



MURIEL DIMEN

*Surviving Sexual
Contradictions*

*A Startling and Different Look at a Day
in the Life of a Contemporary Professional
Woman*

Macmillan Publishing Company

New York

The character whose narrative is related throughout this book is a fictional construct, as is her day. Some living individuals' experiences have been drawn upon in this narrative, but their names and identifying characteristics, as well as the actual events, have been altered so that no individual is recognizable, thereby protecting the rights and privacy of those individuals.

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Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022
Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Dimen, Muriel

Surviving sexual contradictions.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Sex discrimination against women—United States.
2. Sexism—United States. 3. Sex role—United States.
4. Feminism—United States. I. Title.

HQ1426.D56 1986 305.4'2'0973 86-12600

ISBN 0-02-531620-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Surviving Sexual Contradictions

ALSO BY MURIEL DIMEN

The Anthropological Imagination

Regional Variation in Modern Greece and Cyprus

(co-edited with Ernestine Friedl)

For Sasha Mariel

Acknowledgments

In the matter of debts, I am fortunate to suffer an embarrassment of riches.

First, I wish to thank those who made possible my study of psychoanalysis. Ernestine Friedl, Robert F. Murphy, and Eric R. Wolf supported me early on, and Lucie Wood Saunders's continuing encouragement has been, in effect, unconditional. The Department of Anthropology of Lehman College, City University of New York, granted me extensive leaves of absence so that I could attend the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, as well as the New Hope Guild Program in Adult Psychotherapy, institutions to which I am grateful for having admitted a nonpsychologist to their ranks.

In a special class is my debt to Arthur H. Feiner for the second epiphany of my adult life. The first occurred at the beginning of college, when, in discovering social science, I also discovered a way to make sense of the world around me. The second took place much later, during my psychoanalysis, when I found a way to make sense of myself.

Although this book contains no reference to any person whom I have treated, I record here my gratitude to my patients, who,

by sharing with me a portion of their lives, allow me to rediscover psychoanalytic theory every day.

Second, I am beholden to the feminist and other progressive social movements in which I have participated during the last twenty years. Much of what I say here synthesizes and serves up for more general consumption the pioneering ideas brewed in a myriad of study groups, consciousness-raising groups, conferences, and writings large and small. In particular, the Group for a Radical Human Science gave me the opportunity to write the paper out of which this book grew. Although fractious, often chaotic, and ultimately disappointing, GRHS provided, during its brief life span, a rare forum in which one could examine both the personal and the political, the psychological and the social, without being forced to select one or the other as the ultimate cause of human behavior.

Third, I may now turn to those individuals who helped me as I formulated and wrote this book. Elsa First, Howard Gadlin, David Lichtenstein, Sara Ruddick, Adria Schwartz, and Paula Webster read and criticized my earliest proposals. Conversations with others shed light on problems I encountered as the writing progressed: Jessica Benjamin, Peggy Crull, Robert Giard, Virginia Goldner, Edgar Gregerson, Adrienne Harris, Daphne Joslin, Carol Kramer, Phyllis Kriegel, Carol Lefcourt, Ricki Levenson, Abigail Norman, Adrian Rifkin, Seth L. Schein, Jonathan Sillin, and Lynne Zeavin.

Several friends and colleagues were kind enough to pore over various versions and portions of the manuscript: Carol Ascher, Donna Bassin, Ellen Cantarow, Harriet Cohen, Adrienne Harris, Katherine King, Maxine Margolis, Laura Martin, Robin Omata, Robert Roth, Adria Schwartz, Sue Shapiro, David Schiller, and Linda D. Wolfe. Adrienne Harris deserves special thanks for reading the entire manuscript a second time during a period of crisis.

Fourth, I am happy to thank those who have made the publication of this book possible. I am extremely grateful to my publisher, Hillel Black, for his unfailing enthusiasm, faith, and accessibility. My editor, Marion Wheeler, gave me the benefit of her fine sense of structure and language, as well as her early support. Edward A. Novak III smoothed the production process with thoughtfulness and patience, and Sharon L. Gonzalez was especially considerate about last-minute copyediting. And I could

not wish for a better literary agent than Charlotte Sheedy, who believed in this book from its very beginnings and always came through in the pinch with generous encouragement, advice, optimism, and humor.

