Identifying the limits of sexual liberation as a feminist value

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IDENTIFYING THE LIMITS OF SEXUAL LIBERATION
AS A FEMINIST VALUE

by

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Abstract:

This thesis explores feminist responses to the sexual revolution and the extent to which sexual liberation, from the perspective of heterosexual relations, has served women’s interests as an oppressed social group under patriarchy. In particular, this thesis examines the divide between libertarian and radical feminists’ interpretation of sexual liberation, considering both the radical feminist criticisms of the sexist nature of heterosexual sex and the libertarian feminist view of free sexuality as a revolutionary act that ameliorates the condition of women. This thesis offers a middle ground approach to sexual liberation as a feminist value by suggesting two conditions on heterosexual activity that seek to permit maximal sexual autonomy for women, while mitigating risks to female sexual agents under patriarchy. Specifically, the notion of care respect is suggested as a necessary condition for heterosexuality, as it precludes the possibility of dehumanizing sexual objectification of women. The avoidance of mere-instrumentalizing sex (using persons solely as instruments of sexual gratification) is also suggested as a condition of liberated heterosexual activity.
Chapter One: Background

1.1. Structure and Scope

Competing schools of feminist thought have differed in their interpretation of the sexual revolution and the impact that it has had on women. In particular, radical and Marxist feminists remain diametrically opposed to libertarian feminists (also called “sex liberals” or “sex-positive feminists”) in their assessment of whether the sexual revolution has undermined or empowered women as a sociopolitical group. Libertarian feminists regard consensual sexual behavior as potentially empowering for females, generally arguing that the sexual revolution has allowed women to transcend the role of passive sexual object and assume the roles of sexual initiators and subjects previously reserved for men. By contrast, radical feminists hold that, due to the overarching societal power structures of heterosexuality, the circumstances under which female sexual agents can engage in sex acts without succumbing to the patriarchal sexual paradigm are severely limited and, in fact, greater participation in heterosexual sex will only exacerbate sexual objectification and subordination of women.

Bearing in mind the debate between libertarian and radical feminists, the ultimate goal of this thesis will be to identify minimal conditions of liberated sexuality that, I will argue, are necessary for a feminist sexual ethics. These conditions will offer a framework of sexual ethics that bridges the divide between radical and libertarian feminism. The scope of this examination
will be limited to heterosexual sex and the experience of heterosexual men and women in
developed societies in the post-World War II era. To begin, in the present chapter I will outline
the theoretical background necessary to understand the interplay of heterosexuality and gender
oppression. In particular, this will involve a conceptual analysis of patriarchy, oppression and
objectification, their interrelatedness and their implications for heterosexual sex. This will be
followed by an explanation of the main tenets of libertarian and radical feminism and their
respective analyses of patriarchy, oppression, objectification and heterosexuality. Major
disagreements between these competing analyses will be explored, as these disagreements offer
key points of departure for the framework of feminist sexual ethics I will subsequently outline.

Chapter 2 will explore in detail the concept of sexual liberation and the ascent of the
libertarian feminist view of sexual ethics. This will include a brief survey of the historical
development of the sexual revolution, as well as the major theoretical pillars — psychoanalysis
and sexology — that precipitated the revolution as we understand it today. A critique of the
sexual revolution and sexual liberation will then be provided from the radical feminist
perspective, exploring literature, pop culture phenomena and firsthand accounts from the
women’s movement. The issues and tensions identified in this analysis will set the stage for a
discussion of what I suggest are minimum conditions necessary to align liberated heterosexual
sex with feminist ethics.

Chapter 3 will make the positive case for certain conditions on liberated heterosexual sex,
namely, the avoidance of what I will term “mere instrumentalizing sexuality” and the necessary
presence of “care respect” in heterosexual sex. This will involve a discussion of risk in sexual
behavior and the impact that sociopolitical factors, such as patriarchy and objectification, have
on the assessment of that risk for women. What I intend to demonstrate is not only the extreme risk instrumentalizing sexuality poses to the women who engage in this activity themselves, but also risks that are imposed on women as a social group. These concerns will, I believe, reinforce the necessity of the proposed conditions on liberated sexuality outlined in this thesis. Finally, I will defend my view against several serious objections.

1.2. Understanding Patriarchy

Much of the divide over the sexual revolution’s general impact on women is rooted in the concern over fundamental power differences between genders in society at large. To put it simply, heterosexual sex does not occur in a social vacuum, but, like other interpersonal relations, is shaped by power relationships and, in some cases, systems of oppression. In feminist terms, the social factor of paramount concern is patriarchy, generally construed as the domination of society by men and the accompanying subordination of women. Some feminists, such as Catherine MacKinnon and Kate Millet, believe that intercourse, which they posit is the most rudimentary of male-female social interactions, as it is the core of broader cultural mores, values and attitudes, is, in essence, a microcosm of the greater culture in which it is situated. As Millet puts it, intercourse is “a model of sexual politics on an individual plane” (Millet 23).

According to Millet, patriarchy (also called “sexual domination”) is arguably the most pervasive and fundamental of all human power relationships. Millet states that every society that has existed and does exist is patriarchal to some degree -- that is, dominated by men, with most
of society’s power in the hands of men, who control the female half of the population. It is a social constant across time and space, so much so that it “provides [our culture] its most fundamental concept of power” (Millet 25) and influences all other institutions, the political, social, economic and religious. It cuts across other power structures, such as economic class and castes.

Millet’s exposition of patriarchy and political implications of heterosexuality follows the Weberian understanding of power or “herrschaft,” which is defined simply as the possibility of imposing one’s will on the behavior of others and is manifested both socially and in formal political institutions. In fact, Weber specifically identifies patriarchy as a form of control through social authority, in contrast to control through formal authorities such as the law or the state. Likewise, Millet defines “politics” broadly as “power-structure relationships...whereby one group of persons is controlled by another,” (23) and not in the narrow sense of formal political institutions (although these institutions are nonetheless shaped by broader power structures). These power relationships are exhibited among socially well defined, cohesive groups of people — e.g. “races, castes, classes, and sexes” (Millet 24) — and form the basis of domination and subordination among large swathes of socially similar people.

To understand the mechanism by which socially similar individuals are categorized into these power groups, we may turn to Sally Haslanger’s analysis of gender terminology. Haslanger describes our social categorizations of genders as being a function of oppressive relations

1 From the scholarship available at the time of Millet’s writing in 1970, Millet asserts that “[n]o matriarchal societies are known to exist” and that “our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy” (25). However, the possibility remains open that a non-patriarchal society of primeval origins could have existed due to the fact that patriarchy does not “appear to originate in human nature” (Millet 27) but rather in power structures. She therefore grants, and notes that some anthropologists believe, that a “pre-patriarchal” form of social arrangement could have existed. The difficulty, Millet says, is that the existence of a pre-patriarchal society is primarily conjectural and there is a lack of evidence for it (27).
between individuals who are socially marked as belonging to the groups “man” and “woman.” As Haslanger explains, gender is a social concept that does not neatly map onto biological realities, nor is it consistently represented through time or among cultures. On the contrary, gender categories have different meanings and expectations cross-culturally and temporally, and may include individuals who do not possess some of the supposed physiological or behavioral traits of those categories (e.g., a woman who is not passive; a man who is nurturing, etc.). What we mean by “woman” and “man,” and who we say fits these labels, is not, then, defined in terms of intrinsic physical or psychological features. Rather, Haslanger asserts that the meaning and extensions of gender categories are context-specific. They are a product of how one is viewed, treated, and how one’s life is structured socially, legally and economically, relative to others in a given social context (Haslanger 229).

What is constant about the gender relation, at least as we experience it in the world today, is that it is systematically hierarchal, with “men” being the dominant social group and “women” being the subordinate group. Determining who fits into these groups is determined by how the cultural context marks individuals for certain social treatment, the manner of which is also determined by the cultural context. In contemporary American society, for example, having the perceived features of the biological male body marks such individuals for privileged treatment as part of their ostensible membership in the social male group. Likewise, having the

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2 For example, the replacement of the housewife with the “supermom” concept as a feminine ideal in contemporary American society.

3 Haslanger’s view is focused on the pragmatics of the usage of gender terms (as well as racial terms) and not describing what our concept is of such terms or who can be said to fit these concepts. Her purpose is to provide an operational definition of gender that can be used to as an effective tool to redress social injustice and inequalities. As Haslanger writes, “My priority … is not to capture what we do mean, but how we might usefully revise what we mean for certain theoretical and political purposes” (Haslanger 224).
perceived features of the biological female body marks such individuals for treatment as a subordinate as part of their ostensible membership in the social female group (Haslanger 235).

Millet’s analysis elucidates how the gender categorization system and its associated power dynamics are maintained in a given social context. What is crucial to the maintenance of patriarchy is the socialization of the sexes. Patriarchal societies rely to a great extent on personal compliance rather than physical force. Compliance is generated by the socialization of men and women into the distinct, hierarchal categories of the masculine and feminine⁴. Like Haslanger, Millet argues that assignment into the socially constructed masculine-feminine dichotomy is imposed on individuals on the basis of their perceived bio-genital sex. Males and females are conditioned to fit into these categories primarily in terms of their temperament, social role and social status (Millet 26). Women and men are primed to seek out predetermined gender behavior in these and other areas in order to fulfill their respective socially acceptable gender identities.

According to Millet, the content of the respective gender categories is rooted in exploitation by the dominant class. Fundamentally, gender category traits are “based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates” (26). The traits found in each category are complimentary and buttress one another in such a way that they function not only to benefit one group at the expense of the other, but to maintain the united patriarchal power structure indefinitely. In other words, “If aggressiveness is the trait of the master class, docility must be the corresponding trait of the subject group” (Millet 32). Hence, the masculine category is defined by (but not limited

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⁴ Millet uses the term “sex categories” as opposed to as “gender categories” to refers to the socially constructed masculine-feminine dichotomy imposed on individuals usually on the basis of their bio-genital sex.
to) such features as: aggression, intelligence, achievement, ambition; while the feminine is
likewise defined by such inverse features as: docility, passivity, ignorance and domestic service.
As males are primed from the moment of birth to express these characteristics, so are females
conditioned to exhibit corresponding subordinate behavior. Because conditioning is pervasive
and omnipresent, sex socialization is the fundamental glue that keeps patriarchy from falling
apart. Millet refers to this socialization process as the “interiorization of patriarchal ideology.
Status, temperament, and role are all value systems with endless psychological ramifications for
each sex” (Millet 54).

The critical role socialization plays in patriarchy does not mean that physical force is not
also an important factor, however. It is true that in patriarchal societies male dominance is or has
a history of being maintained by the full force of the state or threat of physical violence.
Although there has been variation through time and cross-culturally in this regard, in an extreme
patriarchal society the “entire culture supports masculine authority in all areas of life and --
outside of the home -- permits the female none” (Millet 35). Thus, patriarchy is also maintained
through more formal institutions, namely, the patriarchal family and the state. According to
Millet, the most basic institution of patriarchy is the family, which mirrors society at large and
enforces the power structure beyond the reach of other authorities. Millet thus refers to it as the
basic “patriarchal unit” (33) -- a unit with essentially feudal character, with the relationship
between male heads of households parallel to that of ruler and subject or property owner and
chattel. The authority of the patriarchal family is not just a matter of social conventions, but has
enjoyed a long history of codification in law in the areas such as property rights, inheritance
rights and other aspects of criminal and family law.
As Millet also points out, patriarchy is further maintained through the economic system. Women are often economically dependent on men for survival and/or their work is considered less valuable in the marketplace, limiting their economic power. Women certainly labor in this context, but, with respect to the domestic tasks such as child-rearing, the labor is not paid and women do not “earn” wealth from it; not in the same way men benefit from labor, which is linked to the public sphere and, hence, to social prestige. Women may also be paid less for their paid work outside the home, and fields that women have historically pursued tend to lack both economic and social value. Occupations that are important to the functioning of the public sphere, by contrast, have traditionally been dominated by males. This includes government, military, science, technology, and other areas. Thus, women have occupied and been restricted to a sphere of influence that is considered inferior from the perspective of the male public sphere. This process has more than material consequences for women. Through constant bombardment of society’s disesteem for the female sex, women may develop contempt for the self and for others in their group. Their inferior status is constantly reaffirmed, and so it becomes accepted as fact.

Simone de Beauvoir similarly characterized this situation as one in which women are stuck in impossible circumstances: They are socially imprisoned, with only limited, low-status activities available to them, which stymies their potential and relegates them to inferior roles. Yet this stunted version of women’s capacities comes to define “femininity” and female “nature” in the eyes of men, women and society. As Beauvoir put it, “the curse that is upon woman as vassal consists, as we have seen, in the fact that she is not permitted to do anything” (641). Thus, men limit women’s activity and then disdain them for the very inferior qualities that those
limitations produce. However, this situation is a social imposition and certainly not something derived from female nature. “She [woman] often appears to be lazy, indolent; but the occupations available to her are as empty as the pure passage of time. … The truth is that when a woman is engaged in an enterprise worthy of a human being, she is quite able to show herself as active, efficient, taciturn — and as ascetic — as a man” (573).

It is necessary to note at this juncture that the notion that socialization is essential to the maintenance of patriarchy is not without challenges. It has long been argued that women’s subordinate status arises from the biological nature of men and women. That is, men's historic domination of women has been attributed to alleged innate qualities such as physical strength, social aggressiveness and greater intelligence, among other things. Meanwhile, women have been alleged to be innately given to characteristics such as submissiveness, passivity, and maternal nurturing. Patriarchy, according to this perspective, is likewise considered to be biologically rooted and the product of a natural order.

However, the view that women’s nature is the source of their subordinate status has been widely discredited. For instance, in 1869 John Stuart Mill argued that women's nature, if it exists, is unknowable. According to Mill, for women’s true nature to be revealed, women would have to be allowed to develop on their own. However, such a situation is virtually unknown to human history, including the present day, and therefore speculation on the subject is unverifiable conjecture. Rather, everything that we know about the nature of women has been manipulated and distorted from its origins, as women have been influenced by the strictures of men and male-controlled society from the time of birth (Mill 138). Millet adds that physical strength, perhaps one of the least controversial innate difference between males and females, is also not a
convincing hypothetical source of patriarchy. In the first place, physical strength does not
determine power relationships among men themselves, especially in contemporary society. For
example, in class relations, members of the dominate class may be physically weaker than those
in the subordinate class. Likewise, those in the subordinate class may be physically stronger than
those in the dominant class. Strength does not determine an individual’s membership in either
group, but rather social factors such as wealth, personal and familial associations and so on.
Thus, physical strength would seem to be repudiated as a legitimate source of political power.

1.3. Patriarchy & Oppression

What the above analysis demonstrates is that, generally speaking, patriarchy is an
oppressive system. As Marilyn Frye explains, oppression is a situation in which options for a
particular group of people are very few due to the constant threat of some kind of negative
consequences. These consequences form a system of restrictions and barriers to the oppressed’s
activity. To be sure, restrictions and barriers are not always in themselves oppressive, and indeed,
everything in the universe could be said to encounter them. But the restrictions of “oppression”
are something unique. Oppression fundamentally involves having one’s behavior systematically
restricted by virtue of one’s membership in a designated group or category. In Frye’s words, in
patriarchal oppression, women are caught in a “network of forces and barriers that expose one to
penalty, loss or contempt” simply because they are female (3). This complex array of forces and
barriers consists of systematically related components that are meant to restrict choice and
action.
Frye refers to the form these barriers often take as the “double bind” (2). A double bind situation is one in which the actor’s options are “reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (Frye 2). Women face these negative consequences “whether one works outside the home or not, is on welfare or not, bears children or not, raises children or not, marries or not, stays married or not,” and so on (Frye 3). For instance, both too much and too little heterosexual activity on the part of females is subject to social opprobrium. A woman may be castigated as a “slut” for being too sexual or “frigid” if she is not sexual enough. Women may also face social stigma for working while raising children or social disapproval for foregoing childrearing for a career. Certain clothing may be deemed “too sexual,” while other clothing may lead to accusations that the woman is “unfeminine.” In short, women are “caught in a bind, caught between systematically related pressures” (Frye 3). Frye compares this situation to the network of bars on a cage, none of which could restrict the internee alone, but taken together, have this effect. Thus, it is necessary to understand the entire interconnected framework to understand the situation of the oppressed. Taking a myopic view of the individual restrictions women face does not reveal the systematic oppression of women as a group and as a class, who are systematically reduced, molded and immobilized.

Like Millet’s analysis of patriarchy, Frye asserts the systematic confinement of women need not be physical. Oppression of women permeates all of society and operates on numerous levels, legal, social and psychological. It cuts across class and racial lines. Women are a dispersed social group, and this dispersal in fact works in the interests of the dominant group, as it inhibits solidarity and group identification and blinds the oppressed to the perception of the
greater network of forces working against them; it blinds them, in other words, to the perception of “the shape of [their] common cage” (Frye 8).

