

Response to Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex"

Gayle Rubin discusses in her paper the historical and societal origins of women's oppression and subordination in the world. By discovering the cause of this oppression Rubin hopes to find a way to change the system which allows this repression; if in fact a sexually equal society is possible. Rubin refers to several previous theorists including Marx, Engels, Lévi-Strauss, and Freud.

According to John Markey, "Social phenomena are considered as including all behavior which influences or is influenced by organisms sufficiently alive to respond to one another." A behavior commonly found on North American college campuses involves the relationship between two young organisms: dating. Dating or the possibility of dating greatly influences the behavior of both sexes and all sexual orientations. While I do not regard the "dating process" to be demeaning to women, many points from Rubin's work have relevance to the history and social importance of courting.

Rubin begins her article with an evaluation of Marx and his view of capitalism. Marx's work cannot be used to describe the oppression of women because although it is true housework is not valued in capitalism women are oppressed in primitive cultures, not only modern ones. Additionally in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx suggests that in socialism there will not be a differentiation in labor between sexes because of technology. Marx does offer the presence of "a historical and moral element" (Rubin, 164) in discussing what is necessary for the reproduction of labor. Marx admits that the worker

has needs beyond purely material and economic possessions. Rubin expands on this phrase in saying that within this phrase Marx has captured “the entire domain of sex, sexuality, and sex oppression.”(164)

Dating can be found under this “historical and moral element.” There is a long tradition of courtship in American society. Present college students feel the need to belong in a dating relationship from the past activities of our parents and the exploits of characters/people in the media. In the society of the United States, it is the norm for a couple to meet, get to know each other through dating and then either go their separate ways or travel together down the wedding aisle. Dating is such a predominant action because it is tradition, especially at the age in which people attend college. Dating is a norm for our society but is not universal. Many cultures use betrothal or matchmakers to produce a marriage.

Rubin states that only by analyzing the “historical and moral element” can the establishment of sex oppression in society be described. Engels introduces an idea similar to Marx’s phrase in the term of sex/gender system. The sex/gender system suggests that every culture has its own norms involving sexuality and society. A form of sex/gender system is the kinship systems. Rubin analyzes the kinship system thoroughly with the assistance of Lévi-Strauss’ work.

Lévi-Strauss suggests that marriage in primitive cultures was merely a form of gift exchange with the result of kinship. This necessity for the “exchange of women” to form bonds with other men causes the prohibition of incest and the origins of culture. Rubin uses this argument to state that the subordination of women results from the sex as a whole being seen as a material good.

The kinship system is at work in the college dating scene as well. By having a relationship with someone you create a new social outlet and thus new friends. The “incest taboo” can also be taken account for dating. If a man dated his sister, he would not have the opportunity to meet new people. However in our culture we are aware of the biological problems with reproduction between close relatives which is probably the primary purpose for the taboo. Dating in college would not be the base of “culture” but relationships are definitely a source of formation of groups. Groups of friends form around couples that bring two different groups together. While Rubin finds this kinship system to possibly be the reason for oppression of women, the kinship formed through dating is not based on the subordination of women. In the case of dating kinship is formed on all sides, whether both sides of a heterosexual couple or homosexual couple.

Lévi-Strauss also argues that the gender division of system is not a result of biological processes but a social enforcement of heterosexual marriage. He suggests that women are socialized to act feminine while men must act masculine. Therefore the only complete union is a relationship between a man and a woman. As explained by Lévi-Strauss “the sexual division of labor is nothing else than a device to institute a reciprocal state of dependency between sexes.” (178)

“The sexual division of labor” does not hold true for the dating experience in college. While there are defined gender roles such as the man picking up the woman for the date and the man paying for the date these norms are not absolute. In modern society there is more equality in a relationship between a man and a woman. Although a man generally drives the woman, in modern society a woman could still drive herself to the restaurant. The woman is not dependent on the man just the same there is not the

dependence of a man on a woman. It is more accepted now for men to cook and clean for themselves. While there is not dependence between the sexes, there still is dependence between human beings. Dating does offer a level of intimacy which causes the two people in the relationship to depend on each other, but intimacy can also be achieved through other means not just a relationship between a man and a woman. Intimacy can come from close friendships not just dating.

Rubin next brings in the work of Freud and his idea of “penis envy”. This theory suggests the subordination of women results from the realization of the lack of phallus. “Penis envy” has little relevance in the dating scene today. While it is possibly the norm that the woman acts passively in sexual actions and relationships, the case is not particularly true in modern times. Many times the woman is the aggressor and makes the first move. Women do not only reciprocate the man’s feelings, but also act on feelings of their own.

Gayle Rubin unites the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and Freud to conclude that the goal should be “the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles.” (205) She also calls for political action to change the sex/gender system and that the only way to truly study the role of women in society is to study everything about society such as the economy, politics and possibly dating. While dating does incorporate the idea of kinship, in modern society there is no “sexual division of labor” or “penis envy”. As a member of the oppressed in society, I feel the sex/genders system is already in the process of changing, not only from the experience of women but the growing acceptance of gay unions.

## Works Cited

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