

Amia Srinivasan, The Right to Sex: Preface (pp. xi-xii)

Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view. It is a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? It answers: we do not know; let us try and see.

Feminism begins with a woman's recognition that she is a member of a sex class: that is, a member of a class of people assigned to an inferior social status on the basis of something called 'sex' — a thing that is said to be natural, pre-political, an objective material ground on which the world of human culture is built.

We inspect this supposedly natural thing, 'sex', only to find that it is already laden with meaning. At birth, bodies are sorted as 'male' or 'female', though many bodies must be mutilated to fit one category or the other, and many bodies will later protest against the decision that was made. This originary division determines what social purpose a body will be assigned. Some of these bodies are

for creating new bodies, for washing and clothing and feeding other bodies (out of love, never duty), for making other bodies feel good and whole and in control, for making other bodies feel free. Sex is, then, a cultural thing posing as a natural one. Sex, which feminists have taught us to distinguish from gender, is itself already gender in disguise.¹

There is another sense of the word 'sex': sex as a thing we do with our sexed bodies. Some bodies are for other bodies to have sex with. Some bodies are for the pleasure, the possession, the consumption, the worshipping, the servicing, the validating of other bodies. 'Sex' in this second sense is also said to be a natural thing, a thing that exists outside politics. Feminism shows that this too is a fiction, and a fiction that serves certain interests. Sex, which we think of as the most private of acts, is in reality a public thing. The roles we play, the emotions we feel, who gives, who takes, who demands, who serves, who wants, who is wanted, who benefits, who suffers: the rules for all this were set long before we entered the world.

A famous philosopher once said to me that he objected to feminist critiques of sex because it was only during sex that he felt truly outside politics, that he felt truly free. I asked him what his wife would say to that. (I couldn't ask her myself; she hadn't been invited to the dinner.) This is not to say that sex cannot be free. Feminists have long dreamed of sexual freedom. What they refuse to accept is its simulacrum: sex that is said to be free, not because it is equal, but because it is ubiquitous. In this world, sexual freedom is not a given but something to be achieved, and it is always incomplete.