A reasonable objection that one might raise at this juncture is that it’s clear that men have traditionally faced some “restrictions” and barriers, and some of them are in virtue of their gender. For example, men have traditionally encountered stigma for preforming “women’s work,” entering into professions that are considered to be women’s professions and becoming primary caretakers in the home. One could say men have been “restricted” from these sectors. Is this oppression? According to Frye, obstacles geared toward men cannot be considered oppressive because, in the first place, the restrictions that are placed on women compared to men systematically demean and devalue. Secondly, though there may be two distinct spheres at work, the masculine and feminine, that “shape and mold,” in Frye’s words, they are substantively different in that women are typically subjected to forces of confinement and lack of opportunity, while the male sphere tends to promote the enlargement of opportunity. It is a reflection of the exploitative nature of patriarchy pointed to by Millet -- though both sexes have “restrictions” in the sense of having distinct roles, only one systematically benefits, while the other is systematically harmed. In other words, oppressive circumstances that cause detriment to one group, often serve to benefit another. In patriarchy, the oppressive structure is “erected and maintained by men, for the benefit of men” (Frye 12). What is protected is the male superior status and the privileges it entails, which include sexual access to females and access to a range of more prestigious (and more materially rewarding) occupations.

Like Millet, Frye also emphasizes the coercive underpinnings of patriarchy. We often think of the quintessential example of coercion in terms of an assailant, armed with a weapon,
say, a gun, forcing his victim into doing something the victim does not want to do. However, in such a scenario, the threat of bodily harm may not be real. The gun may not be loaded or, unbeknownst to the victim, the coercer may not have the actual fortitude to follow through on his or her threat. Thus, the heart of coercion involves manipulating circumstances and limiting options so that the victim has the perception that she has no choice but to act in a way the coercer wants. Frye concludes: “to coerce someone into doing something, one has to manipulate the situation so that the world as perceived by the victim presents the victim with a range of options the least unattractive of which (or the most attractive of which) in the judgement of the victim is the act one wants the victim to do” (57). This is the modus operandi of an oppressive society. In a highly patriarchal culture, for instance, women may be forced to choose between the option of complete destitution (because there are few societal avenues through which women may achieve financial independence) and material well-being with an abusive male provider or in an unhappy relationship due to economic dependence, etc.

Importantly, coercion is typically most effective when the subjects do the bidding of the dominant group without necessitating effort on the part of that group. Thus, Frye notes that many of the restrictions women face are internalized and self-monitored adaptations. One of the methods by which women have come to participate in their own oppression is by assuming the mentality that their subordination is inevitable, normal or natural. Women (and men) condition themselves to behave and present themselves in certain gender-specific ways, restricting themselves to particular gender norms, which shape their bodies and minds according to the gender dichotomy. Women may come to believe, for instance, that they are naturally suited toward domestic service and rule out male-dominated professions or they may police the activity
of other females to encourage conformity. The conscious effort of gender conformity, according to Frye, eventually has a physical toll, as it molds women’s bodies and affects their physiology. The size, strength and physical abilities of women are themselves the product of what is socially acceptable to and for men.

Evident in the foregoing expositions of patriarchy and oppression is the reality that such systems recognize some individuals as full-persons and others as less than full-persons. That is, one group is entitled to the full panoply of societal rights, privileges and agency in light of members’ status as full social beings, while the other is restricted to a limited subset of rights in light of members’ inferior personal status. A related notion is the concept of objectification, which, in terms of personal objectification, involves the viewing of individuals as less-than-full-person, object-like things. Objectification is another crucial factor in assessments of patriarchy and the sexual revolution, particularly in terms of its negative consequences for women. I will therefore explore objectification, its implications for women in patriarchal contexts and its relationship to heterosexuality in the following section.

1.4. Objectification

The term “objectification” is broadly understood as treating others as objects or things. While objectification may apply to non-sexual contexts, many take particular exception with objectification in sexual relations. Sandra Bartky provides a basic understanding of the process of sexual objectification and its more troublesome implications. Sexual objectification, according to Bartky, essentially amounts to one’s sexual parts or functions being separated out from the rest
of one’s personality and reduced to the status of instruments that are capable of representing the entire person (26). This situation becomes oppressive when it is habitually extended to every aspect of a person’s experience, which results in the person being subjected to pervasive, forced sexualization of the self, in which case the spheres of the sexual and non-sexual for the person lose distinction. Bartky’s understanding underscores the dehumanization of objectification: That is, objectification involves the stripping of an individual’s rightful status as a full human being. Linda LeMoncheck similarly explains that one of the central problems with objectification is that it involves the treatment of persons as non-persons; as instruments, for instance. But persons, by nature, deserve to be treated as beings with certain rights, with recognition and respect of their personhood and with treatment as moral equals. What it means to be degraded through objectification is that a person who deserves human rights and respect is viewed or treated as less than that, “as if she were an animal, body, or object” (LeMoncheck, Dehumanizing Women 29).

The moral objection to treating persons in this way famously derives from Kant, who recognized the human impulse to treat others as objects of enjoyment rather than ends in themselves, as is appropriate for human beings (155). In this respect the sexual drive has a uniquely problematic nature: According to Kant, “[W]e never find that a human being can be the object of another’s enjoyment, save through the sexual impulse” (Kant 155). Kant specifically described “sexual enjoyment” as an appetite; a situation in which a human being is pleasing to the appetite of another. Unlike the related inclination of love, which “promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it,” the “appetite” of sexual inclination -- sex in and of itself -- is motivated by treating another as the object of that appetite and is unconcerned with the happiness and ends of the other. “As soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away, as
one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it” (Kant 156). In this way, the person is reduced to a thing, at which point all motives of moral relationships fall away. An objectified person’s humanity is thus degraded. In other words, the sexual impulse is not an inclination that one person has for another person qua human, but is an inclination toward the person’s sexual capacity only. “The desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being; on the contrary, the woman’s humanity is of no concern to him, and the only object of his desire is her sex” (Kant 156).

Using Kant’s analysis as a backdrop, Martha Nussbaum provides an account of objectification as a multifarious phenomenon with many aspects, and some of which are more morally problematic than others. In her analysis, Nussbaum identifies at least seven features of objectification, not all of which are morally objectionable or, at least, not equally objectionable. Among the most relevant to the inquiry at hand are: Instrumentality, which I shall also refer to also as “instrumentalization,” where the objectifier treats another person as a tool for his or her purposes; denial of autonomy, where the objectifier treats the object as lacking autonomy and self-determination; and violability, where the objectifier treats the object as lacking boundary integrity and as something that can be broken into (Nussbaum 257). According to Nussbaum, not all instances of objectification involve all of these features at the same time, nor do all forms of objectification necessarily entail others. For instance, inanimate objects are viewed as lacking autonomy, though certain objects may be appreciated for their natural beauty, importance, etc. and therefore are seen as things that warrant respect in their own right and should not be violated.

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Nonetheless the features of objectification outlined by Nussbaum are interrelated and have important moral implications for sexuality.

The morally problematic nature of denial of autonomy and violability as applied to human beings is easy to recognize. Viewing an object as violable gives rise to unwanted bodily harm, physical abuse and threats to the existence of the person being viewed as the object. Denial of autonomy disregards an individual’s personal ends and the right to pursue those ends. It often involves the rejection of the object’s status as a full person or moral agent in the sense that the object is not recognized as being entitled to exercise her autonomy, a fundamental right of all persons. Instrumentalization, using another person as a means or tool, is problematic because it involves stripping a person of something “fundamental to them as human beings, namely, the status of being ends in themselves,” as Nussbaum describes it (265).

Nussbaum’s analysis suggests that these features of objectification operate in a special cluster that, when considered together, accentuate each feature’s problematic nature. Nussbaum pays particular attention to instrumentalization in this regard. Treating another person as an instrument need not logically entail moral transgression. For example, Nussbaum explains that she might innocently use her lover’s stomach as a pillow, without any ethical reservations. Instrumentalization need not even entail violability; for instance, slaves are regarded as tools of their owners, but may not be considered violable objects, and there may even be prohibitions in law against their bodily harm (Nussbaum 264). However, instrumentalization is unique in that, not only does it typically involve the degradation of one's humanity and is wrong in itself in most instances (notwithstanding innocent counterexamples such as noted above), it naturally leads the thought process to other morally problematic types of objectification. When one views another
person as primarily or merely as a tool, it easily leads to a “failure of the imagination … [such that one stops] asking the questions morality usually dictates such as, What is this person likely to feel if I do X? What does this person want and how will my doing X affect her with respect to those wants? And so on” (Nussbaum 265). This is why, Nussbaum argues, when one is primarily or merely used as an instrument it is always morally problematic.

This is especially true when instrumentalization is coupled with a denial of autonomy. Treating persons as instruments, while “negating the autonomy that is proper to them as persons, also leaves the human being so denuded of humanity, in the eyes of the objectifier, that he or she seems ripe for other abuses,” including serious cases of violability (Nussbaum 264). This is why, for example, instrumentalizing conditions like slavery do in fact readily lead to abuses and personal violations, though not as a matter of logical necessity. This understanding of how instrumentality operates on the mind is also why, Nussbaum argues, instrumentalization is so problematic in sexual life — because it leads all too easily to sexual abuse or other harmful treatment.

Some have argued that all sex involves some level of instrumentalization. For example, Alan Goodman, in his analysis of “plain sex,” has posited that because the most reductive understanding of sexual acts is the achievement of sexual pleasure, one's partner is, minimally speaking, a means to such gratification, regardless of other factors (e.g. emotional, social) that may be involved in the act (58). For the purposes of this inquiry, I will leave aside consideration of the veracity of this claim. As I will later demonstrate, whether or not all sex involves some level of instrumentalization, it is not the case that all sex involves only instrumentalization. Other social factors involving our respect for and treatment of individuals can be and routinely are
present in any given expression of sexuality. The ethical framework I will put forward rests on an examination of what these other social factors are. What is relevant in this regard are contextual factors on a larger social and political scale — that is, the overarching sociopolitical milieu, most importantly patriarchy, that affects our moral interpretation of sex acts. Both radical feminists and libertarian feminists share a concern for the patriarchal context in which heterosexual sex takes place. However, as will be explored below, these schools of thought differ in their interpretation of contextual implications for sex norms and their effects on women. These differences will inform the ethical framework I will later introduce.

1.5. Radical/Marxist Feminism

The radical and Marxist feminist schools of thought overlap a great deal, but they can also be differentiated. As Alison Jaggar explains, classic Marxist feminism holds that patriarchy has been exacerbated by (though not exclusively caused by) the advent of private property and capitalism (Jaggar 9-10). According to Marxist feminists, the institution of private property and the capitalistic system have aided in relegating women to a special oppressed group that exists within all class levels of society. This is because, in the classic Marxist view, the institution of private property has precipitated the gradual transition of human society from a more egalitarian state to a patriarchal one by its role in solidifying the dominance of monogamous marriage, the entire objective of which is to enthrall women to men so that they may be dominated and exploited for male purposes. As such, marriage (and, by extension, the nuclear family) is the foundation of women’s subjugation in society.
How, precisely, are the institutions of private property and marriage related according to the Marxist feminist view? First, according to Marxists, human society has progressed through stages, beginning with more communal, egalitarian social arrangements (in which patriarchal marriage did not exist) and leading to a highly stratified, class-based society. The institutionalization of private property and capitalism are key transformative forces in this progression. The institution of private property has helped cement the supremacy of marriage in society due to the fact that in a system of private ownership, women have a particular function: with their special sexual and reproductive capacities, women can be utilized to produce (and raise) heirs and through them transfer property and wealth. As systems of private ownership force all those not in control over the means of production to sell their labor in order to survive, women have been economically coerced to submit to the institution of marriage to serve these male purposes, forcing women into conditions of slave-like domestic labor in the nuclear family. The nature of the nuclear family “excludes women from participation in ‘public’ production and relegates [them] to domestic work in the ‘private’ world of the home” (Jaggar 10). Thus, the institution of private property has been vital in the solidification of male supremacy.

The pursuit of female liberation for Marxist feminists is, therefore, inextricably tied to the pursuit of a classless society and the abolition of the system of private ownership. If the means of class oppression are removed -- that is, if the means of production are under public, as opposed

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6 A detailed account of the hypothesized historical transition from egalitarian, communal society toward a society rigidly structured by patriarchal marriage can be found in Engels’ “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.” As Engels writes, in the progression of human sociological development, “systems of consanguinity … undergo a long series of changes before they finally end in monogamy” (61). The monogamous family was based “not on natural, but on economic conditions — on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. … [T]he sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family, and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own” (Engels 95-96). Monogamous marriage is the first appearance of division of labor and class opposition (Engels 96).
to private, control -- then economic coercion will cease and class distinctions, along with material and political inequality, will dissolve. Women in particular can become liberated through their participation in public production, which will eliminate their economic dependence on men, and if the economic functions of the family are a public concern, for instance, by being conducted by the state or, ideally, a stateless communist system (Jaggar 10-11).

Where radical feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson, primarily differ is that they posit that the systematic oppression of females under capitalism developed first and foremost as a result of the challenges of female biology. Radical feminism “reverses the emphasis of the classical Marxist feminist by explaining the development of class society in terms of the biological family rather than explaining the development of the family in terms of class society,” Jaggar explains (13). That is, women face certain physiological realities that men do not face, in particular, the burden of child-bearing and relative physical weakness. In the radical feminist view, this has made women dependent on men for physical survival, which has been exploited by men as a means to oppress women. Thus, it is biology that has ultimately given rise to the patriarchal family and class oppression of women by men, not the capitalist system. Radical feminists specifically look to technological and social advancement to alleviate the biological disadvantages of women, and also to the state taking on the functions of the family, women’s role in the family (e.g. childcare and domestic service) and legal reforms. For example, Firestone advocated the development of artificial reproduction to liberate women from pregnancy and child-birth (179), cybernetics (advanced computerized machines) to preform labor roles occupied by women (183) and the diffusion of the responsibilities of child-rearing, such as through the replacement of families with households of voluntary association (209).
Both radical feminists and Marxist feminists view patriarchal oppression as pervasive and posit that only a revolutionary dismantling of the system may bring about true equality in civil society. Their views on the perils of heterosexual sex, which is infused with these oppressive power structures, tend to be very similar, and theorists often overlap between the two frameworks. As Ann Ferguson describes it, radical feminists tend to reject sex practices and outlets that they believe exemplify and reinforce society’s patriarchal power structure and sexual exploitation/dehumanization of women, including sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, promiscuous sex with strangers, sexual role playing and adult/child relations. Importantly, as Ferguson states, “[s]exual freedom [for the radical feminist] requires the sexual equality of partners and their equal respect for one another both as subjects and as a body. It also requires the elimination of all patriarchal institutions” such as the patriarchal family, the pornography industry and compulsory heterosexuality (108). This is largely the view of feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Sheila Jeffreys, who are commonly categorized and categorize themselves as radical feminists. These feminists identify with and espouse theories deeply rooted in Marxism, but, as we’ll see, crossover into radical feminism. For the purposes of this thesis, because the radical and Marxist feminist theories and views on sexuality are so similar, I will not typically differentiate between them when I contrast them with libertarian feminism later on.

Sandra Bartky explains that feminist consciousness, analogous to Marxist class consciousness, arises from the recognition of contradictions in society’s structures. These contradictions emerge when existing social interactions (e.g. property relations, values, attitudes and beliefs) come into conflict with new social relations produced by changes in the modes of
production. For example, women may make advances in the private economic sphere and come to recognize their competence in such enterprises, while also recognizing the overriding patriarchal views in place that maintain that women are best suited to work in the home. In this scenario, as Bartky puts it, one both believes and does not believe that one is inferior at the same time (30). When contradictions are recognized, the status quo is ripe for social change.

Like Bartky, MacKinnon draws much of her theory from classic Marxism. MacKinnon believes that society in general is organized to expropriate the labor of some for the benefit of others. In the heterosexual power structure, it is women, as a class, who are the “workers” whose labor and use is expropriated for the benefit of others, namely, men. What “femaleness” or “femininity” for MacKinnon means is “attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms” (110). The experience of sexuality is key to the initiation into femaleness for women. Sexuality itself is “a complex unity of physicality, emotionality, identity, and status affirmation, in which sexual intercourse is central” (MacKinnon 111). It acts as a socialization mechanism that determines gender:

Gender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as such sexual beings, as beings that exist for men, specifically for male sexual use. It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity as a woman, and thus make it real in the world (MacKinnon 110-111).

What is centrally involved in this experience of sexuality, MacKinnon argues, is “woman as sexual object for man, the use of women’s sexuality by men” (111). That is, the defining feature of sexuality is the male pursuit of control over women’s sexuality. MacKinnon believes this is reflected by a culture of acceptance of the violation of women’s sexuality, including
through the prevalence of sexual harassment and rape. Natural resistance to this violation is
diminished by socializing women to be passive and submissive. In this way, sexual abuse of
women is intertwined with the social definition of womanhood.

