as long as it does not violate other rules heterosexuality is acknowledged to exhibit the full range of human experience.


In contrast all six acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuances. The further from the line of sex act is, the more it is depicted as a uniformly bad experience. Rubin says that as a result of the six conflicts of the last decade some behavior near the border is inching across it.

Unmarried couples living together and some forms of homosexuality are moving now in the direction of respectability. Though most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. Yet if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction.


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- Such a politics would separate the impossibility of leading a life of virtuous normality or absolute queerness from the possibility of broadly challenging hierarchies of sexual value, regardless of the extent to which one's own identity is queer or normal.
- Further it will create possibility of working on specific sexual agendas, such as the legal status of particular sexual acts, the recognition of bisexuality, HIV/AIDS activism, the bullying of kids perceived to be 'queer', the rights of sex workers, or the rights of same-sex couples.


• Rubin points out to numerous empirical research that incorporate a positive concept of sexual variation. Alfred Kinsey and his successors John Gagnon and William Simon have pioneered the application of sociological understandings of erotic variety.



Alfred Kinsey  
Source: Britannica



John Gagnon  
Source: The New York Times



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Rubin points out to numerous empirical research that incorporate a positive concept of sexual variation. Alfred Kinsey, John Gagnon and William Simon have incorporated a positive concept of sexual variation.

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- This notion of a single ideal sexuality characterizes most systems of thought about sex.
  - For religion, the ideal is procreative marriage.
  - For psychology, it is mature heterosexuality.
- Although its content varies, the format of a single sexual standard is continually reconstituted within other rhetorical frameworks, including feminism and socialism.
- Rubin comments that it is just as objectionable to insist that everyone should be lesbian, non-monogamous, or kinky, as to believe that everyone should be heterosexual or married.



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This notion of a single ideal sexuality characterizes most systems of thought about sex. For religion, the ideal is procreative marriage. For psychology, it is mature heterosexuality. Although its content varies, the format of a single sexual standard is continually reconstituted within other rhetorical frameworks, including feminism and socialism.

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## Sexual Transformations

- This section deals with how the different sex panics discussed in the previous part of the essay have formed a system and/or hierarchy of sex.
- Rubin focuses on the writings of nineteenth-century sexology.
- She is particularly interested in what she calls “erotic speciation.” Homosexuality is its best example.
- Rubin illustrates how homosexual behaviour was always present among humans.
- However, in different societies and epochs they may be rewarded or punished, required or forbidden, treated as a temporary experience or a life-long vocation.



Source: The Conversation



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The next section on sexual transformations deals with how the different sex panics discussed in the previous part of the essay have formed a system as well as a hierarchy of sex. Rubin focuses on the writings of nineteenth-century sexology. She is particularly interested in what she calls “erotic speciation”.

Homosexuality is its best example. Rubin illustrates how homosexual behaviour was always present among human societies; however, in different societies and in different epochs homosexuality might be rewarded or punished, required or forbidden, treated as a temporary experience or a lifelong vocation.


Speciation means creating a new identity, in a way creating a new species. Same-sex relationships have occurred throughout history, but it was in the late 19th century that this behavior became an independent species, the homosexuals. Society started to talk about sexual behavior as an identity, instead of taking it as an activity. Similar process of speciation had happened with prostitution also.

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- Prostitution has undergone similar changes. Rather than an activity some women might participate in for temporary employment, women started to become identified as “prostitutes,” as if this employment completely defined them.
- “Prostitution began to change from a temporary job to a more permanent occupation as a result of nineteenth-century agitation, legal reform, and police persecution”(165).
- The result of both forms of speciation was that homosexuality and prostitution stopped looking like activities people engaged in and started to look like categories of people, permanently defined.



Source: Giovanni Boldini



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Rubin points out that prostitution started to change from a temporary job as it was taken up during the 17th and 18th century to a more permanent occupation as a result of nineteenth-century agitation legal reform and police persecution.

The result of both forms of speciation was that homosexuality as well as prostitution is stopped looking like activities people engaged in and started to look like categories of people who are then permanently defined. As a result, people of these categories were segregated and punished.