Finally, I thank my family and close friends, past and present. In particular, my brother, Michael Dimen, not only cheered me on but convinced me that it was easy as well as invaluable to use a word processor. And my cousin, Carole Fink, often kept me going with her deep belief in the value of my work.

I am grateful also to Carol Ascher for many years of literary and other mothering.

And, last of the last, there are those steadfast friends who have sustained me with their respect, honesty, and love. Harriet Cohen criticized my arguments and style even when it was hard to do so. Middle-of-the-night telephone calls with Katherine King saved many a day. Robert Roth, present at the birth of this project, has always confronted me in an extraordinarily productive fashion. And, despite the claims made by his work and family life, David Schiller not only read my manuscript with the care and challenge of an editor but was a fount of great-hearted comfort and counsel.

It gives me long-awaited pleasure to acknowledge all these contributions to whatever is good in this book, and to exempt all but myself from responsibility for the faults therein.

New York City, *September 1986*

Author to Reader

IN 1981, as a member of a panel whose subject of inquiry was “The Question of Feminism,” I delivered a brief paper to a small group of psychoanalysts and social theorists, who were both my colleagues and my friends. My topic was women; my theme was the relationship between the personal and the political.

My paper wove together personal anecdotes with a commentary about their political significance. The stories I chose to tell were sexual ones. Recounting events that had happened to me and other women whom I knew, they were meant to demonstrate how even the most impersonal and distant social institutions and political constraints penetrate the most intimate and private core of personal experience. The commentary placed these

stories in their psychological, social, and political contexts. Explaining the events as products of sexism, it argued against the idea that sexism is a conspiracy perpetrated by men against women. Rather, it insisted that sexism, like all social systems, affects men and women alike. Our participation in it is ambiguous, something in between playwright and puppet. Indeed, it was this ambiguity that fascinated me.

This book, modeled on that paper, consists of two voices. Each portion begins with the first-person story of one woman's day as she lives it. The other voice comments on that day. The first voice expresses the personal, the private, the individual; the second represents the political, the public, the cultural.

The first voice is a contrivance, that of an imaginary character whose day I have invented. However, I have plainly modeled my heroine's workday on mine, and she is, like me, both social scientist and psychotherapist. Her day is a series of episodes that serve as a hypothesis, a sort of experiment, for the second voice, which comments on her day. In a way, the narrative asks, What if? If a woman behaved and thought and felt as this particular woman in the course of a day, what would that mean about women's experience and social life in general?

The commentary answers in a voice that synthesizes several perspectives—anthropology, psychoanalysis, feminism, and social criticism. First, it examines the events of this day as an ethnographer would happenings in a foreign land, holding them up for scrutiny against the backdrop of the culture in which they appear. Second, the commentary speculates about these occurrences as would a psychoanalyst, wondering about the hidden, unconscious meanings of everyday life. Third, the commentary uses the narrative to explore the political problems of sex and gender with which women and men currently grapple. And, finally, the commentary argues that aspects of our culture, inextricably linked with patriarchy, inhibit personal freedom and social justice.

However, the commentary pretends to no omniscience about the protagonist, accepting that her inner being, like everyone's, eludes us. To put this in other terms, the commentary is to the narrative as theory is to life. The first may illuminate but can never exhaust the second, and the second is not reducible to the first. We may point to all manner of social and psychological causes for human behavior. We may be able to predict, with some con-

confidence, what people will do, and chart, within limits, the future course of our society. But we can never eliminate the triangular tension between choice, causality, and chance in which our lives are suspended.

There is a profound relationship between the personal and the political, between private and public life, between individual experience and culture: If you go deeply enough into one, you come upon the other. In the heart of personal life lie the commonalities linking people who belong to the same culture. At the same time, the kernel of social life holds the premises, principles, and passions that give life to each individual. Personal experience is ingrained and contoured by culture; culture is reciprocally informed and maintained by individuals and their personal principles and passions.