The analysis MacKinnon provides, like Frye and Millet’s, can also be understood as a
system of power. Specifically, she refers to the heterosexual power relationship as “dominance
eroticized” (130). What is meant by this is that “[m]ale and female are created through the
erotization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/
submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex[.]” (MacKinnon 113).
Fundamentally, through their experience with sexuality, women and men come to respond to and
internalize their respective roles of dominance and submission. Objectification is the central
element within this framework. Women are identified and do identify as objects, as beings whose
sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male. Likewise, men know themselves as men
by treating women as sexual objects. Objectification, in this way, is the primary process of
subjugation in patriarchy (MacKinnon 127). According to MacKinnon, objectification is,
unfortunately, omnipresent: “All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in
water” (149).

In terms of Nussbaum’s analysis, the kind of objectification at issue here is,
fundamentally, instrumentalization, and it is very much one-sided in MacKinnon’s view. Men
learn to develop erotic feelings of their domination and possession of women through sex, while
women learn to erotically respond to being dominated and possessed. This dynamic is definitive
of sexuality, which is broadly “a social construct of male power” (MacKinnon 128). For
MacKinnon, men sexualize hierarchy. (Each sex is conditioned, but only men create the
conditions, as she says.) Thus, sexuality does not involve mutual objectification for pleasure, but an objectifier, on the one hand, and on the other, a “volunteer” for this objectification. Yet it is only the object that is systematically divested of her humanity in this scenario.

Andrea Dworkin, whose views closely coincide with MacKinnon’s, argues that, because objectification is so inveterate, political or civic reforms meant to empower women are but token advances. “No rights to hold government office or other public positions of civil or professional power will change her status as long as she is exploited in sex .... As long as men desire women for intercourse [which necessarily equates to a desire to objectify], and women are used as sexual objects, regardless of laws and other public reforms women’s real status will be low, degraded” (Dworkin 21).

In Dworkin’s view, the physical nature of sex contributes to the necessary relationship between heterosexuality and the degradation of women. Physically, the woman is overtaken and commandeered; intercourse is innately an act of possession and “ownership” (Dworkin 79-80). The male role in intercourse is invasive, forceful, and in these respects, represents violence. In fact, Dworkin often equates “violation” with “intercourse” itself and uses the two interchangeably (154). A woman experiences sexual pleasure “and sexual identity in being possessed; in being owned” and the possession is felt as deeply erotic (Dworkin 84).

Dworkin continues: “There is a deep recognition in culture and in experience that intercourse is both the normal use of a woman, her human potentiality affirmed by it, and a violative abuse, her privacy irredeemably compromised” (154). Here we see Dworkin’s radical feminist views at work. Dworkin adheres to the idea that the sexual, and hence, personal and political, degradation of woman in terms of her particular sexual function is rooted in the nature
of her physiology. The woman is “made for intercourse: for penetration, entry, occupation,” in Dworkin’s words (155). By the very nature of intercourse, women are “physically occupied” (in the sense that countries are occupied and dominated) and “internally invaded.” Women thus necessarily experience compromised privacy relative to men. These qualities of women's oppression make the subordination of them different than any other historically subordinated people: being an “occupied people” (Dworkin 156) is an aspect of feminine essence. Although Dworkin concedes that all men do not subordinate or have complete power over all women, she does believe that “all men have some kinds of power over all women,” in particular, the women with whom they are in sex-dominance relationships (Dworkin 159).

Dworkin’s analysis clearly emphasizes the “violability” sense of objectification highlighted by Nussbaum. Dworkin is aware that violability is a function of the recognition of the degraded or inferior nature of the sexual object. Dworkin also recognizes that by women’s physical nature and the physical nature of intercourse, the female sexual object is the kind of object that is by definition violated and that lacks boundary integrity. This is because, according to Dworkin, female sex objects are defined by their capacities in intercourse — that is, as objects to be penetrated and invaded in virtue of the vaginal cavity. This is not the case for males in heterosexual intercourse, and it is why Dworkin and MacKinnon argue that there is little difference between heterosexual sex and rape in general (rape is a kind of sex, not a kind of violence, as they say). Thus, objectification, according to Dworkin, “may well be the most singly destructive aspect of gender hierarchy, especially as it exists in relation to intercourse” (177).

According to Dworkin heterosexual intercourse will always be morally problematic until it is, at the very least, free of objectification of women. However, it is far from clear that such a scenario
is possible, as she also asserts that objectification of women is frequently a precondition for males to engage in sex (Dworkin 181). This is due to the fact that men are conditioned to view and treat women as such by the erotization of dominance, which is pervasive. Thus, for a man to be aroused by and want to have sex with a woman, he must view her as an object. This is particularly represented by the fact that there are expectations placed on women’s appearance and behavior in order for male sexual arousal to take place: “She has to look a certain way, be a certain type—even conform to preordained behaviors and scripts — for the man to want to have intercourse and also for the man to be able to have intercourse” (Dworkin 181).

To summarize, the frameworks of Dworkin and MacKinnon explain heterosexual sex, especially intercourse, as a political system. The act of intercourse itself — including the dominance/subordinate-shaped erotic feelings held by the participants and the physical nature of one participant commandeering the other’s body — is fundamentally dehumanizing, and perhaps irredeemably so. The experience of sexuality shapes the entire personal identity of men and women, socializing them into a patriarchal sociopolitical order. As such, intercourse is the foundation upon which the greater patriarchal society and all of its customs and institutions are structured. Male domination is additionally sustained through the overt, overarching patriarchal power structure, which is maintained and perpetuated culturally, psychologically and legally, among other methods. Finally, as intercourse is the source and exemplar of patriarchy, sexual objectification is of course central to the radical feminist analysis. Due to the nature of heterosexual sex, radical feminists maintain that sexual objectification fundamentally involves dehumanizing instrumentalization, denial of full autonomy, violability and general lowering of personal status.
1.6. Libertarianism Feminism

Libertarian feminists differ markedly from radical feminists in how they view sexuality and its implications for women. Ferguson writes that libertarian feminists “support any kind of consensual sexual activity that brings the participants pleasure, including sadomasochism, pornography, role-oriented sex, cruising, and adult/child sexual relations” (107). The sex libertarian view also holds that:

1) Heterosexuality is characterized by institutionalized repression. As Ferguson describes it, “The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority ‘pure’ and under control.” This process distinguishes what is designated the sexually normal, legitimate and healthy from the sexually abnormal, illegitimate and unhealthy and institutionalizes a social power hierarchy of privileged and unprivileged sexual identities;

2) Feminists should reject restrictions and moral judgments that stigmatize sexual minorities and restrict general sexual freedom; and

3) Feminists should reclaim their sexual autonomy by demanding the right to participate in whatever sexual practices that gives them satisfaction (Ferguson 109).

The term “libertarian feminism” employed here was coined by Ann Ferguson in “Sex War: The Debate Between Radical and Libertarian Feminists,” Signs 10.1 (1984): 106-112. Libertarian feminists are also referred to as “sex positive” feminists. This stands in contrast to radical feminists who are sometimes characterized as “sex negative” due to their views on the patriarchal nature of sexuality as discussed in the preceding section. For more discussion on terminology see Linda LeMoncheck’s “Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 69-70.
Libertarian feminists are concerned with the ethical treatment of all people and sexual minorities, however, my discussion here will focus specifically on their views on the sexual repression of women. Libertarian feminists argue that patriarchy circumscribes and tightly controls women’s sexuality relative to what is societally sanctioned for men. In such a system, women’s sexuality is controlled by patriarchal power structures created by men, in service to male interests. Control mechanisms manifest through cults of virginity, double standards, and proscriptions against abortion and contraception. This has characterized much of history, including in Western history, where women have not had sexual freedom to even remotely the same degree as men. Thus, what is desired by many libertarian feminists, as succinctly put by LeMoncheck, is the ability to secure the “right to make sexual and reproductive decisions for herself without undue interference from others” (LeMoncheck, *Loose Women* 54).

Naomi Wolf provides a detailed analysis of the kind of sexual repression of concern to libertarian feminists. According to Wolf, Western society’s highly repressive and restrictive view of female sexuality is deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition and culture in which modern Western societies are rooted. Wolf points out that Hebrew law and custom, evident in numerous Biblical passages (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:20-21; Ezekiel 23:8), viewed women’s sexual freedom negatively, to be denied in some cases under the penalty of death (e.g. non-virgin bride stoning, Deuteronomy 22:20-21). “The Hebrews equated female promiscuity -- meaning any female sexuality outside marriage -- with shame, destruction, and just punishment, as we

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consciously or unconsciously still do” (Wolf 75). Female adultery was also punished with disproportionate harshness, codifying a double standard in male-female sexual behavior that we are familiar with today. Roman and Greek law also maintained this particular double standard. Sheila Jeffreys points out that even as late as the 1920s in England, male adultery was not sufficient grounds for divorce, although female adultery was.

One of the reasons for these strictures, Wolf argues, is that female sexuality has the potential to upset the social order. “In a repressive male world, the force of female desire can in fact be subversive” (Wolf 77). Camille Paglia, in her survey of human sexual history, offers a notable analysis on this point. In the Judeo-Christian framework, which she claims is generally inimical to nature (as compared to, say, pagan or animist cultures), the threat of female sexuality has been seen as a chaotic force in contradiction to civilization. To avoid this threat, women must be repressed sexually and politically. There are only two sexual roles for women under this regime of female sexual control: the “slut” and the sexually pure woman. As Paglia characterizes it, “woman” has been split into two halves: “Mary, the Holy Mother, and Mary Magdalene, the whore” (Vamps 58).

However, cultural tradition is not the only force behind restrictive norms of female sexual behavior. Social subordination also drives women’s economic dependence on men. This situation is particularly expressed through the institution of monogamous marriage. In a society in which power, prestige and access to resources lie exclusively in the hands of men, women become defensive of the status and security provided by sexually exclusive relationships. Economically independent women, on the other hand, may find that sexual freedom under these patriarchal circumstances renders them “impersonal and replaceable sexual objects of male
lust” (LeMoncheck, *Loose Women* 38). Faced with these options, women may easily come to believe that the only means to sexual intimacy and desirable sexual relationships is sexual exclusivity, and more precisely, monogamous marriage. This dovetails seamlessly with the male interest in female sexual exclusivity and monogamy, which is, according to LeMoncheck, the desire to gain sexual status through women they can keep from their sexual competitors.

However, according to libertarian feminists, the extreme sexual restrictiveness represented by monogamous marriage is not consistent with the physical reality of female desire; it is an unnaturally socially imposed restriction. Wolf argues that negative views of female sexual freedom and the female form are a result, not of something inherently degrading in female sexuality, but of the value society assigns to it (Wolf 47). In a society that is sexually restrictive toward women, this value assignment is very low. However, “[i]t is neither natural nor inevitable that women’s lust should be punished” through social disdain and disapproval (Wolf 73). Rather, there is in fact a vast history of women’s sexuality being viewed differently. For instance, Wolf cites Babylonian “sacred prostitutes” of religious temples, which are mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Wolf also cites Taoism’s distinct reverence for female sexuality, which “taught men about women as sexual subjects and guided them carefully to minister to female desire” (183).

According to Wolf, a new sexual ethic is possible where “categories need not be fixed or oppressive, but neither do they need to be dismissed or devalued” (214) and where women are actively in control of defining these things for themselves. What is important is women setting their own boundaries, exploring sexuality according to their own pace and values, independent of what the highly male-influenced society endeavors to impose on them. Women, from the time of girlhood, need to have affirmed “that the lives they lead inside their own self-contained
bodies...and the unique phase in their lives during which they may explore boys and eroticism at their own pace -- these are magical. And they constitute the entrance point to a life cycle of sexuality that should be held sacred” (Wolf 138). This is what sexual “freedom” would look like for Wolf.

However, in Paglia’s view, human sexuality will never be “free” in the sense that it will never be free of the influence of power relations. For both men and women, sexuality is driven by instinct and by the interplay of competing individual desires and interests, a situation she likens to an “arena.” Women are not powerless in this state of affairs, but rather, through their sexual capacity, possess a notable degree of power over men. As she writes, “[i]t is woman, as mistress of birth, who has the real power” (Paglia, Vamps 32). It is up to women to empower themselves; to leverage their sexuality to maximize their social power. What is needed in order for this to happen, according to Paglia, is the “emancipation of female desire” (Vamps 59), although she notes that, practically speaking, female promiscuity may carry with it health risks both to procreative women and, where applicable, to their fetuses. However, that does not diminish the fact that the sexually free and unfettered woman is the ideal for Paglia. “Hence the prostitute has come to symbolize for me the ultimate liberated woman...whose sexuality belongs to no one” (Paglia, Vamps 59). “Not only are these women not victims,” Paglia continues, “they are among the strongest and most formidable women on the planet...[the] heroines of outlaw individualism” (Vamps 59).

While championing female sexual emancipation, Paglia argues that the radical feminist societal analysis of patriarchy and oppression is overly simplistic (Vamps 110). The problem essentially lies in the radical feminist assumption that society (or the overarching patriarchal
power structure) is the supreme source of injustice and vice, including the sexual abuse and other kinds of mistreatment of women. However, Paglia argues that aggression derives from nature, and society is a force to keep this aggression in check (Sexual Personae 2). Similarly, domination derives from nature -- from the tribulations of burdensome female biology, which civilization alone, throughout the ages, has alleviated (Paglia, Sexual Personae 15-17). “When social controls weaken, man’s innate cruelty bursts forth.” Feminism is only possible in the context of civilization, which limits physical and sexual violence toward women, has developed the technological means to lessen constraints of female biology, and has, over the millennia, attempted to establish women’s status as equal political beings. Society, in other words, is not the root of oppression, but the vehicle to eliminate oppression.

Furthermore, Paglia contends that objectification of women is not necessarily problematic. According to Paglia, objectification does not come about, as radical feminists suggest, as an affirmation of the subordinate status of women as a class by the politically dominant male class. Objectification is rather a constitutive feature of the psychology of desire and interest. It is a product of our “conceptualization” of the world (that is, how we conceptualize objects) and is especially evident in our artistic capacities. Paglia even suggests the appreciative objectification of art and sexual objectification are identical (Paglia, Sexual Personae 30).

In this sense, objectification is a product of appreciation, even idolization and captivation with feminine beauty, which is also translatable into a form of power. In fact, according to Paglia, when women are assessed sexually, it is not a reduction to an object, but an assessment of the sexual power she has over men (Vamps 52). Sexual objectification, furthermore, becomes
less problematic when it is understood in terms of sexual emancipation. If women are exercising their sexual autonomy, engaging in intercourse or other sexual acts as they see fit, objectification, an arguably ineradicable component of sexuality, is something women want. They are fully engaged in the erotic process, treat their partners as sexual means, and acknowledge that this, too, is their role. A fully sexually liberated woman engages in sex through her own will, with her own ends in mind, no different in “objectified” status than her partner (Paglia, *Vamps* 65). Thus, for Paglia, women being demeaned or degraded when being sexually objectified has been greatly exaggerated by radical feminists.

MacKinnon and Dworkin, especially in their critiques of marriage, fully acknowledge, like Wolf and Paglia, that women have had their sexual freedom heavily restricted. The impasse between libertarian feminists and radical/Marxist feminists, however, lies in the hope for equitable, just, “free” heterosexuality. Libertarian feminists are resistant to the view that there is anything intrinsic in the nature of heterosexual sex that fundamentally precludes the possibility of non-misogynistic sex. Generally, as long as women are exercising their genuine autonomy, pursuing their own ends, protecting their own interests, and are not subject to an inferior degree of sexual license, heterosexual sex is not only not sexist, but is empowering to women because they are defying the historical repression of their sexuality. Radical/Marxist feminists, however, tend to view intercourse itself as the quintessential expression of patriarchy. Everything that intercourse entails— from its mechanics, to the motivations and psychology of the actors, to the broader social atmosphere in which it is performed — is characterized by male domination and female subordination. As such, we have very little idea of what non-patriarchal, and hence truly free, heterosexual sex would look like at all or if it is even possible such a thing could exist.
1.7. The Debate Today

The two philosophical camps of libertarianism feminism and radical feminism comprise the basis of what is referred to as the “sex wars,” an oftentimes acrimonious dispute that grew out of tensions in second-wave feminism over the role of sexuality in the feminist program and its relationship to women’s sociopolitical interests. In many ways the debate has shaped, and become a central component of, what is becoming identified as the third-wave feminist movement. Although this movement is still being defined, emerging scrutiny by such third-wave historians as R. Claire Snyder, Leslie Heywood, Astrid Henry and others indicates that third-wave feminism identifies strongly with the libertarian feminist side of the debate. According to Synder, this is largely because “the principle of choice … usually trumps all” for third-wave feminists (189). For example, Summer Wood has noted that the notion of “choice,” which began as a highly successful abortion rights branding device, came to be associated with the contemporary feminist movement as a whole:

The word’s primacy in the arena of reproductive rights has slowly caused the phrase “It’s my choice” to become synonymous with “it’s a feminist thing to do” — or, perhaps more precisely, “It is antifeminist to criticize my decision.” The result has been a rapid depoliticizing of the term and an often misguided application of feminist ideology to consumer imperatives, invoked not only for the right to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy, but also for the right to buy all manner of products marketed to women, from cigarettes to antidepressants to diet frozen pizzas. It seems that if you can slap a purple or pink label that says “for women” on a product, choosing to buy it must be a feminist act (20).