The legal persecution of both populations is justified by an elaborate ideology that classifies them as dangerous and inferior, undesirables who cannot be left to their own ways. The next section of Rubin’s essay is titled as Sexual Stratification.



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### Sexual Stratification

- This section explores the means through which this grouping has been developed. Rubin comments that the industrial transformation of Western Europe and North America brought new forms of social stratification.
- The most important means for it has been the law. Obscenity laws worked to reinforce a sexual hierarchy, because they turned sex into a taboo.
- What is particularly fascinating, Rubin argues, is that the obscenity laws also limit commerce in a capitalist society; as sex law incorporates “a very strong prohibition against mixing sex and money, except via marriage”(166).




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This section explores the means through which this grouping has been developed. Rubin comments that the industrial transformation of Western Europe and North America brought new forms of social stratification. The most important means for it has been the law.


Obscenity laws work to reinforce a sexual hierarchy, because they turned sex into a taboo. What is particularly fascinating, as Rubin has argued, is that the obscenity laws also limit commerce in a capitalist society; as sex laws incorporates “a very strong prohibition against mixing sex and money, except via marriage”.

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- In a capitalist society, such a prohibition on trade is rare.
- Capitalist societies rarely place blanket prohibitions on exchanging money for a particular kind of good.
- The fact that a capitalist society would limit trade for sexual commodities, therefore limiting its economy, is one sign of how deep the taboo of sex goes in that society.
- Beyond the law, society also polices sexual activity in everyday interactions and social institutions.
- Getting a job is still difficult for Gay people. Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, gay people may also be less likely to pursue public office or political representation, for fear of a “sex scandal.” This limits the agency of sexual minorities.



"Pyramid of the Capitalist System", a Socialist Poster.  
Source: University of Pittsburgh



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In a capitalist society, Rubin notes such a prohibition on trade is rare. Capitalist societies rarely place blanket prohibitions on exchanging money for any particular kind of good. The fact that a capitalist society would limit trade for sexual commodities, and therefore would limit its own economy, is one sign of how deep the taboo of sex goes in the society. Beyond the law society, also polices sexual activity in everyday interactions and social institutions.

Getting a job is still difficult for gay people. Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, gay people may also be less likely to pursue public office or political representation, for fear of a “sex scandal.” This limits the agency of sexual minorities. Sex law is the most adamant instrument of sexual stratification and erotic persecution.

The state routinely intervenes in sexual behavior at a level that would not be tolerated in other areas of social life. Social and legal acceptance of sexual activity would ensure better protection, better business, better health care and also healthier social relationships.

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- A kind of sexual conformity is also enforced through families.
- Rubin remembers countless stories of homosexuals and sex workers who have been ostracized by their families when they confessed their sexual activities or had them discovered. This cuts people off from a vital source of psychological and economic support.
- Rubin concludes the section by arguing that sex is a vector of oppression.
- “The system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of social inequality, sorting out individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics”(167)
- A theory of sex needs to take this into account, to see how sexual oppression cuts across other kinds of oppression and can compound and multiply them.



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A kind of sexual conformity is also enforced through families. Rubin remembers countless stories of homosexuals and sex workers who have been ostracized by their families when they confessed their sexual activities or had them discovered. This cuts people off from a vital source of psychological and economic support. Rubin concludes this section by saying that sex is a vector of oppression.

And she says “the system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of social inequality, sorting out individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics”. A theory of sex needs to take this into account, to see how sexual oppression cuts across other kinds of oppression and can compound and multiply them.

By vector Rubin means a particular axis or dimension of oppression. For instance, race and gender are other vectors of oppression. People can be oppressed for the color of their skin or for their gender identity. Sex is just like these other vectors as Rubin comments; that means, sexual oppression can act independently of racial and gender oppression.


Rubin’s argument for a unique vector of sexual oppression is what makes her essay, a radical theory. Radical feminists argued that the oppression of women is caused at base by patriarchy. What made them radical is their insistence that this is the fundamental cause of oppression.

