

From radical feminism to lesbian chic

By Janine Booth

OVER THE last decade, much has changed in the political culture of the lesbian 'community'. Ten years ago, the dominant voices were those of 'radical feminists'.

'Radical feminism' denounced heterosexual and bisexual women as collaborators with the enemy. Coming out as a lesbian was the only course to follow for a genuine feminist. But even being a lesbian was not enough. You could not fancy a woman because you would be treating her as a sex object. Penetration was mock heterosexuality; sadomasochism was completely beyond the pale. Socialist women could not be real feminists as we were members of political organisations with men, and therefore brainwashed by them. If you were not prepared to give up shagging men, you had no politics. What was considered 'politics' actually had very little to do with political struggle, and much more to do with policing women's thoughts and behaviour.

The political domination of the radical lesbian feminists was often difficult to

challenge, as its political method was based on guilt. They denied women the right to an opinion on a subject unless you were prepared to bare your soul at length about your own personal experience of it. But enough people did challenge it — or maybe it died under the weight of its own unpleasant, alienating tedium. Whichever, the radical feminist influence has pretty much died, and a generation of lesbian and bisexual women breathed a huge sigh of relief. Girls could now have fun — laugh, enjoy ourselves, enjoy sex (with lasses, and even with lads).

Of course, this change is not unique to lesbians. A whole posse of straight women are currently writing about their rejection of the 'feminist' anti-sex moralism, and insisting that feminism to them entails the right of women to an assertive, free sexuality.

The problem is that in rightly rejecting the radical feminist thought police, many lesbians and bisexual women have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, giving up on politics altogether. Dyke magazine Shebang is now like a homo Just Seventeen. Perhaps one superficially 'serious' article in

each issue, alongside 'just for fun' lifestyle quizzes, and awful snippets about various 'foxatronic', 'babelicious', 'shagtastic' girls. The braincell count is very low.

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The mainstream media has latched onto 'lesbian chic'. Last month, Kilroy hosted a discussion on 'lipstick lesbians'. His audience discussed dress codes, make-up, clubbing, frocks and hair length. Kilroy alternated between looking decidedly awkward and defensively reminding viewers of his unwavering heterosexuality.

Most soap operas now have their lesbian character (Coronation Street, as ever, being the dishonourable exception). My personal favourites are EastEnders Della and Binnie, but most dykes seem to be Beth Jordache devotees. As Brookie watchers will recall, Beth came out hot on the heels of an abusive father and a rapist boyfriend. That pissed me off — I could see a thousand parents deciding that their dyke daughter must have had a bad experience with a man, and that explains it all. Beth actress Anna Friel is busy providing journalists with endless column inches to report her real-life boyfriend.

Perhaps I am being too cynical. There is quite a lot to be positive about. The Lesbian Avengers have brought direct action to lesbian campaigning. Health issues for women who have sex with women are being brought onto the political agenda. The theme of Pride '95 is Visibly Lesbian. There was a vocal fightback over Hackney Council's appalling treatment of lesbian head teacher Jane Brown (an episode which embarrassed the Council by showing that low-level tabloid hysteria is not always representative of 'public opinion').

So what will happen next? Perhaps the action will fizzle out. Perhaps the labour movement will remain oblivious to it all. We should work against either of these happening, and instead for a renewed movement for lesbian and bisexual women's liberation, with the full and active support of socialists.

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