

## SEX IS NOT A NATURAL ACT AND OTHER ESSAYS

Leonore Tiefer  
Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004

### REVIEWED BY MELANIE BERES

Almost 30 years after the sexual revolution, it is popularly believed that we live in a time of sexual enlightenment and freedom, a time of openness and dialogue that is unprecedented in recent history. While it is possible to reflect on many positive changes to the culture of sexuality (the availability of contraception for example), Leonore Tiefer challenges her readers to think about the social structures that continue to restrict sexual freedom, especially women's sexual freedom.

*Sex is Not a Natural Act* is the second edition of a compilation of insightful essays that challenge dominant constructions of sexuality in the United States. This collection is made up of invited lectures, conference presentations, newspaper columns and other works that Tiefer has written over the last few years. Included in this edition are many of the provocative essays that appeared in the first edition, with a generous helping of new essays focusing on major changes in the popular culture of sexuality, especially the public and medical response to the release of Viagra™.

Part One of the text provides the foundation and introduces Tiefer's approach to sexuality. This part is fundamental to understanding her way of thinking and is mostly unchanged from the first edition. In this part Tiefer explains her theoretical perspective on sexuality, and clearly describes her social constructionist approach, using general vernacular palatable to a wide audience.

Part Two focuses on popular culture issues relevant to sexuality and includes a smattering of comical and timely newspaper columns. In one particularly interesting chapter ("The McDonaldization of Sex") Tiefer argues that sex, like fast food, has become efficient, predictable, and controlled. Another chapter, on kissing, outlines ways in which kissing is de-sexualized in popular culture, and identifies the social consequences of this de-sexualization.

In Part Three, Tiefer links her feminist and activist politics with the field of sexology and highlights the manufacture of sexual dysfunction. In particular, she points out how the classification of sexual dysfunction has little to do with the concerns that women have about their own sexual lives. Tiefer elaborates on this in Part Four, by taking a closer look at the latest developments in the field of sexology as it relates to sexual dysfunction. In particular she examines how the introduction of Viagra has impacted expectations of what is considered "normal" sex.

Part Five builds on the previous four parts, and in a sense is the climax of the book (no pun intended). In this part Tiefer develops arguments related to the recent manufacture of female sexual dysfunction. She discusses Viagra's impact on women's sexuality, including the developing concern over finding a "pink Viagra" for women. These last essays are as intriguing as the ones in previous chapters; however, parts of the essays become repetitive. This is largely due to the way the book was put together, as a compilation of essays originally written for other purposes. Thus, each essay stands alone and provides the necessary background information to understand the argument thoroughly. This makes for some moments of *déjà vu* while reading the book, although this feature also makes these essays ideal for use as supplemental reading in a sexuality class.

For Canadian readers, one drawback to the book is that Tiefer dis-

cusses issues of sexuality as they relate to American culture and society. For example, she discusses the political climate around sex education and the American federal government approach to it. She also discusses the impact of the American medical system, including Health Management Organizations (HMOs) and other types of insurance companies, on the types of treatment options accessible to couples with concerns about their sex life. These cultural infrastructures are different in Canada, and thus these issues do not play out in the same way as they do in the United States. While these essays are still interesting and engaging, I was left contemplating how similar social structures impact the construction of sexuality "north of the border."

Overall, *Sex is Not a Natural Act and Other Essays* provides a major contribution to the understanding of sexuality. Tiefer's writing style is enjoyable and witty; she uses humour to engage and to disarm while clearly and concisely making her point. It is an ideal book for academics looking for a feminist analysis of the popular culture of sexuality, and is also a worthwhile teaching tool.