Similarly, Rubin is trying to discover the fundamental cause of oppression of people including gay men and sex workers. Her argument is that the root of their oppression is a distinct sexual system of hierarchy. As in radical feminism, patriarchy causes the oppression of women; in Rubin's radical theory of sex a sexual hierarchy causes sexual oppression.


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### Sexual Conflicts

- In this section Rubin primarily explores what she calls “territorial and border wars.” These conflicts are related with sexual minorities, including homosexuals and sex workers, fighting for space in which to live their lives.
- “According to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sexual worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals”(168)
- Gay pioneers occupied neighbourhoods that were centrally located but rundown. Her own work on leather sub-culture in San Francisco testifies it.



Source: CanStock Photo



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In this section on Sexual Conflicts, Rubin primarily explores what she calls “territorial and border wars.” These conflicts are related with sexual minorities, including homosexuals and sex workers, fighting for a space where to lead their lives. “According to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sexual worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals.”

Gay pioneers occupied neighborhoods that were centrally located but run down. Her own work on leather sub-culture in San Francisco testifies it. After the second world war many gay people from rural areas moved to big cities, here communities of people tended to find each other and establish neighborhoods that provided a kind of sexual enclave.

For instance, today we see gay neighborhoods such as the Castro in San Francisco, East Lakeview in Chicago and Greenbridge Village in New York. Historically these neighborhoods started off as low-income gay ghettos.

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- The most important and consequential kind of sex conflict according to Rubin is what Jeffrey Weeks has termed as the “moral panic”.
- Popularly understood as exaggerated outbursts of public concern over the morality or behavior of a group in society, moral panics are the “political moment” of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channelled into political action, and from there into social change (71).
  - A moral panic is when sex starts to bear the anxieties of other social problems. Sex might be blamed for something that has nothing to do with sex. As a result, a sexual minority is scapegoated and targeted.
  - Rubin gives the examples of the white-slavery hysteria of the 1880s, the anti-homosexual campaigns of the 1950s, and the child-pornography panic of the late 1970s as typical moral panics.



*Mexican-American kids stripped and beaten by US servicemen during Los Angeles' Zoot Suit Riot. Associated Press*

SOURCE: <https://historycollection.com/genealogy/authorities-that-shaped-history-and-contrasted-the-morals/>




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- Rubin discusses two contemporary moral panics. The first, perpetuated by feminists in her opinion, is the moral panic about sadomasochism.
- According to some feminists, consensual sexual acts that include domination or pain, such as bondage and whipping, are dangerous and hurt women.
- In this case sadomasochism is being blamed for patriarchy, perpetuating the subordination of women. But in the process, women who enjoy it are being further oppressed and marginalized.
- The second moral panic is related to the AIDS epidemic. AIDS, which disproportionately affects gay men, is used as an excuse to criminalize, rather than help, gay men.



Secretary, a 2002 American erotic black comedy romantic drama, based on a short story by Mary Gattskill  
Source: pastemagazine



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But in the process, women who might enjoy it, are being further oppressed and marginalized. The second panic she has referred to is related to the AIDS epidemic. AIDS as a disease disproportionately affected gay men, and it was used as an excuse to criminalize, the gay man instead of providing a help to them. Homosexuality is taken as a disease in itself and aids had been used as a ruse to monitor and segregate gay men.

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### The Limits of Feminism

- This section continues some of Rubin's complex discussions about the relation between feminism and sexual liberation. She begins by observing two trends in feminist thought.
  1. Those who advocate sexual liberation and see the liberation of sex as a means to the liberation of women, whose sexuality is often policed.
  2. Those who are associated with an anti-pornography movement in feminism, and think that sex is a means through which women are oppressed.
    - Rubin comments that proponents of this viewpoint have condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression as anti-feminist. Within this framework, monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term, intimate relationships and which does not involve playing with polarized roles, has "replaced married, procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy".



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The section on The Limits of Feminism continues Rubin's complex discussions about the relation between feminism and sexual liberation. She begins by observing two trends in feminist thought. The first segment of feminist thought belongs to those people who advocate sexual liberation and see the liberation of sex as a means to the liberation of women, whose sexuality is often policed.

