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Political Economy of STREET HARASSMENT

by Micaela di Leonardo

Sexual harassment in public places has received little attention in feminist literature since the first outpouring of rage in the late 60's and early 70's, at the myriad forms of male oppression. Then, we protested the experience of

swinging down the street feeling good and smiling at people and being hassled like a piece of meat in return.¹

In the wake of our repeated discoveries of the extent and damage to women of rape, battery, child abuse and harassment in the workplace, protesting street harassment is sometimes seen as trivial. My informal polling has turned up these negative reactions to complaints about harassment in public places:

Feminist Macha: I always do *this* (wear pants, act self-assured, etc). *Meaning:* You must dress feminine, walk wrong, buy into their trip. Why aren't you a big, strong new woman like me?

Anti-feminist Macha: They don't harass *me*. *Meaning:* They only harass women who dress like whores, like you.

Community and brotherhood: I always greet the street men. It's their neighborhood, after all. *Meaning:* Only black men harass women. You are a racist. The streets belong to men.

I have received many positive responses from women. We have shared horror stories, assured one another that these daily experiences are not trivial and comforted one another that we are not anti-feminist sellouts or "asking for it." We have also

shared strategies for avoiding harassment and for fighting back. Still, street harassment remains outside of a feminist analysis for many of us. We are unsympathetic, unwilling to see male domination operating in the situation, where we could be women's advocates as a matter of course if it were a raped prostitute, a battered wife, or a secretary who'd slept with her male boss. And yet street harassment is pervasive, perhaps more pervasive, than these other expressions of violence against women. It damages our self-esteem, restricts our geographic mobility, and sabotages our efforts to achieve control over our public lives.

Why don't we see the importance of street harassment? I believe that it is because we don't want to admit our own impotence. We don't admit how badly street harassment damages all of us because there's nothing we can do about it in the short run. Self-defense classes can't stop stares, words and gestures. The idea of arresting harassers is laughable. We try to ignore harassers, we attack them verbally, or we reason with them. There are few stories of triumph. Street harassment is a nearly fail-safe crime, like hit-and-run murder without the tell-tale car, and where the police aren't interested anyway.

But before I characterize street harassment further, it is necessary to define it and to specify types of oppressive interaction which do not fall under its rubric. Street harassment occurs when one or more strange men accost one or more women whom they perceive as heterosexual in a public place which is

not the woman's/women's worksite. Through looks, words, or gestures the man asserts his right to intrude on the woman's attention, defining her as a sexual object, and forcing her to interact with him. Harassment is *not* the same as badinage,* the friendly give-and-take which often gives us a sense of human warmth and validation of our attractiveness. The distinction between badinage and harassment is that a woman can start or stop badinage on her own time; it is a mutually agreed-upon interaction. Harassment takes place, and continues even when the woman is clearly absorbed in her own concerns, frightened, or aware of the man's presence and actively avoiding interaction. Women can test this distinction by refusing to give the expected response to a harasser: the mask of "friendly interaction" drops and violent hostility takes its place. This proves the coercion of women inherent in harassment: harassing men seek to *force* women to show them deference — if they don't receive "friendliness" they will exact fearfulness.

I exclude male attacks on perceived lesbians in this definition because they do not involve this mask of "friendly" heterosexual interaction. Since men, of course, often perceive lesbians to be heterosexual, lesbians suffer both homophobic and "ordinary" harassment. I exclude harassment by acquaintances, at worksites and at private parties because these interactions take a different form, and because they do not involve *civic life*. I am concerned here with the expected, and actual behavior of strangers toward one another in public places. This is not to say that harassment bears no similarity to other forms of violence against women. Like rape, in most cases it involves the male fiction that the interaction is about sexuality, when it is actually about power. Like pornography, it reduces women to degraded sexual objects.


How does street harassment have these effects? How can a few words or a gesture make a stranger into a victim? In order to understand the meaning behind the ritual, we need to dissect it, just as we have analyzed the meaning of housework or of misogynist language.

