

## 24.201: Hist Political Economy

### Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women"

"The literature on women-both feminist and anti-feminist is a long rumination on the question of the nature and genesis of women's oppression and social subordination." (157)

"More importantly, the analysis of the causes of women's oppression forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy." (157)

"I call that part of social life the "sex/gender system," for lack of a more elegant term. As a preliminary definition, a "sex/gender system" is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied." (159)

"The purpose of this essay is to arrive at a more fully developed definition of the sex/gender system, by way of a somewhat idiosyncratic and exegetical reading of Levi-Strauss and Freud." (159)

#### Method questions:

1. How do we adjudicate the adequacy of Rubin's analysis?
  - What is Rubin theorizing *about*? What is the object of the theory?
  - What is the question Rubin is trying to answer? What are its presuppositions?
  - How, if at all, does the experience (or self-understanding) of women, or of the other participants in the system, matter to the adequacy of Rubin's analysis? If not, why not?
  - What constrains her analysis? What are her data? What background principles does she rely on? Are there any "laws" or "generalizations" in the analysis? What are they?
  - Is it essential to Rubin's project that she explain the origin of gender (without presupposing gender)? Would it be sufficient to explain the reproduction of gender, i.e., how gender is sustained?
2. What sort of explanation is Rubin offering?
  - Is it a causal explanation?
  - Is it a rationalizing explanation?
  - Is it a structural explanation (what would that mean?)?
3. How, if at all, do contextual (v. constitutive) values play a role in Rubin's analysis?

#### Content Questions:

1. What does Rubin mean by a "sex/gender system"? (What is her "first" definition (159), and how is this refined?) How does she distinguish a sex/gender system from patriarchy?
2. According to Rubin, what is wrong with/missing from the attempts by Marx and Engels (and other Marxists) to theorize sex oppression? (163) What is the missing "historical element"? (164)
3. Rubin states, "The "exchange of women" is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems rather than biology." (175) Rubin proposes that the "exchange of women" is an important key to understanding women's oppression.
  - (a) What is the "exchange of women"?
  - (b) Does the exchange of women effectively shift the source of women's oppression to social systems rather than biology? (Why or why not?)
  - (c) What weakness does she find in Levi-Strauss's analysis? (176-77) What taboo replaces the incest taboo?
4. Rubin states that "individuals are engendered in order that marriage be guaranteed." (180)
  - (a) What argument supports this view?
  - (b) How, according to Rubin, is LGBT oppression linked to the oppression of women?

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5. Consider:

In all of the above examples, the rules of gender division and obligatory heterosexuality are present even in their transformations. These two rules apply equally to the constraint of both male and female behavior and personality. Kinship systems dictate some sculpting of the sexuality of both sexes. But it can be deduced from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that more constraint is applied to females than to males. If women are exchanged, in whatever sense we take the term, marital debts are reckoned in female flesh. A woman must become the sexual partner of some man to whom she is owed as return on a previous marriage. If a girl is promised in infancy, her refusal to participate as an adult would disrupt the flow of debts and promises. It would be in the interests of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response. (182)

What is the relation between gender division, obligatory heterosexuality, female passivity and kinship structures in this quote?

6. Rubin argues that

The "exchange of women" is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology. Moreover, it suggests that we look for the ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women rather than the traffic in merchandise." (175)

According to Rubin, how does the traffic in women explain "the ultimate locus of" women's oppression? What are the strengths and weaknesses of her view?

7. Why does Rubin turn to Freud/Lacan rather than simply adopt an analysis in terms of exchange/traffic? What is left out of the sociology in answering the question she poses? More specifically, what is the role of psychoanalysis in the kinship story? (See, e.g., 183ff)

8. How is Lacan's theory preferable to Freud's?

9. Consider:

The presence or absence of the phallus carries the differences between two sexual statuses, "man" and "woman"... Since these are not equal, the phallus also carries a meaning of the dominance of men over women... Moreover, as long as men have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, the phallus also carries the meaning of the difference between "exchanger" and "exchanged," gift and giver. (191)

Also:

The phallus is more than a feature which distinguishes the sexes: it is the embodiment of the male, status, to which men accede, and in which certain rights inhere—among them, the right to a woman. It is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon men. The tracks which it leaves include gender identity, the division of the sexes. But it leaves more than this. It leaves "penis envy," which acquires a rich meaning of the disquietude of women in a phallic culture. (192)

What is explaining what, on this view? Is this Rubin's view?

10. Is this Rubin's final analysis? How does it work? What can we do to take down the existing sex/gender system and replace it with something else?

The precision of the fit between Freud and Levi-Strauss is striking. Kinship systems require a division of the sexes, The Oedipal phase divides the sexes. Kinship systems include sets of rules

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governing sexuality. The Oedipal crisis is the assimilation of these rules and taboos. Compulsory heterosexuality is the product of kinship. The Oedipal phase constitutes heterosexual desire. Kinship rests on a radical difference between the rights of men and women. The Oedipal complex confers male rights upon the boy, and forces the girl to accommodate herself to her lesser rights. (198)

If my reading of Freud and Levi-Strauss is accurate, it suggests that the feminist movement must attempt to resolve the Oedipal crisis of culture by reorganizing the domain of sex and gender in such a way that each individual's Oedipal experience would be less destructive. The dimensions of such a task are difficult to imagine... (198)

11. Why does Rubin include the section on the political economy of sex (pp. 204ff)? What does it add to her analysis?

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