This idea, that “the personal is political,” is particularly feminist. What I have to say is part of the feminist attempt, now ongoing for over twenty years, to understand the personal/political problem as it influences private and public life. Indeed, feminists came to believe that this influence invalidated the conventional dichotomy between private and public life. They argued that what happens in the privacy of our homes, bedrooms, and hearts is welded to what happens in the streets, boardrooms, courts, and legislatures. And, conversely, they held that the most public of events are in part expressions, products, and buttresses of the most familiar details of everyday life.

Not unexpectedly, some things got polarized as the feminist movement probed this difficult and sometimes painful problem. Sometimes the personal was simply reduced to the political; the social context suddenly became the sole determinant of individual experience. At other times, the political was subsumed by the personal: Personal life—family, friendships, sex, therapy, personal development—was defined as the only viable reality, while the constraints of the social world were all but neglected.

The truth does not lie somewhere between these extremes. The extremes are as true as is the relationship between them. The psyche is not a microcosm of social life, nor is the world a psyche writ large. The political *is* political, the personal *is* personal. But neither exists without the other. Human life did not originate with a culture to which human psyches were added, nor with minds to which social life was appended. Mind and culture gen-

erate each other; neither is causative. If there are ultimate causes of human behavior, we do not yet know them. I believe, in fact, that the mechanistic conceptions of “cause” and “effect” are inappropriate tools with which to plumb human depths. But until we know better, we must try to talk about both the personal and the political, as simultaneously as possible but without collapsing the one into the other.

This book, offering up for general consumption a synthesis of recent feminist and other progressive thought, attempts to restore the balance between the extremes. Its two concurrent voices, expressing the personal and the political, examine feminine experience not in compartments but as it is lived in two coexistent realities—the inner, psychological one and the outer, social one.

I assume that the personal is always particular. I do not propose my heroine to be typical of anyone. There is no such thing, in any case, as a “typical” woman or man, black person or white, Jew or Christian—except in our minds and textbooks. The idea of “type” is a category of thought, not of life, the complexity of which eludes typology and single-cause explanations. Not every woman is, like my heroine, white, thirty-seven, and divorced. Not every woman lives in a city, teaches classes, sees patients, meets old lovers, or hovers on the edge of sexual experimentation. However, although she is not Everywoman, the experiences of her particular life are meant to convey something outside the particular that is elemental, that rings true to any reader.

The political is as general as the personal is particular. By definition, it joins us together outside our individualities, creating the cultural context that makes sense of individuality. Therefore, the commentary on the personal narrative, the second voice, relies heavily on the concept of “culture.” Although this concept would seem to need little explanation, the definition can be misleading when applied to a complex society like ours. Commonly understood, *culture* refers to a more or less orderly and homogeneous collection of traditions, customs, and values. But this definition ignores the diversity of tradition and the differences of power within and among cultures and even subcultures. And, since variation is the raw material for cultural evolution, the concept erroneously tends to put forth harmonious stability as the norm, relegating conflict and change to that which is abnormal.

In order to do justice to a multifaceted, conflicted, and changing culture like ours, the commentary draws on four principal

dimensions: the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Western tradition, capitalism, and the state. *The Judaeo-Christian tradition* is the term for the religious and cultural heritage that serves as the source of many of our fundamental moral values. *The Western tradition* refers to the Euro-American intellectual inheritance that emphasizes rationality, objectivity, the mind/body dualism, and democratic values and philosophies. *Capitalism* means the American economic system, with its mix of free enterprise, government-supported industry, and social welfare; its linkage with imperialism; and its amalgam of upward mobility and a stubborn class division into rich and poor. And *the state* denotes the major political frame for society in the twentieth century. In it, political power, both coercive and mediated, is wielded primarily on behalf of the upper classes and is centralized in a bureaucracy that has tremendous sway over the life of every individual.