Much harassment is a question of nuance, of tiny

verbal and non-verbal cues. A friendly "good afternoon" is made insulting by an appraising stare, by the intonational contour (how the voice goes up and down in pitch) of the greeting, and by an intrusive movement towards the woman. Of course, many situations lack all such subtlety, but it is important to discuss harassment in terms of micro-interaction because it is the less grotesque incidents which people tend to misperceive as "simple friendliness." We tend to think of micro-interaction as jokey, a trivial part of life that exploitative books on "body language" explain as the mutual exchange of sexual signals. As Henley² points out, these books in fact focus on heterosexual interaction characterized by equal status, totally ignoring the major function that this interaction plays in creating and maintaining oppressive, hierarchical relations: employer/employee, doctor/patient, teacher/student, man/woman. It is in fact these relations which have been studied most by serious scholars — Goffman³ and many others. Their general findings indicate that micro-interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, influences us greatly; we are social animals, constantly communicating to one another, even if the message given is that we *don't* at the moment wish to communicate.

In pretending friendliness and demanding a response from a strange woman, a man does to her what he wouldn't do to a man (except in specific cases where they both identify it as harassment) — he makes a claim on her time and energy, proving to her that he can force her to respond to him whether or not she wishes to. "Just saying hello" is an exercise in showing yourself and the woman that it doesn't matter whether or not she's thinking about her child's flu or income taxes, she has to respond. All men have rights over all women. Each incident of harassment forces a woman to do what Hochschild⁴ calls "emotion-work": that process of forcing one's emotions to correspond to what is expected. A harassed woman works on herself: if she wants to believe that he is "just being friendly," she batters down her fear, smiles and says "hello," trying to ignore his degrading micro-interactional signals; if she practices the strategy of ignoring the harasser, she stiffens all over and tells herself that she isn't upset; if she chooses to fight back, she pumps up her adrenalin and prepares to act against an entire lifetime's socialization not to make a

*I have used badinage, which the O.E.D. defines as "light trifling raillery or humorous banter," because of the unfortunate connotation of "flirting."



scene, then leaves the interaction feeling like a survivor of a car wreck. I have practiced each of these kinds of emotion-work on myself.

Our culture expects women to be friendly. Flight attendants and waitresses are supposed to remain friendly when pawed; secretaries, when pinched and running for the boss's coffee; women on the street, when "hassled like a piece of meat." In each of these cases, friendliness is the result of the woman's emotion-work, her acquiescence to her fear of being fired, being hurt — to her fear of men.

Street harassment re-establishes and underlines the patriarchal culture's definition of us as objects. We do not freely observe the world because we remain the objects of male observation. I have experienced harassment when I was acting as an observer — stopping to look at autumn leaves, children playing, a building facade. The letdown of a robot mask invites male oppression. But, just as with rape, the opposite also applies; men experience the robot mask as defiance of patriarchal control. A man swerved toward me while passing on a Washington street to hiss, "You're pretty enough to smile a little." Another ran after me on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley screaming "Stuck up!" An acquaintance ran an informal test of my theory by walking past a particular construction site in two very different ways: hunched over looking at the ground, and upright, looking straight ahead and walking briskly. She was left alone in the first posture, and beset by howls in the second.⁵

The foregoing characterization of street harassment abstracts from reality. But what are the man

and the woman *doing* when the incident takes place? Who are they? And why is it happening in the first place? "Patriarchy" is a catch-all answer; we need to look more closely at the specific and changing political economy of street harassment.

The analysis of street harassment which follows flows from two observations: 1) that street harassment has greatly increased over the past decade; and 2) that men of all races and classes engage in it. These observations are based on my personal experience, and on the experiences of dozens of women with whom I discussed the issue. No controlled studies of street harassment exist.⁶

By separating out the components of a single instance of street harassment we can see it more clearly. First, why is the harasser in a public place?

—he is driving by, in the course of work or recreation;
—he is working (construction, doorman, security guard, delivery);

—he is hanging out, lounging on apartment steps, standing on a corner, outside a store, in a park, sitting in a parked car;

—he is walking past in the course of work, recreation, lunch hour, etc.

Why is the victim on the street?

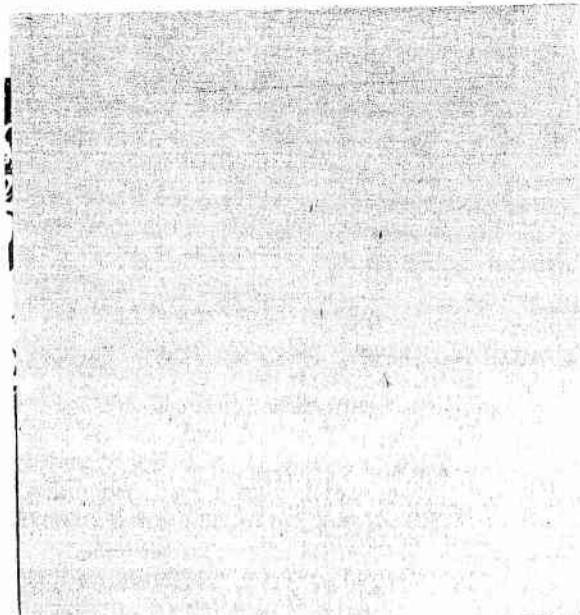
—she is working (courier, construction, mail delivery, etc);

