

Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty, and Revolution. **- book reviews**

Beth Firestein

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Paula C. Rust has written a compelling, stimulating book that combines empirical research and sociohistorical inquiry to produce a coherent, plausible account of why bisexuality appears to function as such a divisive issue for the lesbian community. Rust is a sociologist whose program of research was focused initially on lesbian cultures and communities. As her personal and professional experiences within that community evolved, so did her emerging interest in bisexuality and the diverse attitudes and relationships between lesbian and bisexual women.

Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty, and Revolution reflects the debate over bisexuality in the lesbian community--a debate that appears to be intensifying. Rust explains why bisexuality has become a focus of attention within the lesbian community, by asking questions such as *What are the issues raised by bisexuality, and why are these issues of concern to lesbians and What does the lesbian debate over bisexuality reveal about the political and cultural ideology of lesbianism and the structure of the lesbian movement?* (p. 2). In addition, she offers data concerning the ways lesbians and bisexual women perceive bisexuality and how each group differs in their perceptions of lesbian and bisexual women.

Rust writes from the perspective of a "white, able-bodied, lesbian-identified feminist sociologist" (p. 4), a position that emphasizes the meaning of bisexuality for the lesbian community. Herein lies both the strength of her analysis and the limitations imposed by this perspective

The lesbian perspective on bisexuality and its role in the lesbian community has not been the subject of empirical research despite the recurrent appearance of this controversy in the lesbian press over the past 20-30 years. Rust is the first social scientist to give this topic the attention it deserves. A sound analysis of bisexuality's "challenge" to lesbian politics has the power to illuminate both the history and evolution

of the lesbian community as well, as elements of the bisexual experience, particularly bisexual women's experiences within that community.

Bisexual women have frequently asserted that their experience of political affiliation and personal relating within the lesbian community has troubled them. Bisexual women allege that they have often been the objects of derision and exclusion by lesbians, who have sometimes viewed them as "traitors" or unwanted intruders into the lesbian community (Hutchins & Ka'ahumanu, 1991; Weise, 1992). Rust's research is focused specifically on lesbians' attitudes toward bisexuality and bisexual women, and she finds considerable empirical validation for the negative attitudes held by lesbians (and some bisexual women) about bisexuals, attitudes consistent with bisexual women's self-reported experiences.

Rust's research is characterized by conceptual sophistication and methodological rigor. Furthermore, she writes in a manner that makes her work accessible to a broad readership. She puts: scientific inquiry and methodology within the grasp of any college student with a basic knowledge of the scientific method, without sacrificing discussion of complex elements of the methodology. Although other readers may find these simplified explanations unnecessary or tedious, they set a valuable precedent for how to convey scientific material to a less academic readership.

Rust's study consisted of 332 lesbian-identified women and 45 bisexual-identified women who responded to a survey consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. A woman's membership in the "lesbian" or "bisexual" sample was based on self-identification. The open-ended question most central to the study was What is your opinion of bisexuality (p. 51). Closed-ended questions dealt with a variety of issues and beliefs, such as whether bisexuals are really in transition to a lesbian identity, are less personally and politically trustworthy than lesbians, and are more likely to pass as heterosexual than are lesbians. Rust obtained both bisexual women's and lesbians' responses and then analyzed their responses independently and in comparison to the other group's responses. Throughout the book, the author weaves individual participants' comments into the text to highlight her findings and illustrate her theoretical assertions.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first chapter establishes the context of the study as the debate over bisexuality within "The Lesbian Community" (p. 7). Here Rust distinguishes between "The Lesbian Community" and "The Lesbian Press"--the media arm of this community. Reviewing articles on bisexuality from four gay and

lesbian-oriented publications claiming national readerships, Rust exposes the range of opinions and the differing levels of attention directed to bisexuality in the 1980s and early 1990s. She notes the wide range of opinions about bisexuality expressed in the lesbian press and asks which, if any of these sentiments reflect the communities these periodicals claim to represent.

The second chapter provides an understanding of the role the social sciences have played in our understandings of sexuality in general and sexual orientation in particular. Rust outlines "the great debate" (p. 27) between essentialism and social constructionism and introduces bisexuality and its role in dismantling "the dichotomous conflict model of sexuality" (p. 28). In the third chapter, Rust introduces the study.

Chapters 4 through 8 comprise the heart of this book, including a summary of Rust's research findings and her major theoretical arguments. Rust finds that lesbians hold divided opinions on almost every aspect of bisexuality: whether bisexuality exists, whether it should be defined in terms of behavior or feelings, and the nature of bisexual identity. In exploring what bisexuals are like, Rust describes four categories of responses: unflattering images, positive images, existentially invalidating images, and political images. Rust states that "lesbians have a variety of images of bisexual women, both positive and negative, but negative images outnumber and are far more widespread than positive images" (p. 93).

Key to Rust's interpretation of the differences in lesbians' images of bisexuality was the finding that lesbians who have felt some sexual attraction toward men or who have experienced a period of bisexual identification since coming out as lesbian were more likely to believe that bisexuality exists and to be open to associating with bisexual women personally and politically than women who never experienced such attractions. Interestingly, a period of bisexual identification before coming out as lesbian or a history of heterosexual relationships was not sufficient to ensure feelings of empathy toward bisexual women.