Similarly, there is also a strong sentiment among third-wave feminists that second-wave feminism was overly moralizing and represented, at least in effect, a return to old-fashioned heterosexual values and impositions on women’s sexual choices. For example, Jennifer
Baumgardner and Amy Richards, in their work *Manifesta*, which is viewed as a pivotal marker of the ascendency of third-wave feminism, offer criticism of the popular second-wave feminist mantra, “the personal is political,” noting that the phrase “has sometimes been used to restrict women, rather than to free us” in that it has been used to police or cast judgment on even mundane activities such as dyeing one’s hair or shaving one’s legs (19). More than just a commitment to respect for personal choice, however, third-wave feminism also tends to take a nonjudgemental approach to personal sexuality and values openness toward the full spectrum of sexual diversity. This tolerant stance is extended to active heterosexuals, marginalized sexual minorities and even those who engage in sexual practices particularly scorned by radical feminism, such as producing or viewing pornography and sadomasochism. According to Synder, “[b]y including a diversity of views on sexuality and not judging any of them, third-wave feminists hope to avoid contentious splits” (189).

Furthermore, Henry notes that third-wave feminism takes for granted that women’s sexual freedom is a fundamental right (90). This is poignantly exemplified by Rebecca Walker, who explicitly described sexual pleasure as women’s “birthright,” bestowed by the feminist movement. As Walker writes, “The question is not whether young women are going to have sex … The question is rather, what do young women need to make sex a dynamic, affirmative, safe and pleasurable part of our lives?” (23).

Thus, third-wave feminism aligns very clearly with the libertarian feminist view of sexuality, and in particular, its view of heterosexuality. However, this fact is not to imply that the pro-sex view has “won” the debate. Snyder notes that the feminist sex wars debate has never
been resolved and, in fact, has advanced very little in third-wave feminism, as it is no longer being litigated:

While third-wavers claim the mantle of being prosex, however, the central issue at the heart of the sex wars — how to create gender equality when women enjoy female objectification (pornography), claim the right to make money servicing male sexual needs (prostitution), and eroticize relationships of inequality (sadomasochisms) — has never been resolved; it seems to have simply dropped from sight. Oftentimes, third-wave feminism seems to have morphed into being all about choice with little examination of how chosen desires are constructed or recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large (189).

Importantly, Henry points out that, for differing reasons, neither radical feminism nor sex-positive writers have provided a framework for heterosexual sexual ethics. Radical feminism tore heterosexuality asunder, but offered little in the way of reconstruction. Meanwhile, Henry writes, the libertarian feminist response has so far been inadequate in terms of its theoretical analysis of heterosexuality. As a result, “[w]hen they turn to feminism to find a vision of what Wolf terms ‘radical heterosexuality,’ third-wave feminists find nothing but silence, a silence that is deafening in what it says about feminism’s inability to theorize heterosexuality” (Henry 112). By re-examining the radical/libertarian feminist debate, my thesis will attempt to address this theoretical void. Specifically, I hope to provide a possible foundation for a framework for heterosexual sexual ethics through an analysis of minimum conditions on this particular mode of sexual expression. This will begin in the proceeding chapter with a look at the development of what is referred to as the “sexual revolution” and the ascent of the libertarian feminist view of sexuality in society.
Chapter Two: Understanding Sexual Liberation

2.1. Introduction

What is sexual liberation? Although seen as a source of female empowerment, some argue the sexual revolution has produced anti-feminist effects. To adjudicate this issue, Chapter Two of this inquiry will begin with an examination of the development of the sexual revolution throughout the 20th century, including its transformative effects on the culture and women’s sexual experience. This will be followed by a presentation of the positive case for the sexual revolution’s benefits to women as understood by libertarian feminists. The libertarian feminist view of the sexual revolution, and the sexual revolution generally, will then be critiqued from the lens of radical feminism. What will be evident from this analysis is that the radical feminist criticisms of the sexual revolution demonstrate the serious pitfalls of the libertarian feminist perspective. This analysis will inform discussion in Chapter Three of suggested limiting conditions on the libertarian feminist view of sexual ethics.

2.2. The Roots of the Sexual Revolution

In the most general sense, the sexual revolution can be described as the replacement of a set of sexual norms widely observed in Western society until the mid-20th century with alternative, more liberal, sexual norms. Theoretically, it was a transition from the influences of Victorianism to the post-psychoanalytic era. Historian Jane Gerhard, in her survey of the
evolution of feminism and modern sexual ethics, provides a succinct description of the Victorian view of sexuality:

On the one hand, the Victorians viewed sexuality as a form of spiritual union that elevated sexual intercourse into a form of romantic, emotional and, ultimately, reproductive intimacy. On the other hand, Victorians also saw sexuality as a base physical appetite that was unfit for civilized discourse or civilized women and properly kept to back alleys and red light districts. Sexuality between husband and wife found its highest expression in children, an achievement that sanitized the “unseemly” business of copulation. These two coexistent views of sexuality were deeply gendered, with women cast as the spiritual sex and men as driven by their physical drive for pleasure and release (15).

Victorian sexual ethics stands as the historic standard of sexual righteousness against which the sexual revolution rebelled. According to this paradigm, morally acceptable sexual behavior for women was tied to virginal purity, monogamous marriage and passivity. Early challenges to this system of sexual ethics were marked by the appearance of such new phenomena as the establishment of female-only settlement houses, which were homes typically established by middle-class female social reformers where young women could live and work free of familial bounds, and the rise of the concept of the “charity girl,” a working-class single woman who traded sexual or romantic favors in return for “treating” behavior from men (e.g. dinner, jewelry, entertainment outings). The appearance of “flappers” — young women noted for their rejection of traditional social conventions, including embrace of provocative attire, make up, popular music and sexual experimentation — is also widely viewed as an indicator of the inchoate sexual revolution and an example of women’s changing sexual roles.

On the theoretical side, the analytical frameworks of Freudian psychoanalysis and sexology were also growing in influence during the shift from Victorianism and would later have
an effect on both the sexual revolution and feminism. Though noted for its anti-feminist implications, psychoanalysis paved the way for the sexual revolution by revolutionizing our understanding of the human sexual drive in a way that departed markedly from Victorianism. Psychoanalysis acknowledged the legitimacy and importance of sexual passion in all people, including women, and the destructive potential of sexual repression. It also linked the concept of “health,” particularly psychological health, with sexual expression. Most significantly, sexuality and the interplay of sexual dynamics, both conscious and unconscious, were also assumed, according to the Freudian view, to be both the animating and organizational forces behind human civilization and all of its visible institutions (Gerhard 31). For these reasons, it has also been argued — for instance, by Atkinson — that one positive contribution of Freudianism to later feminist theories of sexuality was that the “concept of sexual intercourse [became understood as] a political construct, reified into an institution” (Atkinson 13).

Following WWII, the Freudian theoretical model began to face challenges. The empirical studies of figures such as Alfred Kinsey and research partners William Masters and Virginia Johnson displaced Freudian orthodoxy regarding female sexuality. Assumptions surrounding vaginal orgasm and feminine sexual identity were being debunked by sexology and a new class of human sexuality researchers. One of the key points of contrast between psychoanalysis and sexology was that the psychoanalytic view of women was as “passive, dependent, and less sexual than men,” while “sexology discovered a responsive, sexually capable and potentially

\[\text{In the psychoanalytical perspective, vaginal orgasm was designated the seat of women’s healthy sexual drive and response (meaning sexual fulfillment exclusively through male penetration), while clitoral response was deemed the result of developmental inferiority, i.e. the failure to transfer sexual desire after puberty from the clitoris to the vagina. Inability to achieve vaginal orgasm, or uninterestedness or aversion towards intercourse, broadly labeled “frigidity,” was considered psychologically deviant.}\]
autonomous female body underneath social and expert myths of feminine passivity” (Gerhard 53). For instance, Kinsey’s research, while undertaking the project of modernizing our understanding of human sexuality, produced scientific validation for the idea that women and men were similar sexual actors in his work, “Sexual Behavior in the Human Female.”

Susan Lydon isolates three central insights from Masters and Johnson’s findings that most influenced the modern sexual revolution and had a profound impact on feminist sexuality theory. According to Lydon, Masters and Johnson a) disputed the presumption that women were less sexual; b) found that women have the natural capacity to be much more sexual than men due to the intensity of clitoral orgasm and the unique potential for multiple, successive orgasms; and c) found that less intense orgasms were in fact experienced during intercourse (Lydon 200). As will be demonstrated, these sexological findings had enormous influence on the philosophical development of feminist construals of the sexual revolution. In particular, the sexology period laid the foundation for the dispute between radical and sex libertarian feminists. For, not only did sexology mark an end to the dominance of Freudianism in popular culture and provide a bridge from heavily patriarchal Freudianism to radical feminism, but sexology also provided a bridge to the concept of open sexuality apart from the Freudian straightjacket of “healthy,” and “normal” sexuality. However, what constitutes a feminist understanding of this reconceptualization of sexuality is a subject of ongoing dispute.

2.3. The Sexual Revolution in Popular Culture
The shift in mainstream views about sex -- changing taboos on pre-marital sex, sexual experimentation, non-monogamous sex, etc. — took root amid a sea of legal, cultural and technological changes. Foremost among these changes was the development and widespread use of reliable contraceptive methods, chiefly the hormonal birth control pill, which was made available for public use in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Obscenity laws in the United States and other Western countries also became attenuated or invalidated, loosening restrictions on sexual content in all forms of media. The evolving ethics of this time period are visible in iconic sex manuals of the era, influential popular literature, and other social phenomena. Such empirical evidence, briefly described below, reveals the sociopolitical context and practical ramifications of the philosophy of sex libertarianism, and so will set the stage for my subsequent analysis of the sexual revolution from the libertarian feminist and radical feminist perspectives.

**Sex Manuals & Advice Literature**

Sexology, with its scientific approach to uncovering the truth about human sexuality and openness to a wider array of human sexual behavior, ushered in iconic popular sex manuals and advice literature of the 1960s and ’70s. These included, for instance, David Reuben’s “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex” and J’s “The Sensuous Woman.” Manuals and advice literature “introduced and domesticated a set of behaviors such as partner swapping and ‘swinging’ for the married set and ‘free love’ for those in the counterculture, behaviors once seen as degenerative, pathological and obscene” (Gerhard 74). Perhaps the quintessential example of such literature is Alex Comfort’s “The Joy of Sex” (TJS). The book purports to help
people, in the abstract, overcome inhibitions and promote openness toward the full spectrum of human sexual behavior. Human sexual actors, Comfort suggested, were capable of — and, indeed, ought to aspire to — developing their taste in the full range of human sexual practices and expression, much like a cultivated appreciated for gourmet cuisine. Reluctance toward sexual behavior discussed in the book was described as “simply...ignorance of the range of human needs” (Comfort 15).

As the sexual revolution unfolded, financial, educational and career advances were impacting the independence of young women, putting them outside the orbit of male control through either the nuclear family or a husband. As a result, sex-advice literature broadened to include sex outside of marriage. This led, consequently, to sex advice literature targeting single women. Books were written specifically for single women instructing them on sexual technique and how to handle oneself living a sexually free lifestyle. This included “Sex and the Single Girl” (1962), whose author, Helen Gurley Brown, later became the editor of the influential popular culture (and woman-oriented) magazine, Cosmopolitan.

The Sexual Revolution in Literature

The sexual revolution also paralleled the de-censorship movement to lift restrictions on pornography and sexually explicit material in creative, popular literature. The move to vitiate obscenity laws appealed to First Amendment arguments and notions of human freedom. It was also promoted in the interest of erotic realism and uncovering the truth about sex. As Jeffreys notes, the themes, ideology and messages of de-censored literature, including pornography,
became intertwined and synonymous with the sexual revolution itself. De-censorship in many ways came to define the concept of sexual liberation. Work of this period by such individuals as Norman Mailer (“An American Dream”), William Burroughs (“The Naked Lunch”), and Vladimir Nabokov (“Lolita”), pushed the envelope of sexuality in literature, while pornography proliferated. As obscenity regulations became more permissive, countercultural publications even began to take part, such as the *New York Review of Sex, Pleasure, Kiss* and *Rat*, which incorporated sexually explicit imagery, language and advertising. As feminist historian Ruth Rosen notes, “Sex ads were enormously profitable for these small operations and brought in thousands of dollars each week to their shoestring budgets” (Rosen 87).

*Other Popular Culture Phenomena*

A notable development in behavior in the sexual revolution was the proliferation of “swinging” — the exchanging of sexual partners between couples — and its attendant subculture. The direct antecedent of the swinging culture was the phenomenon of “wife-swapping,” an exchange of women by males. However, the swinging movement employed the premise of gender neutrality. A noteworthy example from the sexual revolution era is the Sandstone Mansion of southern California, a swinging hub and quasi-community of the 1970s that was founded in part by John Williamson. Alex Comfort was one noted participant of the community, among numerous other significant cultural figures. The Sandstone movement sought to forge a new sexuality that purported to liberate women from submissiveness, provide women sexual freedom, eliminate notions of jealousy and possessiveness, and disassociate emotions
from sex. It was endorsed by numerous influential feminists and female sex theorists, including Betty Dodson and Marilyn Fithian.

2.4. Libertarian Feminism & the Sexual Revolution

Feminist Barbara Ehrenreich provides us with an account of the positive effects of the sexual revolution on women. The core of this perspective emphasizes an ethics of self-determination and relief from external oppression. The sexual revolution, according to this view, is seen as liberating the female body from the imposition of a system of sexual ethics that differs from that of men and is both a byproduct and a tool of woman’s sociopolitical oppression.

Ehrenreich, in her examination of the sexual revolution, has argued that the sexual liberation movement was definitively a women’s revolution. This is because it was the sexual behavior of women that disproportionately changed, while men’s behavior, and the social acceptance of that behavior, changed to a lesser extent. That is to say, the greatest behavioral shift that occurred as a result of the sexual revolution was the degree to which women’s sexual behavior became more like men’s, with greater frequency of such things as premarital sex, rejection of monogamy, aggressiveness and and interest in sexual variety.

As Ehrenreich explains, this movement was a product of women’s changing social power in the post-WWII era, which witnessed a burgeoning new class of women who experienced an extended period of singleness and independence apart from girlhood and marriage. A greater percentage of women became educated and career-aspiring -- the archetype of writer Helen Gurley Brown’s “single girl.” The result was a culture of women who were more willing to assert
their sexual needs instead of being passive and taking on pleasing roles. Although there had always existed a sexual marketplace for male customers (in the form of prostitutes, pornography, exotic dancers, etc.) a sexual marketplace for women developed in an unprecedented way during the sexual revolution (Ehrenreich et al. 108). For instance, instead of Tupperware parties of days gone by, women began attending sex paraphernalia parties, which sold products catering to female sexual desire and designed to enhance female sexual experience. “By making so many erotic products available, the consumer culture was encouraging [women] to play around, or at the very least to experiment with the purchase of an erotic product” (Ehrenreich et al. 104). The emergence of male strippers, escorts, female-oriented pornography, and erotic literature also grew in response to market demands of women. According to Ehrenreich, this sexual consumerism was representative of the decoupling of female sexuality from the confines of the patriarchal family, including “reproduction, motherhood, monogamy — even heterosexuality” (Ehrenreich et al. 105).

Women also became more interested in exploring various sexual practices, which was previously primarily associated with male sexuality. For example, Ehrenreich notes the rise in interest in oral sex on the part of women, which centered on maximizing female pleasure through clitoral stimulation and circumvented complications of vaginal intercourse. “The Sensuous Woman” provided detailed instructions and advice on sexual technique exploration and sexual practices that would have scandalized female readers of the Victorian era. “J’s was one of the first manuals to offer readers explicit directions on how to masturbate and how to perform fellatio … She went on to explain to her reader how to behave at an orgy, when and how to fake orgasm … and how to talk dirty during intercourse,” Gerhard writes (77).
Prior to the sexual revolution, expectations of women’s behavior insisted on virginal purity until marriage. In line with the Victorian influence, which regarded women as the sexless counterforce to male sexual passion, young women from their teenage years until marriage were subject to a strict code of behavior in terms of their sexual activity and often policed that behavior among themselves. Sexual desire on the part of women was to be suppressed until it found proper expression in marriage. Sexual transgressions, going “too far” with a boy, risked forfeiting a young woman’s social worth, which was measured in terms of one's “good girl” marriageability. “Good girls never ‘gave in,’ never abandoned themselves to impulse or emotion, and never, of course, initiated a new excavation on the scale of physical intimacy” (Ehrenreich et al. 24). The reward for women for adhering to this standard was the expectation of motherhood and housewifery and dependence for material comfort on their husband providers.