The second section belongs to those who are associated with an anti-pornography movement in feminism, and think that sex is a means through which women are oppressed. And Rubin comments that proponents of this viewpoint have condemned virtually every variant of sexual operation as anti-feminist.


Within this framework, monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term, intimate relationships and which does not involve playing with polarized roles, has "replaced married, procreative heterosexuality at the top of the value hierarchy." In this context B. Ruby Rich has remarked that the desire for a language of sexuality has led feminists into locations that is pornography and sadomasochism which are too narrow or over determined for a fruitful discussion.

And thus, the debate has collapsed into a rumble. This is the view that objects to sadomasochism for instance. The fights between women against pornography, who are also known as WAP and lesbian sadomasochism have resembled gang warfare. Rubin calls the anti porn rhetoric of such feminist segments a demon sexology, asserting that

they cannot represent the whole feminist movement. However, she contends that sexual liberation has been and continues to be a feminist goal.

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- According to Rubin this so-called feminist discourse recreates a very conservative sexual morality.
  - “For over a century, battles have been waged over just how much shame, distress, and punishment should be incurred by sexual activity. The conservative tradition has promoted opposition to pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, all erotic variation, sex education, sex research, abortion, and contraception” (172).
- These two sides led to what has been called the feminist “sex wars” of the 1980s, which caused a rift in feminism between the pro-sex and the anti-pornography camps.
- Rubin notes a more recent “middle position,” but she is sceptical of this position, too. Sceptically she comments that whenever there is polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think the truth lies somewhere in between.




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Rubin thinks that this so-called feminist discourse recreates a very conservative sexual morality. So, these two sides led to what has been called the feminist “sex wars” of the 1980s, which caused a rift in feminism between the pro-sex and the anti-pornography camps. Rubin notes a more recent “middle position,” but she is skeptical of this position, too. And skeptically she comments that whenever there is a polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think that the truth lies somewhere in between.




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- She quotes the American essayist and feminist, Ellen Willis, to support her point-of-view, who has sarcastically remarked that "the feminist bias is that women are equal to men and the male chauvinist bias is that women are inferior. The unbiased view is that the truth lies somewhere in between"(85).
- Rubin thinks that the new "sexual moderates" tend to condescend to sexual minorities.
- They seem to think that anyone who enjoys sadomasochism or pornography has been brainwashed, and should perhaps be pitied rather than criminalized.



Ellen Willis at the Village Voice offices in the late 1970s.  
Source: NonaWA



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She quotes the American essayist and feminist, Ellen Willis, to support her point-of-view, Willis has also remarked sarcastically and I quote “the feminist bias is that women are equal to men and the male chauvinist bias is that women are inferior. The unbiased view is that the truth lies somewhere in between”, unquote.

Rubin thinks that the new “sexual moderates” tend to condescend to sexual minorities. They seem to think that anyone who enjoys sadomasochism or pornography has been brainwashed, and should perhaps be pitied rather than criminalized. This view cannot help sexual minorities including gay men or female sex workers, because it is still makes them into deviants who if not penalized is still need to be fixed or reformed.

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**Conclusion**

- Rubin concludes by arguing that the end of sexual oppression cannot be brought about by feminism alone.
  - Feminism has learned how to theorize gender oppression. But that does not mean it knows how to think about the oppression of sex. Feminism is no more capable than Marxism of being the ultimate and complete account of all social inequality
  - These critical tools were fashioned to handle very specific areas of social activity. Other areas of social life, their forms of power, and their characteristic modes of oppression, need their own conceptual implements
- Rubin argues for separating sexuality and gender analytically.
  - It means developing a theory of sexuality, separate from a theory of gender, in order to provide a more holistic sense of the ways in which sex and sexuality are regulated in our society.



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Rubin concludes by arguing that the end of sexual operation cannot be brought about by feminism alone. Feminism has learned how to theorize gender oppression. But that does not mean it knows how to think about the oppression of sex. Feminism is no more capable than Marxism of being the ultimate and complete account of all social inequality.

