

COMMODOITIES
AMONG
THEM
SELVES

LUCE
IRIGARAY

LES PÉTROLEUSES WERE THE SEX WORKERS, WITCHES, AND LADY-PROLES OF
THE PARIS COMMUNE WHOSE ‘LOVE OF RIOT’ BURNT PARIS TO THE GROUND.

holla: petroleusepress.tumblr.com || petroleusepress@gmail.com

But what if these “commodities” refused to go to “market”? What if they maintained “another” kind of commerce, among themselves?

Exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end...Without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman...Without sequence or number. Without standard or yardstick. *Red blood* and *sham* would no longer be differentiated by deceptive envelopes concealing their worth. Use and exchange would be indistinguishable. The greatest value would be at the same time the least kept in reserve. Nature’s resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions: enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession. As for all the strategies and savings, the appropriations tantamount to theft and rape, the laborious accumulation of capital, how ironic all that would be.

Utopia? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning-while the *necessity of keeping incest in the realm of pure pretense* has stood in the way of a certain economy of abundance.

This text was originally published as “Des marchandises entre elles,” in *La quinzaine littéraire*, no. 215 (August 1975). English translation: “Commodities on Their Own,” trans. Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*. ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York, 1981), pp. 107-110.

It was subsequently republished in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, (New York, 1985), pp. 192-197.

vising her parents that “if they set store by the therapeutic procedure it should be continued by a woman doctor” (p. 164).

Not a word has been said here about *feminine* homosexuality. Neither the girl’s nor Freud’s. Indeed, the “patient” seemed completely indifferent to the treatment process, although her “intellectual participation” was considerable. *Perhaps the only transference was Freud’s?* A negative transference, as they say. Or denegational. For how could he possibly have identified himself with a “lady” ... who moreover was “‘of bad repute’ sexually,” a “cocotte,” someone who “lived simply by giving her bodily favours” (p. 161)? How could his “superego” have permitted him to be “quite simply” a woman? Still, that would have been the only way to avoid blocking his “patient’s” transference.

So female homosexuality has eluded psychoanalysis. Which is not to say that Freud’s description is simply incorrect. The dominant sociocultural economy leaves female homosexuals only a choice between a sort of *animality* that Freud seems to overlook and *the imitation of male models*. In this economy any interplay of desire among women’s bodies, women’s organs, women’s language is inconceivable.

And yet female homosexuality does exist. But it is recognized only to the extent that it is *prostituted to man’s fantasies*. Commodities can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their “guardians.” It is out of the question for them to go to “market” on their own, enjoy their own worth among themselves, speak to each other, desire each other, free from the control of seller-buyer-consumer subjects. And the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals.

all the same by the fact that “her lady’s slender figure, severe beauty and downright manner reminded her of the brother who was a little older than herself” (p. 156).

How can we account for this “perversion” of the sexual function assigned to a “normal” woman? Our psychoanalyst’s interpretation encounters some difficulty here. The phenomenon of female homosexuality appears so foreign to his “theory,” to his (cultural) imaginary, that it cannot help but be “neglected by psychoanalytic research” (p. 147).

Thus to avoid a serious challenge to his new science, he has to refer this awkward problem back to an anatomo-physiological cause: “of course the constitutional factor is undoubtedly of decisive importance.” And Freud is on the lookout for anatomical indications that would account for the homosexuality—the *masculine* homosexuality—of his “patient.” “Certainly there was no obvious deviation from the feminine physical type,” she was “beautiful and well-made,” and presented no “menstrual disturbance,” but she had, “it is true, her father’s tall figure, and her facial features were sharp rather than soft and girlish, traits which might be regarded as indicating a physical masculinity,” and in addition “some of her intellectual attributes also could be connected with masculinity” (p. 154). But... “the psycho-analyst customarily forgoes a thorough physical examination of his patients in certain cases” (p. 154).