There are two points that I wish to make about the commentary. First, it does not pretend to “objectivity.” Despite the firm Western belief that truth is discoverable without preconceptions, the twentieth-century notion of the relativity of truth suggests otherwise. At a minimum, observations and interpretations of social reality always start from an idea about the nature of reality, an idea that amounts to a point of view. And any point of view proceeds from the theories, social position, and interests of the viewer. Nor is appreciation of human reality “subjective.” Those who observe and interpret human behavior do so in dialogue with friends, colleagues, the people whom they study, and cultural tradition (whether its grain is followed or cut against).

Just as the dichotomy between personal and political is false, so the dichotomy between objective and subjective, when applied to human beings, whose responses can influence what their observers see and think, is simply wrong. However, the stance of the observer of human beings still awaits definition. All that can be said at this juncture is that it occupies different ground from either subjectivity or objectivity. And this estimation, I believe, describes the position of my commentary.

The second point I wish to make about the commentary is a corollary one. The commentary speaks in the voice of a woman. It is not, however, “*the woman’s voice*,” a characterization that I dislike, although not for the usual reasons. There are “women writers,” just as there are “men writers.” How could there not

be? But, as phrases, as ideas, as entities, *woman's voice*, *woman writer*, *women's literature*, and the like are dangerous because they skid into biological determinism. What women say and write no more results from the DNA that produces ovaries than does the thinking of black people come from the genes governing skin pigmentation.

Still, there is no doubt that each of us is gendered. Each of us is assigned to a socially significant, sexual category at birth and is from the start treated in accordance with or in opposition to it. Therefore, the voice of each person will be a gendered one, echoing both the political and the personal experiences of gender. That many writers, claiming the genderless "writer's voice," wish to deny the influence of gender should not obscure the silliness of doing so. The claim to speak in a voice uniquely capable of discerning the universals of human existence in the ordinary confusion of everyday life is very alluring. It would be wonderful to be able to speak so transcendently. But no one, short of prophets, does.

In this book, I build on the early, core feminist insight that our culture makes women into objects. But I also attempt to go beyond this perception. Accepting the proposition that "femininity" is a political creation, I nevertheless assume that women's subjectivity, like men's, is not a cloning from a cell of culture. Were our psychology the product of simple conditioning, neither feminism nor any political protest could ever come into being at all.

Rather, subjectivity is a dialogue between oneself and the surrounding world. This dialogue, which attempts to make sense of life in a way that makes sense to oneself, is simultaneously private and public, personal and political. Expressive of desire, of the unconscious longing that animates everything we do, it contains discord as well as harmony, for, although our world makes sense in some ways, in other ways it does not. Indeed, women's subjectivity is an endless process of refusing to make sense of patriarchal nonsense.

Feminism is therefore a logical exchange in the dialogue of femininity, one that, however, also begins a new conversation. Feminism turned our view of the world inside out. Exposing the cultural unconscious to public view, it made conscious what we had always known to exist but had ignored because it threatened

the bedrock of our civilization. Feminist writings of the second wave that arose in the sixties argued that the second-class status of women was a product not of nature but of culture. Like “maternal instincts,” male domination was socially constructed, not biologically programmed. Sexuality, family life, sex roles, the psychology of men and women—these were created by patriarchal social forces that could, because they were not innate, be changed.

Feminist activism set to work initiating the changes mandated by theory. Feminist writers and speakers rallied women to join feminist groups, where they raised their own and others’ consciousness about their social domination. Through agitation, lobbying, and organizing, feminist groups effected important changes in social institutions. Affirmative action allowed women to get jobs previously denied them and made inroads on wage discrimination. The Supreme Court decriminalized abortions. In couples and families, men and women began to modify their traditional roles. Women, armed with contraception and a new respect for and knowledge about their bodies and longings, started to explore their sexual desire with awareness and dignity. Even language changed, as *he or she* occasionally came to replace the ubiquitous, universal third-person *he*. And, perhaps most astonishingly, feminism became part of the cultural landscape.

