

returns so often to haunt us. Joan Nestle puts sex where it belongs – in with the rest of life, not cut off in some zone of privacy. Perhaps this is why she conveys so powerfully the erotic charge of butch-femme relationships, and their fundamental difference from heterosexual desire.

On the other hand her determination to exclude *nothing* of the sexual, to admit everything, to refuse to have any truck whatsoever with the drawing of lines, with the putting of some acts beyond the pale, with the virtues of reticence – this determination does mean that she can never question what is, after all, a dominant assumption of the society against which she protests with such vigour and so movingly: the assumption that sexuality *is* at the

centre and core of everything, including personal identity – an assumption that, after all, both feminist and gay historians have begun to challenge. Her insistence on sexuality is liberating, especially as it results in an insistence that older women, ‘ugly’ women, women with disabilities have just as much right to sexual pleasure as everyone else, yet it can also set up sexual daring, even performance, as an imperative. At times I did feel timid and unadventurous, when comparing my own experience with her heroic tales of untrammelled lust. This however is a small price to pay for the warmth, humour and passion of this exceptional book.

Elizabeth Wilson

The Social Construction of Lesbianism

Celia Kitzinger

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The central political project of this book is an avowedly radical feminist one. It is to present a critique of liberal humanist views of lesbianism, as expressed in ‘gay affirmative’ research in psychology and also as expressed in the accounts that many women give of their lesbian identities and lesbian politics. These present lesbianism as a dignified way of life, just as natural, normal and fulfilling for those who follow it as heterosexuality and therefore unthreatening to heterosexual institutions. Such views, according to Celia Kitzinger, serve to ‘remove lesbianism from the political domain’ by making it an individual variation and making it assimilable to the mainstream. She asserts instead that lesbianism is collective and subversive: ‘a political challenge to the patriarchy’.

The book originated as a doctoral

thesis in psychology and this, together with the author’s radical feminism, accounts for many of its distinctive features. There is a progressive movement in psychology at present that is discovering – or perhaps inventing afresh – the ideas of social constructionism and Celia Kitzinger appears to be very much a part of this. She draws very little on the ideas of social construction that have been developed by sociologists, gay historians and theorists of the lesbian and gay movement – the implications of which are discussed so interestingly by Sarah Franklin and Jackie Stacey in the last issue of *Feminist Review*. (Indeed, reading this book as one who was active in the National Deviancy Symposium in the sixties and who wrote on the social construction of homosexuality twenty years ago, I sometimes felt I had entered a time warp.) For Celia Kitzinger, social construction seems to mean three rather different things. One derives from the recognition that ‘the lesbian’ and ‘the homosexual’ have not existed in all periods and societies, so that homosexual activities have not always implied a

distinctive identity or an absence of heterosexual attachments. Although she alludes to this version, it is not one that informs her analysis. The second version is that lesbianism is a political construct: one of the early achievements of radical feminism, she says, was to redefine the word lesbian in terms of 'blow against the patriarchy' instead of in terms of 'sexual/emotional preference'. And the third version, related to Berger and Luckmann's 'social construction of reality', is a concern, as she puts it, 'to understand how people construct, negotiate and interpret their experience' rather than thinking that you can get at their 'real' histories, motives or life events.

The second version of social constructionism, the one around which the book is really organized, seems to me to be incompatible with both the first and the third. It implies that lesbians voluntaristically create a political identity, rather than what the first version would suggest, which is that we participate in and reproduce an identity that we and our oppressors have developed interactively through history. It also implies a rejection of the variety of ways of 'constructing, negotiating and interpreting' that women defined/defining ourselves as lesbian have adopted, in favour of a single – dare I say, correct – construction. This is borne out in Celia Kitzinger's research for this book.

It is very self-conscious about its methodology and very erudite on the psychological literature. The first chapter is a highly amusing account of the use of rhetoric in presenting research, exposing the ways in which claims to be scientific and objective, and also claims to be a participant with insider authenticity, are used in order to persuade the reader. The rejection of any hierarchy of knowledge reflected here wins an accolade from Dale Spender on the back cover. There is no reference here to the rival ideas on 'feminist methodology' that are very popular among younger

British sociologists, which firmly accept a hierarchy in which women's experience is a privileged form of knowledge. Nor is there any reference to the much more sophisticated debates, mainly in the United States, around feminism and epistemology and whether science is peculiarly masculine. Celia Kitzinger concludes that 'the question is not *whether* to use rhetoric in scientific writing, but *how* to use it, in whose interests'. This enables her to proceed to a highly quantitative mode of research and fairly conventional modes of argument.

The research itself uses a technique called the 'Q-sort', or operant subjectivity, involving a computer analysis of the way in which sets of cards with opinion statements on them are sorted by participants in the study. The idea is not to measure anything objective about the participants, but to get them to produce an account of themselves. This in turn is not done in order to characterize them as individuals but in order to study *types of account* that emerge as distinctive and coherent. Celia Kitzinger asked samples of self-identified lesbians to do Q-sorts of items relating to their lesbian identity and, separately, their lesbian politics. She also asked a sample of mainly non-lesbians to do one relating to attitudes to lesbianism, in order to locate types of homophobic prejudice.

