

Lesbianism as Political Practice:

Reply no. 2

Refractory Girl

(June 2003): The first segment below contains two excerpts from an article that appeared in the October 1980 issue of the journal *Refractory Girl* (RG) (Issue 20/21), plus some current comments of mine. The second segment is my response at the time, in 1980. I initially thought I might send it to RG, but then I decided not to because I was simply too demoralised. It wasn't finished either, for the same reason, so it ends rather abruptly. I've also included an undated fragment, probably written about the same time (because it was in the same folder).

The 1980 Women & Labour Conference: A Discussion

[p.27] The *Refractory Girl* collective decided to produce a group response to the Women and Labour Conference held in May 1980 in Melbourne, which all but one of us attended ... Producing our response to the conference proved very difficult. We held a group discussion and taped it. Most of us experienced this discussing as expressing a broad and optimistic consensus about the function of such conferences. However, when the transcript of the discussion was produced, we became all too aware of our confusions and differences. A large amount of our enthusiasm appeared to have been solely generated by the large numbers of women and the generally high atmosphere of the conference. Beneath this superficial reaction it was clear that some of us were worried about the increasing prevalence of apolitical papers, and the structure of this hybrid conference. A smaller group then prepared a summary of the issues discussed. What appears below is that summary of the discussion, interspersed with selected comments from the transcript.

We hope by this method to give RG readers an indication of at least some of our reactions to the Conference, in order both to give people who didn't attend the

Conference some idea of its character and impact, and to stimulate further reflection on, and discussion of, the significance of the Women and Labour conference for Australian Feminists generally ...

[pp.28-9] All of those from the RG collective who went to the Lesbianism session agreed that it was a terrible session.

L.L. I think a few things have to be said about self-conscious, and pretentious and obfuscating, pulling in, of theory which most didn't understand ... And it's really unfortunate that it happened in the lesbian session because one of the things that came out of this conference was the incredible confusion about what the Women's Movement's own history vis a vis the lesbian issue has been.

It was confused in 2 ways. One, because there's this new band of radical lesbians, who believe that they've brought the lesbian issue to the women's movement, beginning in 1978 when they attacked the organisers of the Womens Day March because of their supposed hiding of the lesbian issue. And they continue to claim that the women's movement has not even looked at lesbianism prior to 1978. And as people such as [LB] said with some degree of desperation at that session 'Look may I mention these 12 conferences beginning in ...'. People can just get angry about the historical inaccuracy of it and the arrogance. So that's one confusion.

The other problem is the attempt to push an undigested theory. But the worst aspect was, when pushed by 'we don't understand what you're saying' or 'it doesn't make any sense', the answer was. and I think I quote 'Well I'm afraid I can't explain it without going into high theory and you won't understand me'. And I was pleased somebody got up and said 'It's nothing to do with your theory being sophisticated, it's to do with your theories being very very confused'. But that was an appalling session. Given that the impetus behind that session was to claim that Women's Liberation conferences and Women's Liberation audiences still can't cope with lesbians I think it was probably very important and in terms of the tension between the Women's Liberation type of conferences and the more academic ones I'm sure that session's going to have provoked a great deal of ill will ... And it was packed. 1000 odd people or more. Somebody got up and said '95% of these women are lesbians. Nobody queried it. (hysterical laughter) Also, some of the lady post-graduates who had given their straight empiricist papers were

sitting there ... (hysteria) Well if this was to be their first step I'm afraid if they've got any sense they'll run (hysteria) back to their marriages for at least another generation (hysteria) [elisions in the original].

[p.30] the bias of papers away from sexuality, 'personal' issues, issue raising, general theory, and [from] Left-wing political perspectives, imply changes for the **organisation** of the Conference in future. Further, we feel feminists concerned about all these things—and in this we include ourselves—should make a greater effort to offer papers along these lines at future conferences. If they are not, future Women and Labour Conferences could become important venues for a bland mixture of concern for women's studies [p.29—'very worthy in itself but having some worrying implications'] and career opportunities for women. 'Feminism' could well be appropriated by those whose radical intent poses no threat to patriarchal, capitalist society.

My Comments

(June 2003): A couple of points need to be made, that I didn't make at the time in my reply below. The first is the breathtaking arrogance of this account. The 'lady post-graduates' gibe and the collective's regret that they didn't give any papers and that the problems would have been solved if they had, were typical of the whole piece. It's no wonder they interpreted me as being arrogant—it was a clear case of projection. The other point, and this applies to [LB]'s reply as well, concerns the remarkable possessiveness about knowledge displayed by my critics. They were all saying that they knew things I didn't know and that, because I didn't know them, I should shut up. Not one of them offered to give me any information, even when I approached them individually and in person. The knowledge was theirs alone and they weren't going to share it, at least, not with me.

A Reply to 'The 1980 Women and Labour Conference: A Discussion'

As the author of that (presumably) 'terrible' paper delivered at the '*appalling*' session on lesbianism at the Melbourne Women and Labour Conference this year, I would like to comment on and extend the brief remarks made by [L.L.] in the *Refractory Girl* Collective's discussion on the Conference, printed in issue no.20/21. Let me first list the points on which the collective and I are in agreement. I agree that the session was 'terrible', but for somewhat different reasons than those put forward by the collective. (See below). I agree also that the theory I presented in my paper was 'undigested'—a term which far more accurately describes my own feelings about it than the term I actually used at the time, i.e. 'confused'. Moreover, as far as my memory serves me, [L.] quoted me fairly accurately (as far as she went), except that I said 'heavy' theory, not 'high' theory.

There our points of agreement end.

