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“Anti-Sex” and the Real Sexual Politics of the Right

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the opposition to reactionary politics many seem to believe, and in fact can contribute to the cultural defense of compulsory sexuality: if sex is a “good” then it can follow that people who reject sex for themselves are broken and in need of fixing, and in fact many asexual and sex repulsed people have felt themselves alienated from “sex positivity” movements for this very reason.

What I believe people are trying to articulate when they describe themselves as “pro-sex” could be, and should be, better articulated as pro-autonomy and pro-consent, and doing so would make opposition to right wing sexual politics clear. It can also demonstrate solidarity to asexual and sex repulsed comrades, as it has the capacity to analyze and disrupt the system of compulsory sexuality under which we *all* suffer. We are not violated by “anti-sex” politics, but by anti-consent and anti-autonomy politics, under which our sexualities are considered the private property of patriarchs to control and extract value from. This is why during the height of #MeToo reactionaries were themselves decrying what they called rampant “anti-sex,” because the centering of consent and autonomy is, in fact, the true opposition to their sexual politics, and of this they are well aware. Sex is not in need of our defense, but bodily autonomy and consent always are, and it is from that standpoint that can allow us to meaningfully fight reactionary sexual politics.

So common is the conceptualization of reactionaries as having “anti-sex” politics that it is hardly remarked upon. They hate sex workers, they hate it when women and other marginalized genders have a lot of sex, queer sex, or extramarital sex, they want to keep children from any form of sexual education, etc. What do these all have in common? Sex! So it really must be that the right-wing is anti-sex.

It is an easy conclusion, too easy, and so reductive as to render itself useless as a framework for political analysis. Reactionaries are not, nor have they ever been, anti-sex. Instead, what they really believe in is the politics of compulsory sexuality and patriarchal sexual control. Not only is reducing right wing ideology to being simply “anti-sex” inaccurate, it also positions those in opposition to reactionary politics as necessarily “pro-sex.” This frames sex as an inherent political “good” to be defended, when in reality what is in need of defending is bodily autonomy and consent.

Anti-Sex?

As a queer woman who grew up among right-wing family and community, hearing them described as “anti-sex” is so absurd as to be almost laughable. Nothing as straightforward as simple sex negativity was taught to me. Instead, I had my sexual future explicitly described to me as an unquestionable fact from as early as I can remember, was brought to purity balls to ritualistically acknowledge my father’s ownership of my sexuality, was told what sexual practices would be expected of me, and that I would one day have a husband and a duty to satisfy his sexual desires.

The belief system at play in what is commonly referred to as “purity culture” cannot be honestly described as anti-sex, but instead as a belief system of sexual control, specifically over women for the satisfaction and power of men. In this belief system, men have natural and generally uncontrollable sexual urges and

“good” women will keep themselves “pure” (have their sexuality controlled by their father) until they are gifted to those men for the purpose of fulfilling their sexual desires. A singular “pure” woman, through the property relation of marriage, has a “duty” to fulfill her husbands sexual desires so that way those urges don’t “make” him have sex outside of the marriage contract, thus keeping him, supposedly, closer to God. Sex is seen as a holy act, necessary to the reproduction of the faith (“be fruitful and multiply”), as long as it happens within these prescribed (patriarchal) parameters. In this dynamic it does not matter what the woman wants, as sexual availability to her husband is about duty rather than desire, and the culture in general denies even the possibility of her sexual pleasure. It is a rape culture.

This is an articulation of how Christian reactionaries relate to sex and sexuality, but the general dynamics at play are demonstrated by non-Christian reactionaries as well. They may substitute in slightly different language as suits their religious (or lack thereof) framework, and this is because the driving force behind their logic is patriarchal, rather than spiritual, in nature. Cis men are framed as the rightful owners of the sexualities of marginalized genders and entitled to receive sexual gratification from them. Sex that satisfies these terms is seen as “good” and “natural” and sex that does not is “bad,” “unnatural,” and in need of patriarchal suppression and control.

When reactionaries work to demonize and destroy sexualities and sexual practices that do not conform to patriarchal expectations it is not because they hate sex, but because they hate sex that happens outside of their control and does not conform to their rigid gender essentialism. When they direct their hate and disgust towards sex workers, it is not because they have sex or otherwise make money from sexuality, but because they enact their sexuality on their own terms, act in their own autonomy, outside of patriarchal prescriptions. Similarly, when reactionaries express their hatred and disgust for women and other marginalized genders when

they have a lot of sex/queer sex/sex outside of the marriage contract it is not because they are “anti-sex” but anti-sexual autonomy because it does not serve to affirm patriarchal power and control. This is why they have similar ire for women and marginalized genders who are asexual, abstain from sex for other reasons, or otherwise deny consent to sex to cis men who demand it from them. When they cry out against basic sex education for children it is not because they think sex is an inherently tainted subject, but because they see their property relation over children as absolute and because they know that keeping children in total ignorance about sex makes it far easier to enact sexual control over them.

Pro-Sex?

Articulating the right-wing as “anti-sex” is reductive and inaccurate, yes, but it also does a disservice to our own politics in ways not commonly understood. Importantly, the way it necessitates framing our own position as “pro-sex.” While on first glance this may seem relatively harmless, but it is my argument that framing our position in this way serves to alienate many of our comrades in the struggle towards sexual autonomy and makes our opposition to reactionary politics weaker (because, as we have explored, they are not even “anti-sex” themselves).

Sex, divorced from context, is neutral. It is not inherently good, nor is it inherently bad, but rather gains its ethical meaning from the context that it occurs in. “Pro-sex,” framing sex as an inherent good, is insufficient to counter reactionary sexual politics, as they also largely see sex as a “good” as long as it occurs in the “correct” contexts (under patriarchal control). Additionally, choosing this rhetoric can actually place us in opposition to our comrades, many of whom are asexual or sex repulsed and are among the primary victims of patriarchal compulsory sexuality. Framing our position “pro-sex” and thus articulating sex as an inherent good is not