If he had not refrained from looking, what might Freud have discovered as anatomical proof of the homosexuality, the *masculine* homosexuality, of his “patient”? What would his desire, his inadmissible desire, for *disguises* have led him to “see”? To cover up all those fantasies with a still anatomo-physiological objectivity, he merely mentions “probably hermaphroditic ovaries” (p. 172). And finally he dismisses the girl, ad-

The exchanges upon which patriarchal societies are based take place exclusively among men. Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another; if it were otherwise, we are told, the social order would fall back upon incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce. Thus the labor force and its products, including those of mother earth, are the object of transactions among men and men alone. This means that the *very possibility of a sociocultural order requires homosexuality* as its organizing principle. Heterosexuality is nothing but the assignment of economic roles: there are producer subjects and agents of exchange (male) on the one hand productive earth and commodities (female) on the other.

Culture, at least in its patriarchal form, thus effectively prohibits any return to *red blood*, including that of the sexual arena. *In consequence, the ruling power is pretense, or sham, which still fails to recognize its own endogamies.* For in this culture the only sex, the only sexes, are those needed to keep relationships among men running smoothly.

Why is masculine homosexuality considered exceptional, then, when in fact the economy as a whole is based upon it? Why are homosexuals ostracized, when society postulates homosexuality? Unless it is because the “*incest* involved in homosexuality has to remain in the realm of pretense.

Consider the exemplary case of *father-son relationships*, which guarantee the transmission of patriarchal power and its laws, its discourse, its social structures. These relations, which are in effect everywhere, cannot be eradicated through the abolition of the family or of monogamous reproduction, nor can they openly display the pederastic love in which they are grounded. They cannot be put into practice at all, ex

cept in language, without provoking a general crisis, without bringing one sort of symbolic system to an end.

The “other” homosexual relations, masculine ones, are just as subversive, so they too are forbidden. *Because they openly interpret the law according to which society operates*, they threaten in fact to shift the horizon of that law. Besides, they challenge the nature, status, and “exogamic” necessity of the product of exchange. By short-circuiting the mechanisms of commerce, might they also expose what is really at stake? Furthermore, they might lower the sublime value of the standard, the yard stick. Once the penis itself becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*. Sexual pleasure, we are told, is best left to those creatures who are ill-suited for the seriousness of symbolic rules, namely, women.

Exchanges and relationships, always among men, would thus be *both required and forbidden by law*. There is a price to pay for being the agents of exchange: male subjects have to give up the possibility of serving as commodities themselves.

Thus all economic organization is homosexual. That of desire as well, even the desire for women. Woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself.

Considering that the peculiar status of what is called heterosexuality has managed, and is still managing, to escape notice, *how can relationships among women be accounted for in this system of exchange?* Except by the assertion that as soon as she desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (expresses herself, to herself), a woman is a man. As soon as

she has any relationship with another woman, she is homosexual, and therefore masculine.

Freud makes this clear in his analyses of female homosexuality.¹

A woman chooses homosexuality only by virtue of a “masculinity complex” (p. 169). Whether this complex is a “direct and unchanged continuation of an infantile fixation” (p. 168) or a regression toward an earlier “masculinity complex,” *it is only as a man that the female homosexual can desire a woman who reminds her of a man*. That is why women in homosexual relationships can play the roles of mother and child or husband and wife, without distinction.

The mother stands for phallic power; the child is always a little boy; the husband is a father-man. And the woman? She “doesn’t exist.” She adopts the disguise that she is told to put on. She acts out the role that is imposed on her. The only thing really required of her is that she *keep intact the circulation of pretense by enveloping herself in femininity*. Hence the fault, the infraction, the misconduct, and the challenge that female homosexuality entails. The problem can be minimized if female homosexuality is regarded merely as an imitation of male behavior.

So, “in her behaviour towards her love-object,” the female homosexual, Freud’s at any rate, “throughout assumed the masculine part” (p. 154); not only did she choose a “feminine love-object,” but she also “developed a masculine attitude to wards that object” (p. 154). She “changed into a man and took her [phallic] mother in place of her father as the object of her love” (p. 158), but her fixation on “the lady” was explained

¹ See Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953-1974), 18:147-171.