According to Ehrenreich, the sexual revolution for women was as much a transformation of women’s sexual fulfillment as it was their personal fulfillment. As Ehrenreich argues, the sexual revolution offered not just new opportunities for sexual expression, but new opportunities for women to shape their lives. Sex outside of patriarchal marriage, made possible by a range of contraceptive methods, meant that young women could explore and expand the period between girlhood and marriage and choose the direction of their lives. In many cases this involved leaving families in suburban areas to pursue work, careers or other economic opportunities in urban areas and living by themselves or with other single female roommates. Notable features characterized the lives of these women compared to women of the past. First, independent working women had their own money, which dispensed with the need for a relationship with a male for material security. Second, the urban atmosphere provided women with a wide array of sexual
opportunities, which, consequently, gave women greater opportunity to explore their sexuality.

Work spaces, public and social venues — which increasingly catered toward “singles” — provided an opportunity to meet many different potential sex partners, and with them, pursue sexual exploration. As Ehrenreich writes,

By the early sixties, thousands of young women … were rejecting the lockstep sequence that led from college or high school graduation directly to marriage and maternity. They expected to spend a few years on their own, working and dating, and not just as a way of passing time until “Mr. Right” arrived. Being single had its own rewards, especially in a city packed with other young people and far from parental oversight. While the teens and preteens were still shrieking over the Beatles … young women in their twenties were already carving out a new kind of sexual identity (Ehrenreich et al. 41).

As women’s sexuality was changing, the institution of heterosexuality, deeply structured by patriarchal oppression, was also redefined. Presumed female sexual passivity and the disregard of women’s response in intercourse was challenged. For example, a much greater emphasis in sex advice literature and sex manuals was placed on achievement of female vaginal orgasm in intercourse. Previously, under the Freudian framework, the absence of female pleasure from intercourse was labeled “frigidity” and was assumed to be the result of psychological deficiency. The sexological view, however, maintained that women were capable of being even more sexually responsive than men. This is due to the sexological discovery that the source of women’s orgasm was the clitoris, not the vagina, and that women were capable of successive orgasms, unlike men. Thus, the sexological framework emphasized the need to cater to women’s sexual needs so that they, too, could find sexual fulfillment.

In this regard, a greater onus was placed on men to help achieve this satisfaction, particularly by assisting women in exploring and mastering various sexual techniques and practices in sex. More openness, too, was also extended to women to be pro-active in achieving
sexual satisfaction, hence, prompting more acceptance of women’s move away from sexual passivity toward aggressiveness. J in “The Sensuous Woman” even chastised women for being too willing to assert their sexual needs at the expense of their male partner’s (Gerhard 77). Furthermore, the sexological discovery of the clitoral orgasm weakened the view of women’s necessary sexual dependency on men for sexual pleasure. Though sexologists did place primacy on the vaginal orgasm as indicative of healthy female sexual response, their research on the clitoral orgasm nonetheless demonstrated that female eroticism did not have to be defined by penile penetration. For example, researchers noted that masturbation involving clitoral stimulation frequently resulted in multiple orgasms for female research participants with “physical exhaustion” being the only terminating factor (Gerhard 69).

Another impact of the sexual revolution on women, according to libertarian feminists, was the loosening of the association between female sexuality and shame. As Wolf notes, the sexual revolution saw female sexuality brought out of the shadows and into the public sphere. Female sexuality found representation in advertising, television, film, music and other aspects of consumer culture. Consumer products catered to women’s desire to be “sexy,” such as through beauty products and more sexual mainstream clothing. Sexual imagery in general, and female sexuality in particular, suffused the popular culture. This was a dramatic departure from Victorian-influenced culture, which vigorously shamed female sexuality into invisibility.

The sexual revolution also saw the development of a new, raised social status for unmarried, sexually expressive women. Whereas before the sexual revolution women who displayed their sexuality faced social scorn and devaluation, the post-sexual liberation era began to see an increase in social value placed on young, sexual women. Singleness in women began to
embody sexiness, allure and excitement. Helen Gurly Brown declared that the “single woman, far from being a creature to be pitied or patronized,” was “emerging as the newest glamour girl of our times” (Ehrenreich 58). By some accounts, sexual women even began to take on more social worth than their chaste, married, maternal counterparts. As Wolf notes from her memoir:

According to the sitcoms of the early to mid-sixties — *Julia* and *Bewitched* — mothers dressed modestly. There were, we all knew, two kinds of women: sexy girls and moms. Sexy girls were essentially Barbies; Barbies were in James Bond movies and Millie the Model comics. The comic-book character Veronica, as someone has observed, was a Barbie; Betty, her lesser rival and sidekick, was a future mom. Barbies went on yachts, wore chiffon, and had high-coiled hair and interesting accents. Moms didn’t (Wolf 17).

In sum, libertarian feminists emphasize that the sexual revolution had many ameliorative effects on women's condition. Before the sexual revolution and the ascent of the perspective of sexual libertarianism, women's sexuality was characterized by extreme repression. Sexual autonomy and the search for sexual fulfillment was highly restricted. The only permissible sexual outlet for women was heterosexual intercourse within the confines of marriage. The separation of reproduction from sexuality for women was also disdained or impossible. However, with the sexual revolution came a new emphasis on women's sexual autonomy. Women began to experience newfound economic and personal independence with the extension of the time period between girlhood and marriage. Single, sexual women began to find new societal worth in a stark contrast to their pariah status prior to the sexual revolution. Women experienced more direct encouragement to explore their sexuality and pursue sexual pleasure both outside of marriage and beyond intercourse with men. As such, libertarian feminists count the sexual revolution as an unprecedented time of improvement for women’s sexual independence and freedom.
2.5. The Radical Feminist Critique of the Sexual Revolution

Jeffreys offers one of the most comprehensive radical feminist critiques of the sexual revolution and its impact on women. In line with MacKinnon and Dworkin, Jeffreys describes sexual liberation succinctly as the “freedom for women to take pleasure from their own eroticized subordination” (Jeffreys 1). Like MacKinnon, Jeffreys’ interpretation of the sexual revolution is rooted in Millet’s analysis of sexual politics: Fundamentally, sex is one part of an onerous political reality, which is the system of male dominance and female subordination through intercourse. Sex understood in this way is not “a natural and spontaneous seeking after pleasure by men and women” (contra the libertarian feminist view) “but a regulatory mechanism designed and constructed to enforce male dominance and female submission” (Jeffreys 5).

Jeffreys offers three essential and interrelated insights into the sexual revolution, which I will explore individually. First, as explained in part above, the history of the sexual revolution, with its roots in psychoanalysis and sexology, has been highly structured by patriarchal sexism. According to Jeffreys, sexology and sex therapy arose out of the Freudian concern for the future of the patriarchal family and female equality’s perceived impact on this unit. The growing women’s movement was seen as threatening to the stability of society, to child-rearing and the institution of motherhood, while theorists saw their role as bolstering the institution of the heterosexual family for the good of society. Sex was seen as the essential glue that would keep marriage, the institution of female subordination, together. Thus, sexologists endeavored to ameliorate female malaise and disenchantment with motherhood, marriage and heterosexual
intercourse, as well as to address the potential of these issues to cause division and distance between men and women in heterosexual marriage by developing theories on bolstering optimally healthy and satisfying sexuality within marriage. As such, Jeffreys characterizes sexology as a notably anti-feminist program.

The second, related, insight Jeffreys points us to is one of the most enduring and complex problems facing Freudians, sexologists and promoters of the sexual revolution alike: The apparent reticence to engage in sexual activity with men on the part of women (Jeffreys 21). As Jeffreys writes, “As women in the first wave of sex reform were seen as slow to appreciate the joys of sexual intercourse with men, if not mainly frigid, so 1960s woman was seen as the fly in the ointment of sexual progress” (93). On this point, Freudian notions of frigidity transitioned seamlessly into later sexological theories. “Inhibition” to intercourse and various sexual practices became the conceptual heir to frigidity. Inhibition presupposes that personal uninterestedness in or aversion to intercourse or certain kinds of sexual activity is rooted in developmental pathology and not something that arises from rational causes. Because sexual inhibition was an affliction that was seen as primarily affecting women, it was women’s sexuality that was consistently targeted for remediation throughout the sexual revolution. As the sexual revolution progressed, men provided much of the impetus for sex libertarianism and the crusade against inhibition.

For example, Jeffreys and Gerhard point out that sex manuals and sex advice literature frequently associated women’s sexuality with inhibition and obstacles to sexual enlightenment. Meanwhile, the philosophy behind this literature served the sexual interests of men: the literature promoted the maximization of men’s sexual use of women by encouraging women to be more enthusiastic about sex and accepting of sexually abusive behaviors (including humiliation and
violence). In the TJS, for instance, women were encouraged to take more initiative, to anticipate erotic activity “ahead of being asked,” in short, to be “an initiator, a user of your stimulatory equipment” (Comfort 74). The book even acknowledges that women’s sexual interests are not like that of men (describing such a scenario as men’s wish), thus giving the lie to much of the purported gender neutrality of the manual (Comfort 73).

In another example of men leading the sexual revolution, Edward Brecher, a writer and journalist who investigated the swinging culture of the 1960s, wrote that swinging attracted far more males than females and that most men enjoyed the culture when first exposed to it, while many women were “turned off” (Jeffreys 132). Brecher records women being “talked into” these activities by their husbands and having the motivation of wanting to please husbands, relieve the husband’s boredom, escape guilty feelings, and so on. “In many cases,” Brecher wrote, “it is the husband who initiates swinging contacts and then either persuades or browbeats his wife into ‘going along’” (Jeffreys 134).

For sexological theorists, inhibition, and women’s reluctance toward heterosexual sex, and particularly intercourse, held great concern for more than just reasons of women’s satisfaction. As sexologists came to accept women’s equality, unequal enjoyment of sex between men and women was seen as problematic for a number of reasons. The possibility of women no longer being economically and socially dependent on men through the nuclear family necessitated another bonding element to compensate, and many sex researchers looked to sex. But for this to be successful in the face of tepid enthusiasm for intercourse and other sexual behavior, female partners had to be coached to be relieved of supposed neurotic reluctance toward this activity. This frequently involved the active eroticization of the male-female/
dominant-submissive sex roles. Surrender and submission to sexual use by their husbands was cast as a pre-requisite for sexual pleasure for women. This also served the purpose of making women compliant in other areas of the marital relationship and in society (Jeffreys 31). In contrast, the healthy male role in sex was defined by dominance and reinforcement of his feeling of power.

One of the purported objectives of focusing on women’s lack of vaginal sexual response was to make sex more fair. However, the practical results were not necessarily so. Historians have tended to look at the eroticization of the housewife as a form of emancipation for women, which was to women’s benefit and served their interests. The eroticization of the housewife was made famous by Marabel Morgan and her books “Total Woman” and “Total Joy,” which encouraged women to sexualize themselves for their husbands’ benefit and also to claim power for themselves in their marriages through their sexuality. However, Jeffreys denies that this phenomenon was helpful to women. “Men’s sexual satisfaction and their preferred mode of sexual practice remain primary and unquestioned. Women were to be trained to have [vaginal] orgasms in response to this practice, not just because this would be slightly less unfair for women, but because it would reinforce male dominance and women’s subordination” (Jeffreys 31). Sex was written about in mechanical terms, as a duty that had to be worked at and mastered like an “apprentice learning a trade and a machine which can break down and need repair” (Jeffreys 28). This understanding thus emphasized the role of the woman as a sexual tool for her husband.

This brings us to an important point regarding apparent female reluctance toward sex. Though Freudians and sexologists alike have cast this as a mental pathology, women may be
reticent to engage in sex due to their particular experience of heterosexuality. As Millet and others have described, there is a clear association between heterosexual sex and male domination of women. In the first place, intercourse, as the sole reproductive method for most of human history, has burdened women with child-bearing. However, reluctance toward heterosexual sex may also have roots in women’s social experience of heterosexuality. As Susan Griffin points out, the fear of sexual violence and sexual domination is an aspect of women’s experience with sex. For example, women carry awareness of the possibility that rape or sexual abuse might be committed not just by random perpetrators, but seemingly “safe” individuals, such as acquaintances and family members: e.g. marital rape, incest, and non-stranger rape. The threat of rape is present in the “natural environment” in which women live and fear of it is part of women’s everyday consciousness (Griffin 26-27). Thus, Griffin asserts that inhibited or passive attitude toward sex on the part of women is a rational response to living in a world of male sexual violence (33).

Kathleen Barry, in addition to acknowledging the effects of the threat of sexual violence, also incorporates the idea that being treated and viewed as a thing for sexual use by men and recognizing one’s degradation in this would likewise cause reluctance to engage in sex. Barry suggests that sexual liberation has in fact mainstreamed “cultural sadism,” i.e. the underlying culture of male practices of sexual violence, exploitation and slavery that are present in the institution of heterosexual sex. Cultural sadism is, in other words, the normalization of sexual sadism directed toward women in our code of sexual behavior and thought. Through the sexual revolution, sexual demands once made by men of prostitutes (who are often in conditions that fit the standard of enslavement, fulfilling male sexual demands in order to secure money and their
survival) have made their way into private homes and bedrooms. Mainstream pornography, for instance, with its prevalent themes of sexual violence, slavery, humiliation, dehumanization, and so on, is a function of cultural sadism (and a promulgator of it as well) (Barry 205). Cultural sadism is found in much more than pornography, but in literature, film and other media, and thus permeates the whole of society. As such, after the sexual revolution, ordinary women have become exposed to the social expectation of fulfilling the demand of sexual sadism that had been traditionally serviced by prostitutes. Barry also argues that sadism includes the status of the “throwaway woman,” legitimized by the sexual revolution, i.e. “the one who is disposed of when there is no other use for her” (Barry 214). Thus, women’s experience of cultural sadism may also account for their rational inhibitions toward heterosexual sex and sexual libertarianism.

While libertarian feminists may downplay the prevalence or existence of cultural sadism, for radical feminists, it is an ineradicable problem for heterosexuality. Libertarian feminists may claim that practices of cultural “sadism” are merely expressions of legitimate pleasure seeking by individuals. What counts as “sadistic,” and therefore, morally objectionable, is what society seeks to repress in terms of individuals’ sexual expression. What matters is the consensual nature of the sexual behavior at issue. For example, many libertarian feminists defend women’s right to participate in sadomasochistic sex, though the practice ostensibly involves sexual violence, domination and humiliation. Radical feminists, on the other hand, often argue this dominant/submissive paradigm promotes rampant abuse against women in society, particularly in the form of rape and sexual violence.

Radical feminists maintain that through the sexual revolution, expectations have been raised for women to willingly participate in culturally sadistic practices and, hence, in their own
sexual abuse. Cultural sadism has thus helped normalize the sexual abuse of women. For example, sexology, with its relativistic position toward personal pleasure seeking, provides theoretical openness to a wide gamut of sexual behavior and desires, some of which are much more morally controversial than others. This includes predilections like pedophilia, necrophilia, exhibitionism and sexual violence. Sex researchers Inge and Sten Hegeler, for example, asserted in their 1967 work “An ABZ of Love,” that women’s eroticization of their sexual abuse -- fantasizing about rape, incest and the like -- was healthy (91). Although this sexually relativistic perspective purports to be gender neutral, reducing the issue to what abstract “individuals” find pleasurable, the demand for tolerance of these activities has not been made equally by men and women searching for sexual equality, but largely by men seeking tolerance for various and sundry desires to sexually abuse women, girls and children (Lars Ullerstam’s “Sexual Bill of Rights for Sexual Minorities” is one example of this)\(^\text{10}\). Women, meanwhile, bear the burden of correcting their inhibitions toward these practices. Sexology’s sexual relativism thus protects the range of primarily male sexual abuses and exploitation of women and children from moral censure. As Jeffreys writes,

> If a woman did not like a sexual activity, whatever the basis of her objection, whether personal, political or aesthetic, she was considered to have had some problem in childhood which constructed for her an inhibition...the implication being that the woman was old-fashioned, narrow-minded and somehow psychologically damaged (95-96).

What the preceding discussion points to is an important problem for libertarian feminism:

Although the libertarian feminist view is couched in the language of gender egalitarianism, the

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social meaning of sex for women means that the purported egalitarian effects of the sexual revolution are merely superficial. What might account for this? The difference in social meaning for men and women may be a logical necessity under patriarchy. LeMoncheck explains this in terms of the politics of objectification. First, the assignment of sexual object status is an assignment of moral subordinate and not moral equal. Women, as social subordinates, cannot fulfill the role of sexual subject; they are the sexual objects. Therefore, for women under patriarchy, due to their object status, sexuality engenders role expectations and stereotypes that comport with their position as sexual objects and are damaging to their personhood. The female sexual stereotype is one of “dependence, submission and passivity” (LeMoncheck, Dehumanizing Women 63). However, the reverse is true for men as sexual agents under patriarchy. As the necessary sexual subjects, male sexual associations are “independence, dominance and aggression.” The male stereotype increases, rather than decreases, men’s ability to lead a self-determined life, which makes sexuality positive for them.