The reason why I thought the session was so 'terrible' was because I was on the receiving end of a vituperative attack such as I had not experienced since the 1978 women and Labour Conference at Macquarie University (of which more later). The mood of the session was set by the first questioner (LB), although the manner in which the question was put did not *cause* the subsequent fracas—it merely exemplified it. I must hasten to add (because L. has since suggested that I can't take criticism) that I am not objecting to *what* L. said—I am simply questioning the *way* in which she said it. It could have been done another way, without the anger and recrimination she directed towards me. She didn't appear to me to be making her point about the '10 (not 12) conferences beginning in ...', in *desperation*, but in a righteous fury aimed at putting me in my place and telling me just where I got off.

As for the question of theory—unassimilated, regurgitated or defecated though it might be—I would like to fill in the lead up to my comment: 'To answer that I would have to go into heavy theory, and you wouldn't understand me'. I had

said right at the beginning of the session that I had already spoken about the paper to a number of women that morning. They had advised me not to go ahead with the theoretical part of the paper as it was too difficult for them to understand, and they were sure that most of the people at the session wouldn't understand it either. I fell in with that suggestion, not because I thought that I would be talking to a bunch of semi-literates who had never had a thought in their lives, but for the reason that I didn't think I had done enough work on it to make it comprehensible to anyone at all. The fault was mine, and I said so. Hence, far from being the arrogant shit that Lesley's comment made me out to be (note the significance of the switch to 'high' theory), I was actually suffering from my usual bout of low self-esteem (nor unjustified on this occasion, I'm prepared to admit).

I would like now to come to the point that both [L.L.]'s comments in the *Refractory Girl* discussion, and L.'s objections at the Conference, were designed to tell me. Both of them have interpreted me as saying that lesbianism has not been discussed within the feminism of the last ten years—a fair enough interpretation given the way I compressed the argument to fit into a limited space, and that I hadn't sufficiently elucidated the point I *was* making. (Although, given that I *did* say that when lesbianism *was* brought up it aroused more sound and fury than any other issue, I obviously wasn't imposing a total silence). In opposition to that assertion of mine, L. listed the (ten) conferences referred to above as evidence that lesbianism *had* been discussed. Both [L.L.] and L. appear to be of the opinion that my assertion about the feminist silence on the issue of lesbianism was due to my ignorance of the occasions on which it had been discussed, and a consequence of my late arrival on the feminist scene (1978). [L.L.], for example, refers to 'this new band of radical lesbians' who first appeared on the scene in 1978, and particularly those who objected to the omission of any mention of lesbian demands from the 1978 Women's Day manifesto (of whom I wasn't one). L., in her response at the session, made a remark to the effect that 'all these conferences happened *before* 1978'.

Up to a point, this is correct. I do not know of all the occasions on which the issue

was discussed; and it wasn't until 1978 that I was in a position to start going to conferences, meetings, etc. However, my paper in 1978 wasn't the first, the last, or the only time puzzlement was expressed at the exclusion (or omission) or lesbianism from an occasion on which feminist issues were being discussed. As far back as the Mount Beauty Feminist Theory Conference in Hobart in 1973, the Hobart Women's Action Group expressed their displeasure at its omission in no uncertain terms. This is one of the conferences which L. cited as part of her refutation of my assertion. But since that HWAG paper was, in part, a demand that lesbianism not be excluded from a conference on feminist theory (at least, as it was reported in *Refractory Girl* no.5, the 'Lesbian Issue'), I can only feel that it supports my assertion, rather than refutes it.

I am prepared to admit that lesbianism *has* been discussed on many more occasions than I was aware of, and I would welcome any useful additions to my somewhat deficient knowledge of what has actually happened. However, at least three points need to be made in order to defend myself against the harsher aspects of the criticism I have been subjected to. The first is that I did make some attempts to gain access to that information. Since very little is available in published form, that involves gaining access to the networks of women who partook in those debates and discussions. For whatever reason, I have not been able to do this. After my much lamented (by me mainly) paper at the first Women and Labour Conference in 1978, I found myself 'persona non grata' in those circles. I have since learned (from L.) that that was because I was 'told' at that conference that lesbianism had not been ignored by the women's movement, and I was to stop saying it had. I was never, at any stage, offered help to amend my fault, despite a number of attempts on my part to do so.

The second point is that, whatever was said at those discussions, it did not answer the question of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism. If those discussions did not clear up that central point, then, in effect if not in woman hours expended, the debate was effectively silenced. It is that question towards which my paper was directed, and I thought that I had suggested at least one answer.

Which brings me to the third point: I said (at least I thought I did) far more than the points I have been taken up on in both the Women and Labour Conference papers, particularly the second one. The fact that nothing else was taken up and used as a basis for criticism leads me to one of two conclusions: either I am saying nothing of any moment at all; or what I am saying needs so much development and extension that it may not be worth the effort, given that I have to support myself in the meantime. (And I am, thank heaven, too busy at the moment to make a choice between those two alternatives).

It is somewhat egocentric of me to single out my own special interests from the welter of criticism which that discussion by the *Refractory Girl* collective was. At least I wasn't named. What must those women who were identified by name be feeling at the savage demolition of their work? What sins had they committed that they should be so summarily dismissed from consideration? What is so heinous about empirical investigations delving into the minutiae of women's suppressed history? And what is so dastardly about struggling with theoretical concepts which won't fit?

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Re: personalising the political—placing the origin of structures and/or the responsibility for their maintenance within the individual psyche, desires, motivations, etc. The individual is no more than (and no less than) the locus of choice. The individual is she who acquiesces in or rejects, denies or refuses participation within the social order. But the individual is not the origin of what is acquiesced in/rejected—that is the social order which is beyond the individual, and at the same time, constitutes the individual as female or male, defines the world as it is, and leaves no room for what is not, and no room for what ought to be or what ought *not* to be.