However, as the story and commentary of this book reveal, the problems persist. Indeed, in some basic way, they have changed hardly at all since the beginning of the second wave. Because some women, largely middle-class and white, have succeeded in ascending professional and corporate ladders, it looks to the rest of society as if the feminist revolution were over. Yet many women, indeed proportionately more, remain poor. Women of color still confront racism as well as sexism. Even abortion, the right to which is fundamental to women’s control of their own lives, remains a battleground. And women, no matter what other work they do, continue to be in charge of rearing children.

Finally, the kind of success that feminism has had may be its failure. Once extraordinary and extreme, it is now routine. Having achieved political validity, it takes its place alongside numberless other interest groups and thereby becomes nearly invisible. Accommodated in the public mind as women’s claim to economic emancipation, its radical edge is blunted. It may be that the price of accommodation, the pruning of feminism’s truly radical promise

of genuine equality and freedom for all, has been too high. For what has slipped into obscurity is feminism's core, utopian vision—a society, based on a humanitarian value system, in which all people have access to the material and spiritual necessities of life and are free to pursue their sexual desire, in which work is spiritually as well as financially rewarding, in which the care of children and of personal relations count as “work” and are shared by all, and in which neither race nor gender nor sexual preference can prohibit participation in the enjoyment of and running of society.

The present state of feminism is like the present state of women—ambiguous and laden with contradictions. Women are living in a time when, despite the gains they have made toward social equality, patriarchy retains a stubborn, if now more hidden, hold on all of our thoughts, feelings, and social institutions. The current problem is that women are supposed to live as if they were free when in fact freedom is still in the future. To live in such a particularly ambiguous circumstance is to struggle endlessly with contradiction. Ordinary life becomes a jungle on whose rooted floor it is easy to stumble, yet whose tangle is so comfortably familiar that one is often reluctant to hack away a single strangling vine. We want to shape our own lives to satisfy our own desires, yet find ourselves conforming to familiar social rules and institutions that imprison rather than free us. Still, at the same time as we collude in patterns and rules ingrained in us by childhood and tradition, we also try to resist the temptation to follow them. That we must endlessly battle against a gravity pulling us simultaneously in two directions explains why contradiction is the central metaphor for women's experience in the middle of the feminist revolution.

Certainly the determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of a young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.

GEORGE ELIOT
Middlemarch

Finally they got the Singles problem under control, they made it scientific. They opened huge sex centers—you could simply go and state what you want and they would find you someone who wanted that too. You would stand under a sign saying *I Like To Be Touched And Held* and when someone came and stood under the sign saying *I Like To Touch And Hold* they would send the two of you off together.

At first it went great. A steady stream of people under the sign *I Like To Give Pain* paired up with the steady stream of people from under *I Like To Receive Pain*. *Foreplay Only—No Orgasm* found its adherents, and *Orgasm Only—No Foreplay* matched up its believers. A loyal Berkeley, California, policeman stood under the sign *Married Adults, Lights Out, Face To Face, Under A Sheet* because that's the only way it was legal in Berkeley—but he stood there a long time in his lonely blue law coat. And the man under *I Like To Be Sung To While Bread Is Kneaded On My Stomach* had been there weeks without a reply.

Things began to get strange. The *Love Only—No Sex* was doing fine; the *Sex Only—No Love* was doing really well, pair after pair walking out together like wooden animals off a child's ark, but the line for *38D Or Bigger* was getting unruly, shouting insults at the line for *8 Inches Or Longer*, and odd isolated signs were springing up everywhere, *Retired Schoolteacher And Parakeet—No Leather, One Rm/No Bath/View Of Sausage Factory*.

The din rose in the vast room. The line under *I Want To Be Fucked Senseless* was so long that portable toilets had to be added and a minister brought in for deaths, births, and marriages on the line. Over under *I Want To Fuck Senseless*—no one, a pile of guns. A hollow roaring filled the enormous gym. More and more people began to move over to *Want To Be Fucked Senseless*. The line snaked around the gym, the stadium, the whole town, out into the fields. More and more people joined it, until *Fucked Senseless* stretched across the nation in a huge wide belt like the Milky Way, and since they had to name it, they called it the American Way.

SHARON OLDS
The Solution