—she is commuting to or from work on foot or on public transportation;

—she is shopping;

—she is jogging or playing tennis or engaged in some kind of physical activity;

—she is taking a walk.



There have been great changes in American women's lives over the past decade, changes affecting their participation in these activities.

Women have entered the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers. There has been a new population movement back into urban areas, especially by young single people. Women's ages at first marriage, divorce and desertion have risen. These factors, coupled with increasing public acceptance of unchaperoned women in public places, means that women are much more likely to be out alone, and in areas of town or suburb and at times of day which were unusual only a decade ago. Adding to the breakdown of this informal women's curfew and ghettoization in neighborhoods are two other factors: changes in patterns of reproduction and physical activity. Women in general are having fewer children; they are postponing first pregnancies as well. Even those women who have children at young ages are increasingly forced into the paid labor market by declining real wages or the father's desertion — or the need to work for personal fulfillment. Thus women of all classes, married or single, are *much less likely* to be accompanied by children in public places. My informal observation indicates that an accompanying child helps insure against street harassment; the roles of mother and sexual object seem to be mutually exclusive in the harasser's mind. Second, there has been, in part because of feminist encouragement, a fantastic rise

in the number of women concerned with being physically fit. This change places women outdoors, in areas they wouldn't travel otherwise, at all times of day and night. Not only running, but simply commuting to and from dance, self-defense or exercise classes, tennis courts or softball fields places women outdoors more often. Harassment (not to mention rape and murder) of women runners happens so often that the first three books on running I picked up included special sections on how to cope with it.

To summarize: A breakup of the postwar economic geography of gender has taken place. Women in general are more geographically mobile, both in space and time, and much more likely to be alone in public places. The stage is increasingly set for street harassment.

But harassment requires male motivation. What changes in men's lives over the past decade lead them to respond to women's increased public presence by harassing them more often? The most obvious answer is the rise of feminist militance: women are refusing to serve, to be deferent to, to avoid competing with, to take abuse from men — in the home and at work. Men in general can count less on women in general giving them the material and psychological rewards of the oppressor. And even when women are not militant, the pressures of the double day — women performing both paid labor market work and unpaid work in the home — mean that women are more exhausted and likely to cut down on the quality of the services given to the men in their lives.

The second answer relates to women's double day; the economic crisis of recent years presses on men as well as on women, and on men of all classes, because the economy's instability causes even well-off men to fear a relative loss of purchasing power. Behavior in public places in general has deteriorated; increased street harassment may be part of this process.

But other factors influence men as well. Women's standards of dress have changed. Different dress and the feminist movement have combined to overturn the idea of the "lady" — a woman who deserves respect and who could call the police. It is my suspicion that increased harassment is in part the extension of harassment up the class ladder. Some women (as well as men) have lost *class* protec-

tion on the street, except insofar as they can still afford cars, taxis, exclusive neighborhoods — and can afford not to work. This is not to say that an individual woman's dress bears much relation to how often she is harassed. I have experimented extensively with this myself; and in any event, the myth of "enticing clothing" has met its demise through the anti-rape movement.

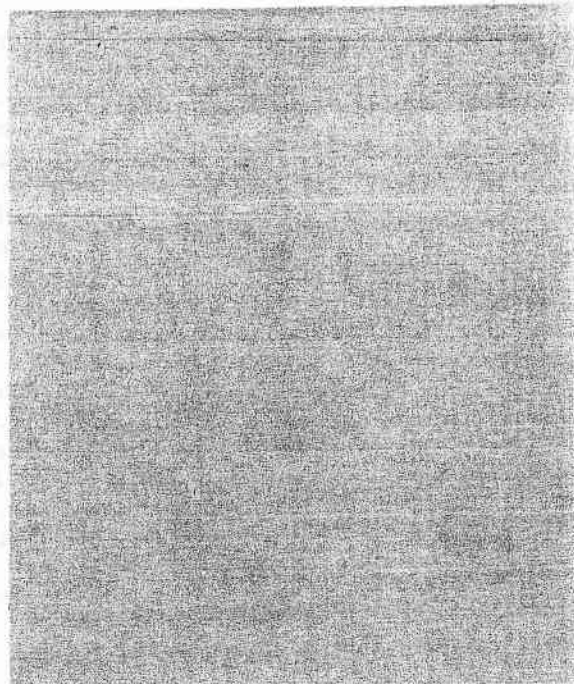
Another factor is the increase of publicly displayed pornography — skin magazines, billboards, sex newspapers in street vending machines, etc., as well as the increasing visibility of urban prostitution. I know the complexity of the arguments regarding the effect of pornography on male behavior. I will make a case below only for its symbolic effect on men's perceptions of public space.