### FEMINIST POLITICS, ACTIVISM AND VISION: LOCAL AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Luciana Ricciutelli, Angela Miles and Margaret H. McFadden, Eds.  
Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc.; London and New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2004

### REVIEWED BY JENNIFER SUMNER

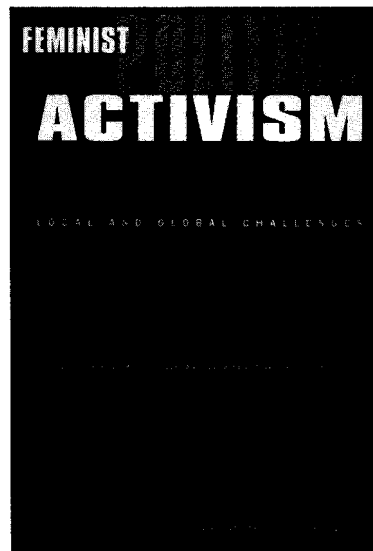
The history of women, like the history of many other subordinated

groups, has emerged from the shadows of history written by the dominant group—in this case men. For this reason alone, *Feminist Politics, Activism and Vision: Local and Global Challenges* is an important book. Overall, it offers a panorama of the state of women's struggles at the beginning of the third millennium that is unparalleled in its scope of coverage and depth of detail. In particular, it presents the current context of neoliberal globalization, the international scale of feminist organizing, case studies from the global South and the global North, and feminist challenges in both practice and vision.

Feminism itself has been a minefield for those both within and outside the movement, so the range of viewpoints in the book is laudable as well as vital. The contributors include pioneers of the second wave of feminism, feminist academics from around the world, and a new generation of globally savvy but locally committed activists. It is this transcultural range that gives the book its visceral excitement, international flavour and learning potential.

Peggy Antrobus prefaces the book with the warning that women's gains are being jeopardized by the spread of neoliberal globalization and religious fundamentalisms, that women's solidarity is being challenged by resurgent racism, and that women's lives are being endangered by the militaristic "war on terrorism" and the AIDS pandemic. To meet these challenges, she calls on women to pay attention to both their differences and their connections because together they are the strength of the movement. This becomes a recurrent theme in the book, especially what contributor Erella Shadmi calls "the politics of connection."

The core of this politics of connection can be understood through the concept of women's shared specificities. Developed in the writings of one of the co-editors, Angela Miles, women's specificities include not only women's shared oppression and life



experience of reproduction, motherhood, the sexual division of labour and the control of women's sexed bodies, but also their historical experience in taking responsibility for their community and its future, their moral commitment to social solidarity and their ability for long-term and multifaceted activism. These specificities, in turn, are filtered through what Miles refers to as feminist values, such as participation and collaboration, diversity and pluralism, and inclusiveness and consensus-oriented policy making. The result is an interconnected world-view in action that will benefit not only women, but also men, children, non-human life and the environment.

I learned a great deal from reading this book—for example, that the women of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy pitied their American sisters because they lacked the historical rights that Iroquois women enjoyed. When native people were forced to take up American citizenship, indigenous women lost these rights. I also learned that in Seoul, South Korea, feminism is almost non-existent. Instead of belonging to the women's movement, today's young women have joined what political economist Leslie Sklair has called the most successful social movement—shopping—which is able to mobilize millions into the

streets every day. In the wave of capitalist development that has swept over Asia, they are "overwhelmed by the power of money" and have little interest in anything other than consumerism. And, finally, my distrust of postmodernism was confirmed when I learned how the depoliticization and de-radicalization of feminism was fortified by postmodernism's emphasis on two areas. The first area is identity, which is constituted in the existing social order, overlooks power relations, hollows out the concept "woman," and thus denies the possibility for political action and sisterhood. The second area is discourse, representation and performance, which abandon women's experience as the main focus and leave the political field to the sway of the economic dictates of capitalist globalization. These postmodern emphases make the politics of connection almost impossible.

The conclusion is a fitting summary. Entitled "The Empire Strikes Back But Finds Feminism Invincible," it assumes the point of view of a history professor from another galaxy lecturing on patriarchy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on "one of the least civilized planets of the universe." This futuristic overview is at once pessimistic in the oppressive history it reveals and optimistic in its implication that feminism is invincible.

Overall, the blend of theoretical and practical analysis and activism provide a grounded vision of what feminism brings to the world. I would have enjoyed a case study of Canada, but I was more than compensated by the rich mix of global perspective, analytic depth and local examples.