

## Sham menstruation, sex-strike theory and contemporary implications

*Talk given to RAG, Easter 1994*

### Camilla Power

Everyone here will be familiar with the outline of the sham menstruation/sex-strike theory. I'll draw out the basic principles relevant to the discussion.

The theory says that late archaic *Homo sapiens* females manipulated males to extract more energy from them by collective appropriation of a reproductive signal hitherto belonging to an individual.

The more females harnessed these signals by amplifying them and sharing them around, the more power they had. Power to manipulate males because they were amplifying *sexual signals* -- menstrual blood or body painting that mimicked menstrual blood as indicators of prospective fertility. These signals cued males to expect chances of fertile sex, and so kept males hanging around, available and attentive. More of their energy could be directed towards offspring.

In the initial evolution of the strategy, female coalitions used sex signals to pull more males into their groups -- possibly at the expense of other female coalitions. Because of this competitive dynamic, signalling would have got louder and more energy expensive. The more powerful and amplified the signals, the more they transmitted information to other female coalitions, the greater possibility of linking up, synchrony of signals and co-operation. The cultural take-off point was reached when everyone used sex signals to motivate male labour -- the full blown sex-strike strategy, instituting the sexual division of labour and blood taboos.

In the development of these cosmetic traditions, we see a movement from individual manipulation of menstrual (sex) signals to extract mating effort on an individual basis, towards collective appropriation of signals to extract more effort from males directed at a group of females.

That's the model. If we turn to today's issues, we have on the one hand questions of investment, child support, one-parent families and who pays for the babies; on the other, the transformation in the labour market with massive under-utilisation of male energies -- unemployment in full-waged trad. male industry -- and a growing sector of cheap, insecure, female part-time labour.

We, RAG, are developing this scientific theory of how females in the evolutionary past directed male labour and energy to their offspring. Obviously the same questions are pertinent today. The whole subject of the break-up of the family is in the aether; it dominates the media. Everyone from the Pope to back-to-basics Tory wives, to the demonstrators against the Child Support act has something to say -- though the silence from the feminists and the hard left is deafening.

Given the critical nature of the debate for the future of culture and the planet, I think it would be criminal on our part, as RAG, to sit quiet.

RAG has agreed we are not a political organisation, we're scientific. That means we can't base our arguments on any grounds of sectional interest. In the past, marxist discussion of class struggle has inevitably sounded political -- championing the cause of the international working class (and tending to exclude any who are not organised in the workplace). Let's try a thought experiment of transferring the scientific model of origins -- the origins of culture and morality -- to the current situation.

What corresponds today to the amplified network of sexual signals? I'm saying clearly it's the sex industry, where sex industry covers the whole gamut from

- the most abhorrent trade of human flesh in child brothels in Bangkok where sex tourism adds up to the greater part of the GNP;
- to the highest paid pop star or supermodel on the catwalk;
- to the mass production cosmetics industry geared to teenage girls dolling themselves up for Friday night;
- to housewives' slimming and keep fit clubs;
- to soft-porn mags on the top shelves in newsagents;
- to hard-core vicious child abuse videos;
- to half-naked women draped across car bonnets in ad campaigns;

Understood in those terms, the sex industry simply affects every person on the planet, east and west, post-industrial and third world.

I don't think anyone in RAG would consider it 'political' to assert that we really do have to mount a picket line against the sort of abuse that goes with sex tourism in Bangkok or in child sex videos. We are not relativists. Our theory says there really is such a thing as human morality which is universal. We argue for it on grounds of science.

So does our theory say that it's wrong or immoral for females to use sexual signals to extract time, money, energy whatever out of males.

**Clearly not.**

What matters is the relations of power involved in the signalling.

After all, the Palaeolithic cave art is ideologically dominated by female vulvas and sexual imagery. What distinguishes that from today's pornographic sex industry images?

Acc. to our theory it is fundamentally the matter of who is in control of the signals.

On purely scientific grounds, the theory leads us to propose the appropriation and control of these powerful signals by women themselves.

That's OK in the abstract, but concretely, which women? where and who? And then, a further question I'd like to address is how does this relate to the classic marxist positions on class?

Which women? Do you start -- as a traditional marxist might -- with women in the workplace organised through trade unions? Or do you start with housewives and mothers who are so often left out of marxist arguments.

Clearly, the answer is 'yes' in both cases, but the question still remains, where do those 'ordinary' working women stand in relation to the actual women whose bodies -- and labour -- provide the source of the powerful signals?

The sham menstruation/sex-strike strategy says that if the sex-strike or general manipulation of signals does not include those women themselves -- who are equivalent in terms of value to young menstrual females of maximum reproductive potency -- then any female collective strategy of action in solidarity cannot possibly get off the ground.

So the sex workers have to be included in any strategy. But what does included mean?

Do other women tell them to stop it? You're all out of a job now! Do we align ourselves on this one with Islamic fundamentalists -- no imagery of the human body?

Banning the signals is the equivalent of hiding the menstrual blood in the 'sham menstruation' model. The signals are valuable and powerful -- that is why patriarchy, pimps across the world, Sky Television, News International, wants to keep control of them.