Jeffreys explains this phenomenon in terms of the power dynamics inherent in heterosexuality. The problem stems from the fact that heterosexuality is a ruling-class sexuality wherein women are the subordinates and social unequals, and this status is learned as erotic because intercourse is a primary method of women’s continued subordination. In heterosexual sex men are dealing with individuals who do not share their status of social personhood. They are not required to recognize or extend full person status to women, and so the eroticized subordination of women is not an ethical transgression. This allows women to be treated as any other object that is less than a full human subject. To put it another way, men, as ruling-class individuals, are sexual subjects and women are sexual objects. Thus, women are viewed as less
than full social persons (as one would view possessions, objects, etc.). This is why “[t]he elements that constitute male sexuality depend upon the possession of ruling-class status such as objectification, aggression, and the separation of sex from loving emotion” (Jeffreys 237). When men and women are engaged in sex, whether or not it is consensual, they are playing out the roles in this dynamic: women experience degradation of their personhood status; men experience affirmation of their personhood status.

In contrast, heterosexual women cannot partake in ruling-class sexuality because they are not part of that class. “All that heterosexual women are in a position to do is to accommodate male sexual interests while feeling inadequate for not being able to accomplish such feats as the elimination of jealousy” (Jeffreys 237). This is why emulating male sexuality does not bestow on women power or even feelings of power. However, under a system of male supremacy, men’s sexual access to women gives them power and status. It does not matter who initiates the act, “the men still gain the advantage” (Jeffreys 238). “When women feel shame and anxiety at situations such as swinging it is because they sense the loss of status they undergo and the gain in status that accrues to the male. They are not suffering from hangups but are experiencing an instinct for self protection” (Jeffreys 135).

Furthermore, due to their subject status, Jeffreys argues that the sexual objectification of males will never be possible. For instance, the male pornography industry has tried to create analogues for women, but to little avail. This is because in the patriarchal paradigm in which dominance and submission are eroticized the sexual appeal of men (for women) is their power and status. Objectification necessarily subordinates the object group, producing associations of lower status and passivity. This makes male objectification, specifically women’s enjoyment
thereof, a logical impossibility. For women to enjoy a passive, objectified man would mandate a
reconstruction of women’s sexuality into a ruling class mentality. In true egalitarianism,
however, objectification would not exist. This is why the gender egalitarianism offered by
libertarian feminism fails. Its superficially benign notions of gender neutrality lack a power
analysis.

So long as the patriarchal sexual paradigm holds, sexual aggressiveness, sexual conquest,
degradation of women through sexual use, in addition to actual physical pleasure, are naturally
desirable for men. Therefore the sexual revolution coincides seamlessly with their interests. As
long as the patriarchal heterosexual paradigm prevails, men and women will always be playing
out these roles and the social meaning of sex for men and women will remain unchanged.

This is why, as Jeffreys and others argue, changes in sexual behavior as a result of the
sexual revolution, though purported to be of benefit to women, have actually helped to
perpetuate patriarchy. For example, Dana Densmore has argued that women were as oppressed
by sexual liberation as they were by sexual repression. According to Densmore, sexual
objectification of women is pervasive in society and constantly influences women to be sexual.
She wrote, “Everywhere we are sex objects, and our own enjoyment just enhances our
attractiveness” (111). As an oppressed group, women face ubiquitous pressure to acquiesce to the
demands of the male oppressor class. After the sexual revolution, Densmore argues, male sexual
demands took the form of expecting women to be sexually available. Resistance to sexual
advances became stigmatized (whereas the reverse was true prior to the sexual revolution). This
led Densmore to describe sexual liberation as “the right that is a duty” (111).
This view is corroborated by many women who experienced the birth of the sexual revolution firsthand. Feminist historian Ruth Rosen argues that the sexual revolution in the women’s movement “intensified … sexual exploitation” (145). “[S]ome women began to feel like Kleenex, rather than cherished lovers,” she wrote (145). Veteran activist Tom Hayden expressed a concurring sentiment, observing, “Women could freely take multiple boyfriends, but not as freely escape their image as passive objects. For male students like myself, the new climate simply meant that more women were openly ‘available,’ but it told us nothing about the souls and needs of those women” (Rosen 145).

Furthermore, according to Jeffreys, the sexual revolution “completed the sexualisation of women” (Jeffreys 110) and influenced the expectations placed on married and single women alike. The option of spinsterhood ceased to exist. “The spinster, whether she sexualised her relationships with other women or not, had been able to live a reasonably independent life, free from the scrutiny and management of the sex regulators. Now there were no spinsters. Single women were divided into lesbians and active heterosexuals” (Jeffreys 110). New, ubiquitous sexual expectations focused on women’s adaptation to and proficiency in fulfilling men’s sexual desires and predilections, no matter how abusive or degrading.

In contrast,

[j]t is unlikely in the extreme that men will have experienced actual sexual violence from women or its threat. Men do not live in cultures where the degradation and brutalization of men at the hands of women is the stuff of pornography, entertainment and advertising ... They do not live in a society in which their degradation through sex is the dominant theme of the culture. ... [Sexologists] have identified as healthy sexual feelings those which the male ruling class experiences and have chosen to avoid recognising the political reasons why women might feel differently (Jeffreys 250).
In sum, “sexual liberation” according to this analysis is a product of what Jeffreys describes as the “male-supremacist understanding of sex” (96). It is an effort to maximize the ruling class’s enjoyment of eroticized dominance in whatever form it may take, whether that is pedophilia or something less obvious, such as degrading consensual sex. “The concept of inhibition encouraged [women] to interpret their unease [with intercourse]” for any number of reasons, including political reasons, pain, a sense of humiliation or degradation, etc., “as a character defect” (Jeffreys 96). In a new milieu of sexual access, variety, pornography, popular advice literature, magazines, media, etc., women remain in a situation of power vulnerability relative to men, and they face immense societal pressure to acquiesce to this male-driven restructuring of sexuality. Thus, through the sexual revolution, women have been pressured to accept and enjoy behavior that is at best objectionable and at worst abuse.

2.6. Conclusion

What the foregoing account demonstrates is that sexual libertarianism, particularly its promises of sexual egalitarianism and freedom from oppression, doesn’t adequately support the view that the sexual revolution was a benefit to women. The critical assumption of libertarian feminism is that men and women may engage in sex as equal sex partners and that, when the choice is made by women to engage in these acts, it is done in contradiction to patriarchal norms that repress female sexuality and not because of other patriarchal factors that structure sexuality. However, if it is true — that is, that patriarchal factors have also structured post-sexual revolution sexuality — as radical feminists suggest is the case, the sex libertarian assumption
that men and women may, generally, engage in sex as sexual equals is weakened. There is in fact reason to believe that the circumstances that would allow men and women to meet in sex as equals are significantly limited, if they even exist at all.

This possibility finds support in the radical feminist responses to the sexual revolution, which emphasize the following criticisms: First, women and men’s experiences of intercourse and sexuality are not identical. Women are susceptible to the rational development of negative associations with sex. This is because the female experience of heterosexual sex involves sexual violence and dehumanizing instrumentalization (objectification). This is not part of the male experience of sexuality. Secondly, women’s sexual motivations have the potential to be influenced by patriarchal forces that, by the same oppressive mechanisms outlined by Marilyn Frye, pressure women to engage in sex with men against their interests and genuine desires. Again, this is uniquely an aspect of the female experience of sexuality, not male, as men are the social power holders, not subordinates, under patriarchy. Women being influenced in this way, however, does serve the purposes of male sexuality by encouraging the sexual availability of women and women’s submission to instrumentalization.

And yet, how is this to be reconciled with the idea that genuine sexual autonomy, if it can be achieved, would be good for women? Understanding women’s sexual freedom and the possibility of their sexual autonomy under patriarchy is a highly complex issue. Chapter Three of this examination will explore suggested boundaries of an ethical framework that preserves the importance of women’s sexual autonomy while attempting to identify at what points that autonomy becomes co-opted and distorted under patriarchal circumstances, and thus, furthers the interest of the patriarchal power structure. What I will attempt to show is that women’s sexual
freedom, when it is exercised with certain conditions in mind, may avoid these negative consequences of liberated sexuality.
Chapter Three

The Limits of Sexual Liberation as a Feminist Value

3.1. Introduction

As Chapter Two demonstrated, the sexual revolution has not affected women and men equally. As Ehrenreich’s analysis shows, it is women whose behavior with respect to heterosexual sex has most markedly changed as a result of sexual liberation. Yet it is also women who have felt the brunt of the negative ramifications of the sexual revolution, including through objectification and exploitation of their comparatively powerless position, leading to questions over the revolution’s service to women’s interests and its possible deleterious effects. It is necessary, therefore, to try to identify an ethical framework that elucidates a feminist understanding of genuinely liberated heterosexuality for women. A comprehensive examination of the nuances of such a framework would involve a much wider scope than the project at hand. However, we can begin to understand the boundaries of such a view by identifying, on the one hand, the minimum conditions under which women’s engagement in heterosexual sex conduces to their societal equality and advancement and, on the other hand, the conditions under which women’s sexual behavior can be characterized as antithetical to their societal equality and advancement, and, hence, should be excluded from a feminist framework of ethical heterosexuality.
The diametrically opposed positions of libertarian feminism and radical feminism offer a path to identifying the aforementioned conditions. On the one hand, perhaps the least controversial positive consequences of the sexual revolution, as argued by libertarian feminists, are the acceptance of the importance of women’s sexual autonomy and women’s freedom from external forms of social oppression (as perpetuated by traditional male-female sexual relations). Sex libertarianism has brought an embrace of women acting and deciding of their own volition, according to their desires, rather than having their actions constricted or defined by external power structures. Libertarian feminists such as Paglia and Wolf embrace sexuality as an avenue to power and gender equality. Sex itself, in this view, is revolution, as it has a radical potential to liberate the female body from archaic views of female nature and sexuality. In this way, sexual liberation is seen as conducive to political liberation.

On the other hand, the freedom provided by sexual autonomy does not seem to be a benefit without qualifications. Feminists in line with the radical feminism of MacKinnon and Dworkin espouse a deep skepticism that heterosexual sex can be rehabilitated under patriarchy, as the act itself may be irretrievably patriarchal. According to this view, the institution of heterosexual sex is structured by a dominance/subordination paradigm and maintained coercively. This is so much the case that the distinction between rape and consensual sex is difficult to discern in current conditions. The nuances of sexual interplay, what counts as “consent” in a society that primes men to dominate women sexually and women to submit to male sexual domination, make the separation between rape and sex exceedingly difficult to draw. Until the essence of sexuality — the quintessential expression of male domination/female
subordination — itself changes, sex will never be free and equal and much of it will be rape
masquerading as sex.

Thus, the prospect of more sex with more men is of dubious benefit to women if its
underlying function remains the same. The history of the sexual revolution bears out this paradox
for women. Women have historically shown less enthusiasm for expanded opportunity for
heterosexual sex, whereas the opposite has been true of men. Additionally, the sexual revolution
was significantly structured by men’s exhortation of women to change their sexual behavior and
preferences as an antidote to sexual repression. Furthermore, there is also significant doubt, as
Lydon, Koedt, and others have demonstrated, that the change in women’s sexual behavior is a
genuine expression of women’s liberated sexual desires given that vaginal orgasm is not the
primary source of female sexual pleasure. It is this set of observations that suggests that the
situation offered by sexual liberation is little better than the sexual expectations of patriarchal
marriage. In practice, what results is the expectation that “women should be available to service
men’s need for sexual variety” (Jeffreys 103). “Under the guise of liberating women from being
men’s sexual property they have abolished marriage and turned women in the common property
of men” (Jeffreys 103). This is the central problem of the sexual libertarian paradigm — behind
the rhetoric of egalitarianism and freedom is a practical perpetuation of sexual domination and
instrumentalizing objectification.

3.2. Toward a Third Way: Freedom vs. Risk
The difficulties associated with heterosexual liberation for women have led some feminists to go so far as to call for or speak favorably of celibacy as an alternative that avoids the degradation of heterosexual sex. Densmore, for example, argued that most female-male sex involved degradation and oppression and also diverted women’s energies from the feminist movement. Relationships of love, care and affection can be found outside of sexual relationships with men (in sisterhood, for example). In this context, women would be loved for themselves, not for their sexual capacities, and thus, women would always be subjects and never merely objects. Atkinson posited that heterosexual sex, being hardly distinguishable from marriage itself, is not in women’s interests (though it is in men’s interests) and women ought to disengage from it. Jeffreys, as we have seen, put forward a positive view of the “spinster” — the epitome of woman being both economically and sexually independent of male control — and also esteems lesbianism in this way as well.

However, need women reject heterosexual sex in order to avoid sexual victimization? Is there a middle ground that can be found between uncritical esteem of sexual freedom and total abandonment of heterosexual sex? Ferguson offers one such approach. Ferguson argues for a “third way” understanding of sexuality that she describes as “socialist-feminist,” which is relative to particular historical contexts. She asserts that sexual values must be judged in a particular historical context because “there is no one universal function that can be posited for sexuality” (109). One insight that she offers is that we should distinguish between “risky” and “forbidden” sexual practices, which radical feminists tend to conflate. Forbidden sexual practices involve sex acts in which the dominance-submission relation is so explicit that it should be illegal -- rape, incest, adult relations with children, etc. Ferguson urges us to contrast this with
“risky” behavior, which may merely be susceptible to leading to relationships in which women find themselves in the subordinate-dominant relationship, though such a relationship may not necessarily manifest.

The incorporation of Ferguson’s concept of risk is appealing in that it accepts the value of female sexual autonomy in itself, while requiring that particular instances of individual sexual behavior be evaluated in terms of their potentially damaging effects on women. This approach is appealing for a) its more permissive view of circumstances in which female sexual autonomy may be exercised unproblematically, and b) the flexibility it offers our understanding of behavior in a diverse and fluid world, and especially one in which women's position is notably progressing. In societies where women’s continual political, social and economic advancement is more evident — and where patriarchal hegemony is less severe — the rigidity of views such as MacKinnon and Dworkin’s, while not invalid, may hold less persuasiveness. This is because the radical feminism of MacKinnon and Dworkin asserts that there is very little heterosexual activity that does not have oppressive implications. However, this view denies legitimacy to female sexual choices, which some women would very well experience as freely chosen, are an exercise of their sexual autonomy and do not involve oppression. By contrast, a view of sexuality such as Ferguson’s that takes into account women’s diverse and ever-evolving circumstances and interests, including sexual ones, and the changing societal milieu and power structures that produce these circumstances, would seem necessary for an accurate feminist evaluation of female sexuality. Ferguson’s risk-conscious view will therefore constitute part of the foundation of my own argument in support of a middle ground perspective between radical and libertarian feminism.
3.3. Instrumentalizing Objectification: Risky or Forbidden?

In what specific ways does heterosexual sex pose risks to women? What practices may be so risky that they could be categorized as “forbidden”? Impairment of women’s moral and social status through sex would occur, Ferguson argues, if the sexual activity they engage in would expose them to a subordinate-dominant relation with their sexual partner. There are numerous ways such a relationship may develop in patriarchal contexts. First, women face significant socially coercive factors that may influence them to acquiesce to subordinate-dominant sexual interactions. LeMoncheck provides an insightful explanation of this phenomenon:

In a society that is dominated by men in other areas besides the sexual, pressure from those areas can be brought to bear on women in the sexual sphere to act in certain ways ... [W]omen may feel they must submit to being sex objects for men in order to gain a kind of social, economic, or political prestige that they would not gain otherwise (Dehumanizing Women 60).

The need to achieve basic economic security may also affect women in this way. These types of role expectations directed at women are intimidating, manipulating, indoctrinating and coercing in the context of a male-dominated society, and, therefore, impair women’s ability to exercise their sexual autonomy.

Secondly, the nature of oppressive culture is such that the oppressed’s choices are often internalizations of the desires of their dominators, as this is how the power structure is informally maintained. As was described earlier, cultural sadism is one such informal factor that characterizes the culture women live in under patriarchy, which conditions their purportedly free behavior. According to Barry, when a woman is consenting to sex in sexual liberation, though it
may be superficially freely chosen, she is participating in the culture of sadism. She has internalized the sexual norms and thought of her dominators and is fulfilling the demand that used to be fulfilled by the quasi-enslaved prostitute or actual slave, in essence becoming a “free slave” (Barry 250). But the choice cannot be said to be “liberated” due to the pervasiveness and influence of cultural sadism over women’s sexual choices. The choice is only the false choice of the powerless.