Within Rust's sample, four of five bisexual women and two of five lesbians had been seriously involved with men or married to men--only 10% had never had any type of heterosexual relationship. Clearly, there is a great deal of overlap in the experiences, feelings--even the identity histories--of women who currently identify as lesbian and bisexual. So why is there such a pervasive negativity toward bisexual women in the lesbian community?

Rust concludes that the reason bisexuality arouses such passion and controversy in the lesbian community is because "lesbianism, not bisexuality, is the real issue" (p. 122). Tracing the history of the complicated relationship between lesbianism and feminism, and the evolving definitions of who is lesbian, Rust points out that two divergent political traditions undergirding lesbian politics and activism have led to two markedly different ways of conceptualizing lesbian identity. Within the tradition of feminist discourse, lesbianism is constructed as a choice. In contrast, within the ethnic political tradition, the concept of "essence" is key to constructing lesbians as an ethnic group with an entitlement to protection against discrimination, similar to other oppressed minority populations, such as Blacks.

These two frameworks of analysis have led to differing concepts of lesbianism and differing strategies for achieving liberation--definitions and strategies that conflict. Discussions about bisexuality are part of an ongoing political discourse that, in a sense, constructed it out of existence:

In a very real sense, the lesbian/gay movement created bisexuals as an oppressed group by creating a discourse in which lesbians/gays and heterosexuals, but not bisexuals, were defined into political existence. Thus, the lesbian/gay movement not only altered the political arena by creating a new political tradition; it also created the need for a bisexual movement (p. 257)

Given the emergence of a "bisexual voice," Rust asserts that bisexuality now functions to expose controversies and contradictions within lesbian ideology by opening up old, unresolved questions of definition--the question of who is and is not a lesbian. Therefore, Rust believes that the real issue raised by bisexuality is not about bisexuality but is about lesbianism. Bisexuality, whether defined in terms of attraction or behavior, complicates notions of lesbian ethnicity by blurring the boundaries between lesbians and heterosexuals and has other political ramifications for strategies of political activism.

Although the challenge bisexuality poses to lesbianism is clearly, in part, about lesbianism rather than bisexuality, this is not the whole of it. Whether the issue is "really lesbianism" or "really bisexuality" depends on your point of subjective departure. Bisexual women are also members of the lesbian community. For them, the challenge bisexuality imposes to lesbian politics is not really about lesbianism and definitions of lesbianism, it is also about bisexuality and the recognition of women's right to self-identification, intergroup oppression, and biphobia within the lesbian community. Analyzing these issues from her perspective as a lesbian-identified sociologist, Rust

overlooks the fact that this "challenge to lesbian politics" has different meanings for bisexual women. Although her emphasis on the impact of bisexuality on lesbians and the lesbian community is valid, it is incomplete, because bisexual women are also members of this community and approach it with a different subjectivity and political orientation.

In the final chapters of the book, Rust turns to the research on bisexual women and discusses their views on bisexuality and the effects of lesbians' attitudes on the women themselves. She also addresses whether bisexual women perceive their bisexual identity in political terms. Rust notes that the current emergence of a politicized bisexual identity has powerful implications for sexual identity politics and strategies to achieve lesbian and gay rights and liberation in a heterosexist society. Rust finds remarkable similarity in the attitudes of bisexual women and lesbians' attitudes toward bisexuality. Furthermore, the bisexual women in her mid-1980s sample tended to view bisexuality in apolitical terms, i.e., they view bisexuals as lacking unique political interests.

At the end of the book, Rust notes that this is changing as bisexuals begin to find their voices and articulate the beginnings of bisexual politics, characterized by the celebration of diversity, challenges to categorical and dichotomous thinking, and an articulation of bisexual oppression and appropriate responses to such oppression. Rust notes that "by challenging dichotomous gender and sexuality, the bisexual movement undermines sexism and heterosexism and aligns itself with feminism and lesbian/gay liberation" (p. 250). Bisexual activists seem to avoid the construction of a bisexual ethnicity. Rather than working to establish a single definition of bisexuality or a "bisexual history," bisexuals challenge dichotomous notions of gender and sexuality by defying categorization, refusing to desexualize their identity for political gain, and emphasizing the right of every individual to self-identify by the sexual orientation label (or lack of one) of her or his choosing. These emerging multicultural, bisexual politics, Rust asserts, have the potential to be "the final revolution on the wheel of sexual identity politics" (p. 258), if bisexuality is not constructed as a new sexual category and remains a movement for sexual self-determination and sexual liberation.

So, is the challenge bisexuality poses to lesbian politics an issue of bisexuality, or is the issue lesbianism? Perhaps it is both and neither, depending on the subjective position from which a person approaches the discourse. Maybe the greatest challenge bisexuality poses to lesbian politics is the invitation to risk a strategy of liberation based on principles of self-determination, choice, and the simple justice underlying our right to love whomever we love. Rather than adopting an ethnic strategy of political liberation that locks people into categories of perpetual division, with the inevitable sense of being

forever an "other," perhaps we can unite across categories of sexual orientation and identity to advocate for the simple right to love whom we choose and to actualize any or all potential for sexual and affectional expression.

References

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