### **So the issue is, who controls?**

I'm proposing there should be Dictatorship of Women over the sex industry, with workers' control by the women whose bodies actually produce the signals, those women being accountable to the wider world of women.

There is a basic reciprocity of interests here. Clearly, women of the sex industry would not be able to organise for control of their industry without the coalitionary support of women generally. Meanwhile, women everywhere -- their sexuality demeaned and devalued -- stand to gain from appropriating these signals.

I've argued that virtually every woman on the planet is affected by the power of sex industry signals. The more women that are directly implicated in the process of signalling -- whether as coalitionary allies or the actual women displaying the signals -- yes, the more women are linked into prostitution, then the more women are mobilising their power. Worker's control is ultimately control by all women. In this process, the sex industry transcends itself. It becomes classless, with all women obtaining equal share in the power of the signals. There would be no more distinctions between those women who were inside the sex industry and those who were outside. There would only be a moral distinction between women who joined the coalition -- call them Red Women -- and those who didn't -- call them Scabs. All moral distinctions become aligned with class distinctions, judged only from the viewpoint of class solidarity. Any other distinctions of prostitutes who sell their bodies against wives as guardians of 'morality' are bourgeois crap.

Our theory is crucially concerned with organisation of labour and direction of male energies towards offspring. So the central question in all this is one of ownership: who profits? who gains?

Going back to the model, to the extent sham menstruation becomes effective sex-strike and construction of taboo, ownership becomes public, communal. Women own themselves as members of kin groups in solidarity. They own themselves, and their offspring, their kin -- the products of their labour -- through the mark of Blood. Female periodic inviolability is symbolised by the menstrual, red-painted, flagged and decorated picket line of women's bodies as one body, their cosmetic signals synchronised across the species.

For me as a marxist and scientist, it's impossible not to be carried away by the power of the symbolism which identifies that ritually synchronised menstrual signal as nothing else but the Red Flag of the Communist International.

Ownership of the sex industry means international public ownership stamped by the Red Flag.

Can a nation state be the custodian of such ownership? Obviously not when the industry is instantaneously international, transmitting its imagery by satellite all over the globe at the speed of light. No nation state can control Rupert Murdoch now.

So where must ownership rest? with what institution governing it? Which institution is sufficiently international and has sufficient authority? RAG has argued that the only truly international community transcending sectional interest is the international scientific community. But how can science intervene in this arena?

What are the links we need to make? On the one hand, we have the science, the theory of sex signalling; on the other, concretely, the women workers in the sex industry. We as women need information about our own power. This is what science is. Because of their experience, workers of the sex industry must be the best equipped to understand and apply the science of sexual signalling. We need their specialised knowledge, the oldest profession as our scientific and technical elite. What do they need from science? Will they be interested in knowing that their skills, in the service of the collective, created human culture? Will they be more likely to hear the message of feminists of the Campaign against Pornography, or to listen to scientists inviting them to take real power?

### **How practically can we establish dictatorship of women, or dictatorship of science?**

The classic marxist argument is that workers establish their power through strike action, withdrawal of labour -- in this case, shutting down the signals. Can anyone argue for an effective sex-strike which does not centrally involve organising sex industry workers?

Someone might argue that the sex industry is actually peripheral, that all production and consumption would not grind to a halt merely because the Page 3 girl was blanked out; or Soho strippers walked off the stage; or Madonna was kidnapped by the Red Women's Commandos. True for our society perhaps, but less so for some Third World and Eastern European countries these days. The main point though is that, as in our Stone Age model, what is crucial is a) the power and amplitude of the signal, and b) the timing of the signal, in synchrony with other action.

If the signals which are the most potent at a species level are harnessed to the wider cause of planetary insurrection, we stand some chance of achieving a new Human Revolution. If the signals are left under the control of capitalism and patriarchy, what could we achieve? What information would women be receiving about their power?

Someone else might say, well suppose you could take control of the sex industry, so what? Baldly, Karl Marx's position is that all labour is prostitution anyway -- "prostitution is only a specific form of the universal prostitution of the worker". So questioning the relations of power in prostitution is fundamentally questioning the relations of class society. The sex-strike is both a subset of -- and the banner of -- the Human Revolution as a whole. But if sex-strike is the banner -- actually the Red Flag -- it can't be just a negative. It means coming out of the closet, out of the bedroom, onto the streets for Carnival. It means public release of all the libido and energies that are normally privatised. Rituals of licence, which we know are as old and as human as the sham menstruation strategy itself. Carnival -- that's our answer to prostitution.

Capitalism is the trade in human flesh. The more Capitalism dominates the global economy, the more the successful whore becomes the ikon of the society -- look at Russia today. Extraction of male energy and labour becomes increasingly a trade for short-term mating effort. Conscious planning, investment in future generations inevitably declines.

The seizure of control in the sex industry signals the end, the absolute NO to that trade in human flesh, returning us to the women's No of the Ice Age.

When every woman of whatever age and background can feel that the potency of female sexual signalling is her own potency -- when every woman has her share of 'beauty magic' -- then we have restored a truly human sexual morality.