However, what Celia Kitzinger does with these types of account, having elicited them, is not to explore how they arise or how they are used in the world, but to evaluate them politically. 'I illustrate which of the identity accounts conform to liberal humanistic ideology, and argue that they thereby function to privatize lesbianism, removing it from the political domain.' (p. 93) She does this by relating the accounts her participants produced with ones that can be found in the writings of the various strands of lesbian politics. So the question is:

did she really need to do all that research taking up her own and other people's time when she could have identified the same clusters of accounts, and subjected them to her political critique, in a library or a meeting where the various views have been publicly expressed and where those who hold them could answer back.

Perhaps the most serious problem with the book lies in the implications of its voluntarism and separatism, in the context of the mounting oppression of lesbians and gays at the present time. One of the most important accomplishments of the existing social constructionist analysis is that it transcends the simplistic debates about whether homosexuality is innate or acquired. This is important because those debates become translated at the political level into: should it be tolerated or suppressed? The existing analysis acknowledges that homosexuality as we know it today is historically specific, but it also recognizes that it is a social construct with immense social power.

There is room for historical debate about the extent to which the construct of 'the lesbian' is part of a project of social control, of an antifeminist backlash at the turn of this century, as current radical feminist thinking has suggested. Shelia Jeffreys (1985), for instance, points the finger at the early sexologists as major contributors to a conceptual development that stigmatized women who had previously been able to love other women without censure. Less schematically, Lillian Faderman (1981) also associates the change with a variety of strands of antifeminism. These analyses follow the same model as Michel Foucault's (1979) account of the historical construction of the male homosexual. He, too, places great importance on the development of medical and sexual definitions, which he sees as part of the emerging – though subjectless – social control of the body.

Just as Foucault's critics are beginning to suggest that homosexual men may not have been completely passive victims of control, but may have played a part in claiming their own identity, so it may be that further historical research will uncover ways in which women had a creative role in shaping 'the lesbian'. Whatever the outcome of these future debates, it is clear that for most of its short history the identity has been chiefly a form of stigma and only secondarily and sporadically a form of resistance.

Once the term 'lesbian' with all its negative connotations (including the connotation of 'unfit for normal sex') exists and is known, anyone who finds herself attracted to other women has to come to terms with it in one way or another. She cannot, for instance, express those feelings in the florid way that some nineteenth-century bourgeois women were able to do and still remain a happily married wife and mother. She either develops it into a major part of her lifestyle or she represses it, with an effort that usually involves self-hatred. The question as to why some women have the beginnings of those feelings and others seem not to be still unresolved, but becomes unimportant in the face of the social processes that they get caught up in. Celia Kitzinger's political construction sees lesbianism as invented by us rather than them and as having nothing to do with individual feelings.

The fact that the social construct 'the lesbian' originates in straight society also has implications for separatism. Whether we like it or not, the history of the idea of the lesbian has followed closely on that of the homosexual man. As Annabel Faraday (1981) has crisply pointed out, what men and women deviate from is a very asymmetrical heterosexuality which is oppressive to women. So it is possible to see lesbians as rejecting heterosexual oppression in a way that gay men cannot be. Neverthe-

less, in the current period it is the dominant definitions that construct lesbians and gay men and lump them together and the present vitriolic backlash makes no distinction. To claim that gay men are the patriarchy and we the challenge to the patriarchy is to skirmish on the sidelines of the main struggle of the day.

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Consuming Fiction

Terry Lovell

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It seems strange that the role of women as writers, readers and educators in the history of the novel has not before been subjected to systematic study. Fortunately Terry Lovell has undertaken this project in *Consuming Fiction*, thus filling a gaping hole in the sociology of literature.

The questions Lovell asks concern the historical place of the novel in the national culture, its relationship to capitalism, the ruling class and bourgeois ideology, and women's part in the production, consumption and transmission of the novel as 'cultural capital'. Apart from the latter, these questions are the same ones Ian Watt addressed in his classic study, *The Rise of the Novel*.

In a subtle critique of this book Lovell argues forcefully for a re-writing of the early history of the novel as *commodity fiction* (rather than as a retrospective construction of a 'literary tradition'), which includes the central part played by women as readers/consumers and writers/producers. Pivotal to this argument is a discussion of Gothic fiction, not only as a female genre but

also as a genre of transgression and fantasy. It was this literature of fantasy which posed problems for Watt, because of his fixation on formal realism as the 'voice' of the novel-as-bourgeois-form. *The Rise of the Novel* could not account for, and therefore ignored, Gothic fiction. Lovell concludes from this that the ideological needs of capitalism are not necessarily and straightforwardly served in cultural production, as is too easily assumed in functionalist readings of the novel in relation to capitalism.

Neither, however, are they necessarily resisted in women's fiction, Gothic or otherwise. Here Lovell takes issue with the recent vogue in feminist criticism to re-read women's writing, no matter how ostensibly conservative, as 'subversive'. The role of a bourgeois readership, whose notions of femininity were informed by class-interest, is left out of account in these contemporary re-readings. Lovell stresses ambivalence instead: Gothic fiction could 'neither be unambiguously subversive, nor unambiguously conciliatory' in relation to women's subordination. It had to challenge feminine conformity and contain such transgression at the same time.

The overall contention of *Consuming Fiction* is that 'the question of sex and gender must be placed at the