Degradation of one’s personhood status is another significant risk to women in heterosexual sex. In general, sex has degrading social implications for women due to the heterosexual paradigm that exists in which sex is a means of female subordination and women are cast as sexual objects, while men are seen as the sexual dominators and subjects. One of the key ways degradation may occur is through what I will refer to as “mere instrumentalizing sex.” Earlier in this discussion, it was posited that, at its core, sex must involve objectification. Though other moral circumstances may obtain simultaneously, the sex partner is nonetheless an objectified party. What Nussbaum pointed to as problematic, however, was instrumentalizing objectification. This permits a situation in which one can be principally or merely used as an instrument of sexual gratification (or perform the using), which degrades one’s personhood status through the holistic reduction of the person to a non-person thing. In this case, sexual instrumentalization categorically lowers one’s personhood status. Mere instrumentalizing sex, therefore, poses extreme risks to women in terms of its potential to reduce them to sub-person objects.

One caveat that should be mentioned at this juncture is that it is possible that sexual actors, male or female, may not feel degraded in mere instrumentalizing sex. However, such
subjective experience may have little to do with the objective reality of one's objectification. A sexual objectifier may very well view his sexual partner as a degraded instrument of mere sexual gratification, while at the same time his sexual partner may feel she is exercising her sexual autonomy in a given sexual encounter. Furthermore, Haslanger notes that objectification in the cultural context of eroticized dominance is not merely a matter of how one is *viewed* by a sexual partner; it also necessarily involves how one is *treated* in the social system (59). This is due to the fact that male objectification of women, which is characterized by eroticized dominance, is a reality in the world precisely because it is enforced. That is, in a system of male dominance, men have the ability to enforce their view of the world on those they objectify and treat as subordinate. This makes objectification not something that is merely “in the head,” but an act of power that structures the world (Haslanger 62). Thus, regardless of the objectified party’s view of themselves, the male-dominated society at large recognizes and treats the woman as the instrumentalized and degraded sexual object. The objectified sexual partner will consequently face social ramifications that comport with the dominant social power structure’s view of the object. Indeed, this reality is apparent in the traditional double standard imposed on men and women’s sexual behavior in which men’s free sexual expression often improves their social status, while women who express their sexuality are routinely denigrated and demeaned. The subjective experience of the sexual actors involved does not abrogate this double standard.

I would like to take the above argument on instrumentalization one step further by arguing that mere instrumentalizing sex is morally problematic not only for the individual women who themselves engage in this behavior, but for all women as a *class*. LeMoncheck gives us an indication as to why:
As women continue, however ambivalently, to trade their ability to attract and satisfy men sexually for such limited status, they only raise men’s expectations that any woman will be willing to do the same. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for any woman to gain and retain social standing within the male-dominated social hierarchy without being the object of sexual intimidation or manipulation by men. Physical appearance may be important to both sexes, but a woman may become convinced that since her society accords her social status only when she can sexually satisfy men, and so only through the men with whom she comes in contact, this is what she ought to value in herself as well. Thus, a woman’s sexuality begins to take on a significance for her social worth, and by implication, her self-worth, that it does not for a man (Dehumanizing Woman 61).

The dynamic explained by LeMoncheck can be explicated in a slightly different way:

When socially vulnerable women exchange sex or submit to objectification for social gains, they are being rewarded for their actions. This provides the basis for the formation of the belief that women’s self-subjugation will be met with positive reinforcement. By the same token, men who objectify women and exploit their position of power and privilege over them to do so find positive reinforcement for their behavior and outlook when women offer (sexual) rewards for their behavior. Men may then form the belief that their objectifying and exploitative treatment of women will be accepted by women generally. As mere instrumentalizing sex often occurs in serial instances, it involves the repeated reinforcement of the gender dynamic of male power-holders’ sexual instrumentalization of women and women’s submission thereto. This may have the effect of producing a system that conditions both men to sexually instrumentalize women and women to make themselves more sexually available to men. Thus, women’s choices to engage in mere instrumentalizing sex do not merely contribute to their own degradation, but to the degradation of women as a class.

Numerous feminists have in fact noted the conditioning aspect of sexual interactions as described above. Ehrenreich, for example, provides an analysis of the metaphorical sexual “marketplace” (a concept also captured by Paglia’s sexual “arena”). According to Ehrenreich, sex
is a system of interactions, competition and exchange between individuals that bears similarity to a marketplace. The sexual revolution is likewise a product of such an interactive “marketplace.” As Ehrenreich describes the process:

[T]he sexual marketplace both democratizes and institutionalizes the sexual revolution. Practices that were once pioneered by a few brave souls become, through the marketplace, the potential property of anyone. The variety once enjoyed by an avant-garde or urban elite becomes available through mail-order catalogs to a housewife in Iowa. The perverse becomes the commonplace. And as soon as it does, the market must reach further into forbidden areas for the next novelty, the next marketable sensation. In this way, the sexual revolution begins to take on a dynamic of its own, without conscious iconoclasm or risk-taking on anyone’s part, driven along by the impersonal energy of the marketplace (110).

Philipson has noted how the sexual marketplace has exacerbated precisely the sexual degradation of women that would be predicted from the conditioning aspect of mere instrumentalizing sex. According to Philipson’s view, the sexual marketplace is quite literally intertwined with the modern capitalistic marketplace, which has changed the face of sexuality, promoting dehumanizing, instrumentalizing objectification. In Philipson’s words, “[s]exual behavior, ideology, and values have changed in the past century and particularly in the last forty years” such that “modern capitalism has harnessed sexuality and sexual ‘liberation’ for dehumanizing purposes” (115). This is especially evident in the realm of the sex libertarian microcosm of pornography in which the interests of male power holders have overwhelmingly won out:

[A] single trip to any porn district is sufficient to demonstrate that women are not serviced or even considered in the entertainment and materials presented. It should be superfluous to point out that pornography is directed almost exclusively to men and that women’s sexual enjoyment, if considered at all, is seen as a derivative of men’s (Philipson 116).

Importantly, the change in sexual culture noted by Philipson is not merely dehumanizing and instrumentalizing, but also promotes the portrayal of women deriving pleasure from their sexual abuse, pain, humiliation and subordination. It important to note, however, that, contra
Philipson, women’s sexual interests have been advanced in pornography to some extent and that not all pornographic material serves male sexual desire and promotes degradation of women. As the industry has grown over time, women have become consumers of pornography, and have even become producers of pornography that attempts to eliminate violent, exploitative or degrading themes. Candida Royalle, for example, is a former adult film actress who started Femme Productions, whose purpose is the production of nonsexist pornography. Such female-centric material, as Royalle describes it, is intended to be life-enriching by allowing women to explore their sexuality through erotic material that is free of misogynistic content (540). Audre Lorde has suggested that erotica can serve as a resource in combatting gender oppression, noting that the erotic is a constructive, sharing experience of joy between partners, and it promotes this kind of connectivity with others (Lorde 89-90). Unfortunately, that Royalle and Lorde’s views are in the minority further demonstrates that men’s sexual interests are primarily served in the pornographic industry.

It is worth demonstrating in a more formulaic manner how the gender behavior conditioning described earlier may come about. Suppose individual A is a male and has the desire to engage in mere-instrumentalizing intercourse with a woman, B. B consents with the knowledge that A and B are both instrumentalizing each other and that after A and B’s liaison, A and B will seek new partners. Through intercourse with B, A is rewarded in his objective to sexually instrumentalize women. Ipso facto, A has received positive affirmation of his belief that he will receive this reward in the future in similar circumstances. If A encounters woman C, and she acts identically to B, A receives further affirmation of his belief that his desire to instrumentalize women will be rewarded in the future. As more instances of the foregoing occur,
A is likely to form suppositions about females as a class. He comes to believe that it’s socially acceptable to instrumentalize women, that many women will oblige him and that they may even claim to enjoy it. As more men share this experience, as this process becomes a common experience of male sexuality, the beliefs of A regarding acceptable sexual treatment of women are likely to become more ubiquitous among the male social class.\footnote{It should be noted that it is true that in the process I have described above, men are also engaging in self-instrumentalizing behavior. Although it is arguable that there are ethical problems with male sexual self-instrumentalization, my focus is on the negative consequences of this phenomenon on women, who, unlike men, exercise their sexuality under a system of oppression and, therefore, face the greatest risk of subordination through mere-instrumentalizing sexuality. As men are in the social position of dominators under the paradigm of patriarchal heterosexuality, risks of personal degradation and subordination through self-instrumentalization are not comparable to that of women.}

Consider the other side of the equation and how women may be conditioned by the above process. Recall that in the radical feminist analysis, it is pointed out that women trade sex for access to power, which is less available to them. A woman, from a position of more limited social power, may engage in sex for many different reasons other than just pleasure: for male attention and approval, to fulfill gender expectations, for social advancement, even for survival reasons or some form of economic benefit. These are not unreasonable motives for women to have given that they lack the same social power as men and that their choices for fulfilling their interests are comparatively limited. When women do exchange sex with men for these reasons, while receiving social approval that they are being “liberated” by doing so, they are therefore receiving positive reinforcement for their actions on at least two levels. Thus, women who self-instrumentalize, such as women B and C from the example above, are both rewarded for their behavior and receive justification for acting similarly in the future. Through their own positively affirmed behavior, women may have incentive to validate treatment of women by men that is damaging to themselves individually and to women as a class.
To summarize, the foregoing discussion indicates that the phenomenon of mere instrumentalizing sex is itself a conditioning apparatus that both socializes men to treat women as sexual instruments and women to be self-instrumentalizing. This has important implications for the objective of identifying limiting conditions for sexual liberation. Mere instrumentalizing sex would appear to condition toward patriarchal, dehumanizing sexual ideology on a systematic scale. It does not just affect the individual women who participate in it, but the class of women. What this means is that even if a woman willfully engages in instrumentalizing sex for the purpose of instrumentalizing her partner, the behavior nonetheless contributes to the systematic sexual oppression of women. For this reason, I would argue that mere instrumentalizing sex ought to be ruled out as a sexual practice that is compatible with a feminist program of sexual ethics. In addition, given that all sex is instrumentalizing to some degree, and given that patriarchal influences appear to be ubiquitous, the question also arises as to whether other sexual behavior beyond mere instrumentalizing intercourse also presents systemic risks to women. This question will be explored below and other conditions of sexuality to mitigate risks to women will be outlined.

3.4. Care Respect: A Minimum Condition of Sexual Autonomy

The previous section was devoted to one suggested condition of ethically liberated heterosexual sex (the avoidance of mere instrumentalizing sex). What follows is an examination of other possible conditions which, if present, may allow women to exercise their sexual autonomy without risking their own moral status and that of other women.
In his discussion of sexual objectification, Kant posited that a necessary condition of ethically exercised sexuality was that it should take place in the context of marriage. Barbara Herman suggests that this need not be understood as an endorsement of patriarchal marriage. According to Herman, the Kantian view simply asserts that there be assuredness between sexual partners that their sexual use of one another is not a mere act of instrumental use of a person as a means of sexual gratification (it is impermissible in the Kantian framework to treat human moral agents in this way). Marriage as an institution serves this purpose in that it is an arrangement that establishes rights and responsibilities with respect to treatment of one’s spouse, which presumably includes the condition of love. In the Kantian framework, social arrangements of this sort are simply not possible among individuals themselves. Like many other civil relations (e.g. determining property rights), it requires the force of the state to exist to ensures that applicable rights or obligations between the parties will be honored and upheld. Hence, the need for the civil institution of marriage. Herman notes that although Kant’s view implies that an institution of marriage must exist as a moral requirement for sexual relations, it does not tell us what the nature of that institution should be. That is to say, Kant’s theory does not support a requirement that marriage be characterized by patriarchal oppression and inequality, as we have historically known it to entail. On the contrary, Kant’s view would seem to imply that marriage should involve equal moral agents.

However, I suggest that there are conditions on sexuality short of marriage that may also allow sexuality to be ethical exercised. One such condition we may consider is the notion of “care respect” as developed by Robin Dillon. Dillon’s original analysis was concerned with our general treatment of persons and not specifically with sex, though it is readily applicable to
sexual ethics. Care respect, as the term indicates, uses the interrelated concepts of “care” and “respect” to inform our treatment of other human beings in ways that obey the Kantian moral imperative of treating people as ends in themselves and not merely means. According to Dillon’s analysis, the concept of respect has two essential components. One is that it involves deliberate focusing on an object. The respected object is something that claims our attention. More than this, respect is a kind of valuing of an object -- a respected object is something that is worth attending to. Thus, respect involves deliberate focusing on an object on the basis of its having worth. The object is “worthy of consideration” and a “valid source of claims on our attention” (Dillon 70). As the object makes valid claims on our attention, we “regard a further response to the object to be deserved, due, owed, warranted, proper, fitting, appropriate” (Dillon 71). In this way, respect also entails responding to the object in an “appropriate fashion” (Dillon 71). Responding to an object in the appropriate way is determined by the nature of the object. For, although we can like something for no reason or “any old reason,” we cannot respect something for no reason. There is some reason that a respected thing is considered worthy of this attention.

This kind of respect is closely related to “cherishing” (e.g. an environmentalist’s deep respect for nature) and overlaps with the notion of care. Care carries the acknowledgment that the individual is special with his or her own unique ends and personal goods that one has a shared desire to promote. This connects easily with the concept of respect outlined above and what is required for respecting a person. That is because “[e]ach of us is a fully particular and distinct individual, and that fact about us calls for recognition and response from each of
us” (Dillon 77). Respecting a person as being her own unique individual, means viewing the person as having her own value and worth and responding to her accordingly.

It is this junction of care and respect, Dillon suggests, that should inform our treatment of other human beings (Dillon 71). There is a kind of respect that is said to be owed equally to all people by dint of their existence as persons. We recognize that a person has a special worth and status as a human being and that they must, therefore, be treated appropriately. This dovetails closely with Kant’s moral imperative that people be treated as ends-in-themselves and not as means only. Kant’s view for appropriate treatment as such has tended to be viewed as necessitating the respect of individuals’ basic equal human rights, the avoidance of impeding others’ ends and the treatment of others as rationally self-determining moral agents (Dillon 72). More than this, however, care respect involves also trying to understand how the other person views herself and the world and what it is like to be living her life from her point of view. In other words, it involves respecting her self-conception and purposes, which require attention and understanding of the whole person. Moreover, this attention, in order to achieve it, requires a “sympathetic, concerned, involved interest and real effort, which are themselves expressions of our valuing of her and thus constitutive of respect” (Dillon 75). With regard to Kant, care respect goes beyond the common Kantian respect for humanity to respect for personal particularity.

Applying the notion of care respect to sex, with its acknowledgement and demands of an appropriate response to an individual’s personhood, would therefore preclude the instrumental use of another person in sexuality. For, just as care respect provides the minimum condition of treatment of people in a general context, so too can this criterion be applied to the specific
context of sexual activity to prevent the reduction of another person to the status of a mere object or instrument in such interpersonal acts. Care respect is, therefore, an appealing minimum condition of sexual autonomy that would serve to further mitigate the risks to women in heterosexuality.

Risks to women posed by heterosexuality involve the possibility that women may find themselves in sexual circumstances that are dehumanizing, devaluing and subordinating, and that their engagement in this kind sexuality contributes to reinforcing the systematic sexual devaluing of women as a class. However, care respect requires that sexual actors recognize the inherent worth of sex partners and their status as beings deserving of regard. This requirement not only rules out mere instrumentalizing sex — which, as I have argued, is always damaging to the personhood status of women individually and as a class and is impermissible — but also a range of risky sexual circumstance beyond mere instrumentalizing sex. If care respect requires that all sexual agents view and value sexual partners as full persons with unique ends and personal goods, and if this is, in turn, a requirement for engaging in sexual activity, this would seem to exclude sexual encounters where the risk of devaluation of women’s personhood status is significantly high. This may be the case, for example, for sexual activity with individuals whom one may not know well enough to know the true extent of their motivations or their appreciation for one’s self-conception or personal goods.

It may also be argued that the requirement of care respect, especially its focus on appreciating persons as particular individuals, necessitates that a relationship exist between the sexual partners. This may be true to the extent that individuals who do not know each other to a great degree are, thus, not in a position to know each other’s self-conception, desires, personal
ends or understand each other’s particularities. However, the word “relationship” here need not, necessarily, be understood in the romantic or even monogamous sense in which we commonly use the word. The concept of care respect does not require evaluations of romantic or monogamous relations between individuals. Indeed, the notion may be compatible with non-monogamous, non-romantic relationships. For example, LeMoncheck suggests that care respect can be present in sexual relationships that involve multiple partners. She argues that there is nothing logical that prevents open, non-exclusive sexual relationships with multiple partners from being characterized by personal attentiveness and emotional care and concern (*Loose Women* 37). Using the example of “promiscuous Joan,” LeMoncheck explains:

Even if each of Joan’s lovers is a one-night stand, she can communicate to all of them that she regards them as special, that she is interested in what they want out of sex as they can best express it, and that she is interested in sex that fulfills her partner’s needs as well as her own. Such efforts on Joan’s part take a personal commitment of time and emotional energy, energy that perhaps the typical “cruiser” does not have any interest in expending (*Loose Women* 45).