All of these factors strengthen the premise that increased street harassment is part of an overall male backlash to the feminist movement, decline in perceived male status, and the relative loss of women's services. Street harassment provides a quick and dirty means of regaining male ownership of public places. On-the-job harassment, in particular, may gratify men whose outdoor occupations — mechanic, truckdriver, construction worker — have low status in our society. Harassing women while driving past them is a great tactic for the fainthearted, since even the occasional feisty feminist has little opportunity to yell back before the harasser is out of earshot. Harassment from cars and trucks may be associated with symbols of adolescent sexuality, even for men long past adolescence, because of the national symbolic connection of automobiles and sexuality. Men who "hang-out" often stake out a territory with others; harassing women, as well as rival groups of men, probably enhances solidarity within the group. Harassing women while passing them on the sidewalk remains, in my experience, the most common way affluent men practice harassment. Perhaps this type of harassment is related to challenged ownership of sections of a city, such as financial and bar districts.

This brings us to the question of symbolic geography. In my experience, men harass women at the same sites *repeatedly*. I have successfully predicted both harassment and freedom from it, from block to block, as I walked around two cities that I knew well. Certain street pornography, as on University Avenue in Berkeley, California, seems to assure this

status for a public space. Men repeatedly leaned out of their car windows to make cunnilingus gestures towards me when I shopped there. Certain streets — common routes for delivery vans, skilled tradesmen, and others (for example, in Washington, DC, the portion of 23rd St., N.W., between N and P, which skirts Rock Creek Park) exist as free-for-alls for car and truck harassers. Of course, these symbolic meanings change over time. The clearest example of this constant change is the violently altered harassment experience of women on any street as soon as a construction site is established there. This topic needs further exploration, with attention paid to material changes, political activity and media attention.

To bring together the strands of my argument so far let me reiterate: (1) women are experiencing more street harassment because men are retaliating against their perceived lowered status and the loss of women's services; and (2) women, out of both necessity and choice, move around cities and suburbs alone and at all hours. In addition, the symbolic character of public spaces is constantly in flux and outside of women's control. Street pornography contributes to this instability by "pornographizing" entire blocks, giving men symbolic permission to harass women walking through them, even though we may be forced to live, work or shop in these



Street harassment has changed then, as capitalism and patriarchy have changed in the past decade. Women are in public spaces more often and at all hours as a result of capitalism's expanding demand for labor and as a result of the renaissance of feminism. Men resent the relative loss of women's domestic and emotional services. They are enraged that women can now attempt to define themselves as sexual beings — not "ladies" — and at the same time not be under the protection of men. At the same time, street pornography creates for men a climate in which all women can be seen as mere sexual beings existing under male domination.

Men's increased harassment of women functions as one of the many controlling institutions of capitalist patriarchy. It frightens women, just as rape does, into seeking male protection, into denying their fear, into limiting their geographic mobility whenever possible. But most of all it keeps women from relaxing in the public world, from claiming it as their own.

But inevitably, we *will* be on the street alone. What can we do about harassment?

The first task, as with rape, battery, child abuse, pornography and harassment in the workplace, is consciousness-raising. We need to help women (and men) to recognize street harassment for what it is, and to see its connection to men's infatuation at our independence. We need to overcome the myths, similar to the myths about rape, that we "ask for it." We have an inherent right to be left alone in public.

Related to this is the task of information-gathering. Are my hypotheses correct? What are the specific experiences women of different races and different classes have with street harassment? Can we test the operation of symbolic space? What connections exist between street harassment and rape, battery, child abuse, harassment on the job?

Finally we need to think creatively about strategies for fighting back.