These critical tools were fashioned to handle very specific areas of social activity. Other areas of social life, their forms of power, and their characteristic mode of oppression, need their own conceptual implements. Rubin argues for separating sexuality and gender analytically. It means developing a theory of sexuality, separate from a theory of gender, in order to provide a more holistic sense of the ways in which sex and sexuality are regulated in our society.

Although the first step in liberating sex is developing an autonomous theory of sexuality. Rubin hopes that this radical theory is not forever divorced from feminism. She imagines that after we have a radical theory of sexuality, it will enrich and be enriched by feminism.


And she calls for a coalition of pro-sex activists and feminists to shun their prejudices and work together. Unlearning the bias of sexual hierarchy, that is good and bad sex is a condition for future coalition and political activism. In her 2011 article titled “Blood Under The Bridge”. Rubin has remarked that she is proud of this essay’s proto-

queerness, that is moving the discussion of sexual politics beyond single issues and single constituencies from women and lesbians and gay men to analysis that could incorporate an address with more intricacy, the cross identifications and multiple subject positions that most of us occupy. Rubin has argued for theoretical as well as sexual pluralism.


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**Reception**

- In 2011, on the 25th anniversary of the original essay, the influential academic journal *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* published a special issue titled “Rethinking Sex.”
- The issue began with Rubin’s reflections on the essay and presented articles from a number of leading theorists of gender and sexuality who have learned from and advanced Rubin’s thoughts.
- The special issue attests to the continued vitality of the essay a quarter century later.
- Heather Love in the Introduction to the journal declared that the essay “set the terms for feminist and queer scholarship”(2).



Heather Love  
Source: ICI Berlin



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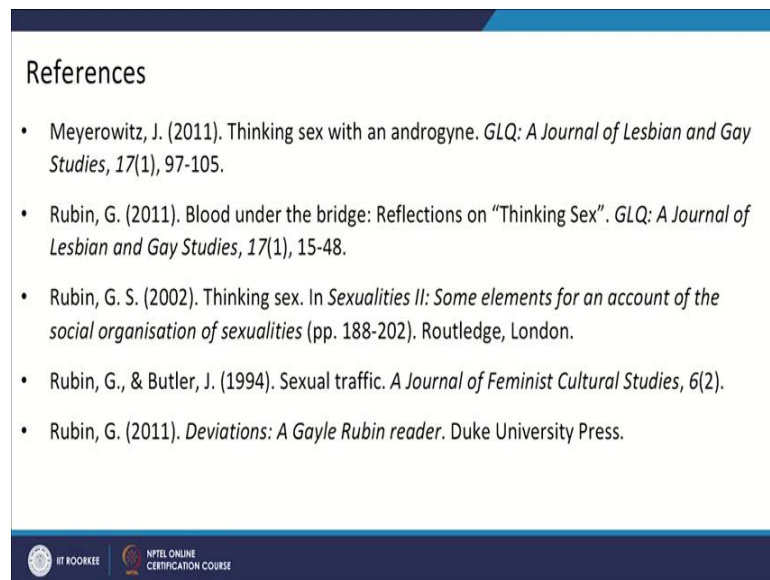
Rubin’s work has had an immense impact on the future theorizations related with sexuality and gender. In 2011 on the 25th anniversary of the original essay, the influential journal *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* published a special issue titled “Rethinking Sex.”

The issue began with Rubin’s reflection on the essay and presented articles from a number of leading theorists of gender and sexuality who have learned from an advanced Rubin’s thought. The famous critic Heather Love in the introduction to this special issue of journal declared that the essay “set the terms for feminist and queer scholarship”.

Six years after *Thinking Sex*, 2 ground-breaking works Eve Sedgwick, ‘*Epistemology of the Closet*’ and Judith Butler’s ‘*Gender Trouble*’, change the ways in which people think about sex and sexuality. Moving away from the essentialist position which has also been effectively attacked by Rubin. In the next module we will look in detail at the works of Eve Sedgwick.

Like Rubin, Sedgwick challenged feminism and pro-sex positions to work together in the future. Both think that the first task is to give theorists of sexuality room to theorize on their own and then they can talk about possible integrations with feminism and the study of gender.

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Thank you.