Each of Joan’s “one-night stands” may very well be with individuals whom she knows intimately and has personal concern and care for and who, in turn, know Joan intimately and have personal concern and care for her as well. These relationships do not seem to be logically ruled out by the requirement of care respect. Whether or not the promiscuous Joan scenario is likely to exist is another question. I would suggest that it is an overwhelmingly unlikely scenario in that individuals involved in a promiscuous-Joan-like situation are highly likely to be motivated by a desire to engage in mere instrumentalizing sex. As such, it is also highly likely that such individuals would view their sex partners as mere tools of sexual gratification and as not full persons or with the fitting, caring appreciation for their personhood required by care
respect. Nonetheless, LeMoncheck’s example at least demonstrates that care respect allows for sexual openness and that it is not solely a feature of monogamous romantic relationships.

3.5. A Framework for All Women?

Given that women do not constitute a monolithic group, it is reasonable to inquire whether the framework I have outlined is applicable or relevant to women of diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The question is significant due to the fact that women as individuals are subject to an array of overlapping power structures that involve factors beyond gender, such as race and class. Kimberle Crenshaw notes that many women exist at the intersection of such power structures and find themselves on the margins of theoretical frameworks that examine only one dimension of personal identity. Women of color, for instance, are confronted by the dual oppressive power structures of racism and sexism. Yet, at certain times, feminist and anti-racist analyses pursue conflicting agendas and are at cross-purposes with each other (Crenshaw 1252). Both frameworks, therefore, fail to fully address their social experience. For example, Crenshaw observes that addressing domestic violence and sexual assault against women in black or Hispanic communities can be problematic, as exposure of this issue has the potential to perpetuate racist stereotypes that men in these communities are violent or should be feared as sexual predators (1253). Trina Grillo also points out that in taking an essentialist route in defining “women’s experience” we necessarily strip our analysis of non-gender factors (such as race) and thereby privilege the view of the dominant group as being the standard feminist view (i.e. the view of white women) (19).
How is the sexual experience of women of color different from that of white women in a way that would justify the framework put forward in this inquiry? We can explore this, on one level, by considering how racial oppression plays out in the sexual realm. What is particular about the sexual politics of racial or ethnic minority communities is that expressions of their sexuality are often defined and regulated by the dominant social group. Patricia Hill Collins notes that in the context of white Western culture, the sexuality of women of color has had a long association with “wild,” “untamed” or “uncivilized” sexuality. Speaking specifically about the experience of black women, Hill Collins writes,

For both women and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of social difference … Whether depicted as ‘freaks’ of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes the Western representations of women and men of African descent (27).

The role of colonialism and European cultural imperialism played a central role in the proliferation of this association. Hill Collins notes that “[i]n the 19th century women stood as symbols of race and women from difference races became associated with differentially valued expressions of sexuality” (30). Ideals surrounding the pure white woman were contrasted with more sexually “primitive” women of native populations, which assisted in justifying the superiority of European culture and, hence, colonial expansion. Black women in particular “became icons of hypersexuality” (Hill Collins 30).

Though in a certain sense this view of black or indigenous women’s sexuality can be said to represent an ideal of “liberated” sexuality in the minds of white dominators, and mark women of color as being symbols of sexual desirability, the conceptualization is not necessarily positive. This is because a culture of sexual repression sets up a dichotomy in which sexual freedom is
construed as negative, deviant and uncivilized, while sexual restraint is cast as representing “normal,” moral, or righteous behavior. This becomes one cultural mechanism by which the “good” women are separated from the “bad,” and, in this case, along racial lines. One case in point is the interpretation of black sexuality in the modern American cultural context. Hill Collins notes that black sexuality is held out as an exemplar of sexual deviancy — i.e. the promiscuous, the uncivilized, the impure (Hill Collins 44). Hill Collins points out that this is evident in the association of black sexuality with animal imagery, which connects it with the wild and untamed (e.g. consumer culture placing black women in seductive animal-skin clothing and associating black men with “dogs”). Likewise, the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous black woman has been captured in the negative cultural trope of the “jezebel.” According to Hill Collins, these cultural associations are promoted and perpetuated in global consumer culture, especially in mass media:

Although different meanings may be associated with animal imagery, Snoop Doggy Dog, Little Bow Wow, and the classic phrase “you my main dog” all invoke this same universe of animal imagery. Moreover, representations of Black men as “dogs” who have replaced the cool “cats” of prior eras of African American jazzmen, as well as the video “hos” who populate rap music videos suggest the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated gender-specific expression of ideas about Blackness sold in the global marketplace” (42).

However, just as the dominant culture associates black sexuality with, in Cornel West’s words, “the dirty, disgusting, and funky,” it is also seen as more intriguing and interesting due to its purported liberated nature (Hill Collins 43). Thus, black sexuality situated in a context of racial domination faces a paradox: black sexual agents are singled out as both the icons of sexual freedom and examples of what not to be. This forms the basis of the expectations placed on the
Another dimension on which we may examine the experience of women of color is considering intracommunity sexual politics. Hill Collins notes that women in these communities also experience pressure to conform to the ideals of gender conservatism and traditional sexuality, which tie women’s sexuality to marriage and the patriarchal nuclear family. For example African American Christian churches, which are important community organizations, promote this perspective (Hill Collins 45). The specter of rape and sexual abuse are also present in the lives of women of color and it manifests in their communities in a particular way. According to bell hooks, the patriarchal culture at large is one that condones and celebrates rape. This is because violence is a necessary aspect of patriarchy — the power structure cannot dominate and control without the tool of violence. hooks asserts that black males, who are socially disenfranchised, view the assertion of sexual domination as their only access to the patriarchal power they are conditioned to believe all men are entitled to. Thus, some celebrate rape culture, phallocentrism and misogyny (hooks 353). The proliferation of misogynistic music produced by black male artists is one expression of this phenomenon cited by hooks. At the same time, due to their doubly oppressed status, women of color may feel compelled to accept their sexual mistreatment. Hooks cites her own experience in a heterosexual relationship in which her lover expected sex at his request and often pressured her. She frequently felt compelled to engage in intercourse even when she didn’t want to (hooks 355). According to Crenshaw cautions that criticism of rap music for its sexism, while valid, may have racial implications in that condemnations of such can be selective, ignoring misogynistic literature or artistic expressions that are produced by members of other social groups, particularly white artists (1285).
hooks, she felt she had no right to say no and no freedom not to proceed with sexual activity. In essence, hooks was compelled to submit to her own sexual instrumentalization.

Hooks’ experience speaks to the applicability of the framework I have suggested to marginalized women. I would argue that considerations of race and class only undermine the libertarian argument even further and strengthen the case for holding care respect as a minimum condition of heterosexual sexual relations. This is because the libertarian feminist view of sexuality presupposes that, in any given sexual encounter, it is possible for men and women to meet as equal social actors in a mutual pursuit of pleasure. However, this view would seem to be most applicable to women in privileged social positions. Henry notes that it has “typically been white, economically privileged women who have had the luxury to define their liberation exclusively in terms of their individual sexual freedom” (97). Women who have advantages of affluence and education, or who do not experience racial oppression as a part of their daily lives, have greater life options available to them and are, therefore, less vulnerable to patriarchal pressures that would affect their sexual choices. Women who are economically self-sufficient or who have attained some degree of social prominence and power may not feel that they are being exploited or degraded in their engagement in instrumentalizing sexuality. Thus, with some level of economic and social security, such women may legitimately feel that exercising their sexual autonomy is an exercise of their social power.

However, the same cannot necessarily be said for women who are in socially vulnerable positions. This fact is all the more relevant to women of color as they live in a society in which trends of affluence and poverty are racialized. Women in such circumstances are likely to face greater patriarchal pressures on their behavior precisely because their options are much more
limited. As previously argued, women in general are subject to pressure to conform to male expectations as a way to obtain resources, prestige and other social advantages to which they otherwise would have limited access. In particular, women whose economic situations are marked by insecurity and scarcity are less able to resist acquiesce to male demands on their behavior. This includes demands for women to submit to sexuality that is instrumentalizing and degrading to their personhood. These women, therefore, are at greater risk of falling into dominant-subordinate sexual relationships than women of privileged social groups.

The minimum condition of care respect may address many of the difficulties with heterosexual sexual relations for marginalized women. On the one hand, it is important that within a sexually repressive culture or in the face of sexual oppression from within their own communities, poor or racial minority women be permitted to exercise their sexual autonomy as social agents on equal footing with men. On the other hand, what must be avoided is the risk of falling into dominant-subordinate or degrading relationships in the course of the free exercise of their sexuality. Of particular concern is that, due to cultural representations of their “bad” sexuality (e.g. “impure,” “hypersexual,” etc.), women of color are especially marked as women whom it is socially acceptable to sexually instrumentalize and to treat as sexual amusements or objects to sate male curiosities of “untamed” sexuality. Care respect as a minimum condition on sexuality, with its basic demand that sexual partners value each other as particular human beings of intrinsic worth, precludes the possibility of mere instrumentalization in sex and the personal degradation that accompanies it. By adhering to this condition of sexuality, women of color or women in especially vulnerable economic situations can exercise their sexuality, defying
repressive sexual norms in the process, while decreasing the likelihood that they will find themselves in a position of sexual subordination.

3.6. Objections

At this juncture, it is necessary to address objections that would seem to arise from the discussion and conclusions above. Much of the preceding analysis depends on the validity of the radical feminist view of the omnipresence of patriarchal power structures. However, it is fair to ask how the situation might be different in a gender-neutral future to which feminism aspires. If patriarchy can be dismantled, if men and women could truly be socially equal, then it is reasonable to ask whether the influence of patriarchy over sex would necessarily whither away. In this case, would conditions of care respect and avoiding mere instrumentalizing sex still be relevant? Is it possible that two social equals, biologically male and female, could engage in the mutual instrumentalizing sex without fear of moral damage to either individual’s personhood?

First, the notion of care respect as developed by Dillon does not apply only to sexual contexts, but to our treatment of other human beings in all contexts. As such, care respect implies obligations as to our treatment of individuals irrespective of the overarching gender politics that apply. Thus, care respect would nonetheless be a necessary component of our treatment of individuals in a sexual context even in total egalitarian circumstances. This would seem to preclude mere instrumentalizing sex as ethical sexual behavior in egalitarian circumstances as well.
Secondly, I am pessimistic that the gender-neutral state of affairs as proposed in the above objection is likely, or even able, to develop. For heterosexual sex to be free of gendered political implications, the societal context in which it occurs must be completely free of patriarchal influences. This means that all gendered power structures would be abolished and that male and female behavior and interactions would not be affected by male domination and female subordination. However, the radical feminist skepticism toward the possibility of this social reformation occurring is a powerful one. The complete eradication of patriarchy would require a total restructuring of all societal institutions on a thoroughly gender-neutral basis. This is something that not only have we not seen anywhere in human society to date, but that may not be possible at all. For, as Dworkin argues, the domination-subordination paradigm may be inherent in heterosexual sex itself. In this case, no amount of societal restructuring would would change the sexist dynamics of heterosexuality and such changes would be superficial at best. According to Dworkin, this is evinced by the fact that despite whatever reforms may be instituted the social condition of women relative to men does not change (160). “Reforms are made; important ones; but the status of women relative to men does not change. Women are still less significant, have less privacy, less integrity, less self-determination” (Dworkin 160). Social improvements have been and continue to be made, but these changes have yet to affect women’s civil inferiority compared to men.

Furthermore, even if the nature of heterosexual sex were not itself sexist — and Dworkin does leave open the possibility that it is not — the act is so intertwined with gender politics that the two may never be separated. As Dworkin writes, “How to separate the act of intercourse from the social reality of male power is not clear, especially because it is male power that constructs
both the meaning and the current practice of intercourse as such” (160). Women, as a subordinate social group, are in a position of having to conform to male interests, including their sexual interests. As they are relatively economically poorer than men, women are compelled to barter sex or sell it out right (which is why they keep us poorer in money). We [women] are poorer than men in psychological well-being because for us self-esteem depends on the approval — frequently expressed through sexual desire — of those who have and exercise power over us. … We need their money; intercourse is frequently how we get it. They force us to be compliant, turn us into parasites, then hate us for not letting go. Intercourse is frequently how we hold on (Dworkin 161).

Indeed, if the current state of sexual dynamics is any window into a possible future of social and sexual equality for women, it is not a promising one. For example, the difference of female-male objectification as it currently exists is grossly disproportionate. Men overwhelmingly tend to fill the role of objectifier, those seeking out depersonalized sexual objects, the consumers of degrading pornography, those who buy and sell human beings for sexual use, etc. while women are overwhelmingly in the role as sex object. It is women’s bodies and sexuality that are overwhelmingly exploited in mass media and consumer culture, used to market a range of products from “women’s” magazines to feature films. Social reforms that have been implemented appear to have done little to change this reality save.

The objection might also be raised that the limiting conditions proposed in this analysis to mitigate risks to women in liberated sex impose unfair standards on women’s sexual behavior compared to that of men. Does my analysis only speak to what behavior heterosexual women should or should not engage in? It is true that my examination has been primarily conducted from the perspective of women. However, given that my analysis has involved the proper treatment of persons generally (e.g. with care respect), this would imply that the ethical
conditions I have outlined would apply to male sexual behavior, including care respect for sexual
partners and rejection of mere instrumentalizing sex. One of the primary reasons that this
discussion has focused on women’s sexual behavior is because of the uniquely problematic
nature of heterosexual sex for women. As has been demonstrated in previous sections, sexuality
differs significantly in meaning and consequence for women compared to men. In particular,
women face threats to their personhood and social status compared to heterosexual men. As a
consequence, it behooves women to consider minimal conditions of engagement in heterosexual
sex that allow them to maximize their sexual autonomy while protecting against these risks.

Finally, there are some objections to conditions on women’s sexual liberation that suggest
such conditions are tantamount to a reformulation of the historic regime of restrictions on female
sexuality. For example, Midge Decter argued, in a similar vein to Ehrenreich, that the sexual
revolution had, for the first time, permitted female sexual autonomy and therefore minimized the
historic value of chastity placed on women’s sexuality. Feminist critics of the sexual revolution,
Decter has argued, are in effect promoters of a “return to female chastity” (Decter 101). These
feminists promote disengagement from heterosexual sex on the part of women. Likewise, Rene
Denfeld has referred to radical feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin as the “new
Victorians” whose philosophy — wittingly or unwittingly — affirms the concept of female
sexual fragility and passivity vis-à-vis male sexual predation and promotes female antipathy
toward sex. “The focus on sexual politics in today’s movement has seen many feminists perform
an abrupt about-face, supporting positions the movement originally fought and mouthing lines
that sound eerily reminiscent of Victorian-era sexual dictates,” Denfeld writes (51).
These criticisms, however, rely on an erroneous interpretation of the radical feminist view of women’s participation in heterosexual sex and misrepresent radical feminists’ motivations. It is true that radical feminists are extremely pessimistic about the women’s ability to engage in nonsexist sex with men and criticize liberated sexual expression that appears to degrade or promote oppression of women (sadomasochistic sex, for example). Some radical feminists stress the importance of emotional intimacy for women’s sexuality or even suggest disengagement from sex with men, as described earlier. However, it would be incorrect to say these prescriptions are examples of demands for women’s chastity. Chastity fundamentally involves societal valuing of women for their sexual purity and using abstinence as a means to ensure that purity. Radical feminists, by contrast, object to valuing women based on their sexual purity and do not exhort women to eschew heterosexual relations out of a desire to preserve women’s sexual righteousness. Rather, they are concerned with women engaging in activity that oppresses them socially. Furthermore, as LeMoncheck points out, the notion of care respect allows for a certain degree of openness in sexual relationships. For example, care respect does not require commitment to monogamous exclusivity or romantic relationships. As such, the condition of care respect does not provide a theoretical basis for chastity. In the context of my analysis, it simply provides a condition for engaging in sexuality where the risk of damaging women’s personhood is avoided. Beyond this, there is no limitation on sexual relations women might engage in if they view these relations as fitting the condition of care respect.

13 For example, Dworkin has written that women want “a more diffuse and tender sensuality that involves the whole body and a polymorphous tenderness” (159).
3.7. Conclusion

The discussion presented in this analysis is intended to outline the limits of sexual liberation’s benefits to women — to identify the points at which female sexual autonomy reverts into oppressive circumstances and to present a suggested framework of sexual ethics that would prevent such a scenario. On the one hand, I have suggested that mere instrumentalizing sex be considered a “forbidden” sexual practice given its degrading effects on women individually and women as a class. On the other hand, I have argued that care respect ought to be a minimum condition of sexuality. Given that this discussion has centered on the basic boundaries of this framework, there remains room for further examination to flesh out a more comprehensive account of sexual ethics that preserves female personhood status. For example, care respect, while permitting a broad range of acceptable sexual contexts, leaves room for analysis of additional conditions of behavior, if needed. In the meantime, care respect serves as a minimum condition for avoiding the pitfalls of unqualified sexual liberation for women, and in particular, the anti-feminist conditioning of men and women in contemporary society.
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