1. Education. Many men can be shamed and made to stop when shown that harassment is a hostile display of power. They claim to themselves that they are just being friendly. We can ask them why they don't greet men on the street. We can include discussions of street harassment in speaking events on other aspects of violence against women.*

2. Individual reactions. We can share our experiences with one another, and seek ways of reacting to harassment which stop men and do not endanger us.

Street harassment is not trivial. We used to think that housework was trivial, that childcare was trivial, that words like 'girl' and 'feminine' were trivial. As our analysis deepens, as more women and men become feminists and help us to broaden our understandings, we will better understand street harassment and work more constructively to stop it. I hope this article begins that process.

*We especially need to confront the myth that street harassment occurs only between white women and black men. I have been harassed by men of all races and ages, and I have observed many black women being harassed. The anti-rape movement has been attacked on the ground that fighting rape is "racist." The underlying assumption of this attack, that only black men rape, and that black women are never raped, is the real racism. We can point out the same fallacy in our discussions of street harassment.

Footnotes

¹Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Vintage Books: New York, 1970. p. 164.

²Henley, Nancy, "Power, Sex and Nonverbal Communication," in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, *Language and Sex*, eds. Newberry House Publishers: Rowley, Massachusetts, 1975.

³Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday: Garden City, New York, 1959 and *Inter-*

action Ritual: Essays On Face-To-Face Behavior. Anchor Books: Garden City, New York, 1967.

⁴Hochschild, Arlie Russell, "Emotion Work Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology*. 85:3, 1979.

⁵Joan Cassell also makes this point in "Externalities of Change: Deference and Demeanor in Contemporary Feminism" in *Human Organization*, 33:1, 1974.

⁶As I finished this article, *Ms.* published a short article by Cheryl Benard and Edit Schlaffer on "man on the street" (May 1981, pp. 18-19). These feminist scholars interviewed harassers in Vienna on their motivation and rationales for verbally assaulting women. Benard and Schlaffer share my general perspective on the effect of street harassment, but in their article give no sense of the historical changes in capitalism and patriarchy that may have affected the levels and types of harassment. For example, they interviewed migrant workers but did not note that the presence of Southeastern European workers in Northwestern Europe is a relatively new phenomenon. They also focus primarily on

the collective rather than individual effects of harassment and on men rather than women. I believe that it is crucial that we focus on individual women's emotion management in response to patriarchal interactions, so that we may collectively decide to work on our emotions in new and liberating ways.

I would like to thank Diane Conner, Laureen France, Susan Gal, Heidi Hartmann, Nancy McDonald, Roberta Spalter-Roth, and John Willoughby for their help with this article.

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The IMPACT of Sexual Harassment on the JOB

A Profile of the Experiences of 92 Women

by Peggy Crull of the
Working Women's Institute¹

Summary: Working Women's Institute mailed a questionnaire to women who had written letters indicating they had experienced sexual harassment on the job. The 92 questionnaires that were returned provide a description of the sexual harassment experience and its economic impact on the women who encounter it. The respondents were primarily clerical and service workers in low-paying jobs who live in all parts of the country and work in a variety of settings. The incidents which prompted the women to write involved intrusive, uninvited, and often repeated sexual overtures. More often than not, the harassers were older men with the power to hire and fire the women. Attempts to stop the harassment were generally useless and in many cases led to some form of retaliation. Twenty-four percent of the women were fired as a result of the harassment, and 42% were pressured into resigning. In a large majority of the cases the situation diminished the woman's ability to do her job by diverting her attention from her work and undermining her self-confidence. Health problems similar to those caused by other types of occupational stress often

resulted. Almost all of the respondents suffered some type of emotional stress and about two-thirds had physical reactions. In effect, sexual harassment seriously damaged the ability of these women to earn a living. This study suggests that sexual harassment acts as a significant barrier to the economic advancement of all women in the workforce.

Introduction

Over the last four years Working Women's Institute has become a nationally recognized research/resource/action center focusing on the issue of sexual harassment on the job. The issue and the Institute's work have received widespread attention in national and local media. As a result women from across the United States write the Institute. Many of them ask for concrete assistance on how to handle a sexual harassment problem. Others are simply seeking a sympathetic audience to listen to their story. Still others see their letters as a contribution to the effort to eliminate sexual harassment.

After reading scores of these letters we noticed patterns which helped to explain how sexual harassment undermines women's ability to take their rightful place in the labor force and earn a decent