



# Who Stole INCEST?

by Louise Armstrong

*Incest was once a feminist issue, an issue of male violence against women. Over the years, feminists have been able to encourage women who have been victimized to come out and the increasing number of reported incest cases is a measure of the women's success. But there's a downside. Incest, now seems only to be about individual damage and personal therapy. Who hijacked the agenda?*

In 1978, when people asked what I'd written about, I'd say "incest." And they would then most often ask: "Oh? Are you a feminist?" Now, when I say (with some reticence) that I have written about incest, people ask: "Oh? Are you a psychologist?"

Incest, the sexualization of children cast in Procrustean form has been transmogrified—hijacked. From a political issue framed by feminists as one of male violence against women and children—a sexual offence on the part of men, for which we demanded accountability, and censure—incest has, in these years, been co-opted and re-formulated by the therapeutic ideology, as an illness in women, to be treated. In children, it is a prediction of illness to be treated.

In 1971 we spoke of what caused child sexual abuse and its role in socialising women and training them for sexual submission. By now, you will hear few speak of what causes incest. Most speak only of what incest causes: sleeplessness, lack of trust, sexual acting-out, timidity, aggression, destiny itself. Children raped by relatives are said to be doomed—to become depressed, dissociated, drug-addicted, suicidal.

It is feared that  
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The issue of incest is now one of illness. It is not social but medical. The response is not a call for change, but a call for "treatment." It is not that we were wrong. Far from it. We identified incest as something fathers and stepfathers had done throughout history and continued to do, not in spite of the fact that they knew it was wrong, but because they believed it was their right: justifiable.

And this is what the offenders said as well. "It's natural, it's perfectly normal." By 1980, men were helping our understanding still more, as academics and other professionals spoke to us as the "pro-incest lobby" of "positive incest." They told us that "children have the right to express themselves sexually, even with members of their own family." They told us, in any case, "the rate of incidence is so high as to make prohibition absurd." They told us that incest could be beneficial.

Well, we knew it could be, too. And we knew who benefited. We knew that incest was not

for anything anyway, the bitch.")

During the 1980s, we had further corroboration that incest was not confined to the rape of children, but one of the many male violence against women. Children, we learned, were now being abused by fathers in retaliation for divorce. And they were being abused with far less finesse.

Yet by then, what we knew, what could be seen from the evidence, had already been overridden, suppressed by male-protective forces. From the moment of our first speaking out, newfound experts on the rape of children had risen full-blown from the sea, pronouncing knowledge with the authority of mental health professionals. The oddest thing was even they knew that the rape of daughters was also violence against women. They said so. In their own language, of course, in their own way.

The mothers of incest victims, they pronounced, simply did not put out enough, were not attractive enough, were not nice enough to their men.

only the grotesque absurdity of men turning the full power of adult male sexuality against infants, toddlers and pre-teens. It was also a form of violence against women. Our fathers had helped us out here as well. ("This would kill your mother if she found out." "She's not good

They were rejecting or were frigid (or sexually rapacious). This, they said, is what drives men to the beds of their five-year-olds, this "incest mother." Well, this was not exactly the way we would have put it. But it meant these new experts saw what we did: that when men



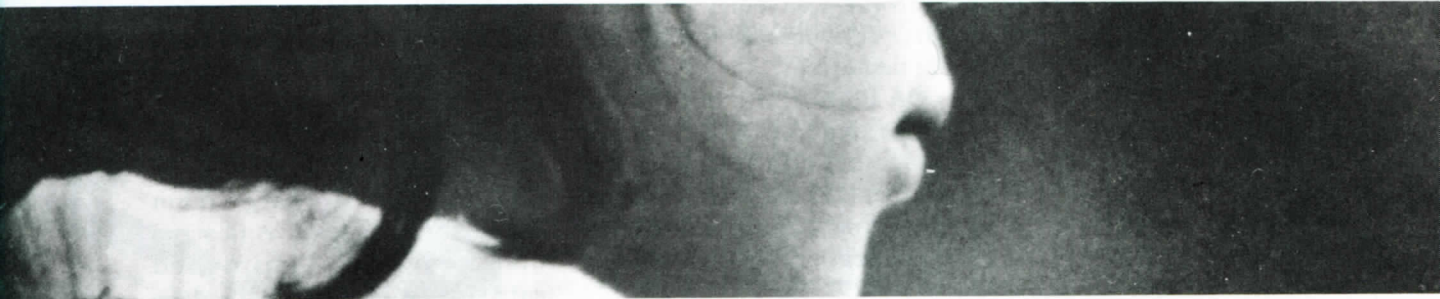
The US policy to decriminalise incest not only punishes women and children. It also diminished the impact of adult survivors' testimony.

sexually assault their children, it is often driven by rage at women.

There was a subtle but serious distinction between the "pro-incest" folks and the new experts. The "pro-incesters" wanted incest legalised, whereas the new experts wanted it "decriminalised." Legalised had the virtue of candour. But decriminalising incest won in the USA. That meant that as a matter of policy, incest was subject to state intervention: civil, not criminal. Incest is a criminal offence in the United Kingdom. Yet, as a formality,

choosing her husband over her child, denying what the kid said. You had to have her, alive or dead. ("Sometimes the incest mother is absent from the home, or terminally ill.")

So women, who, discovering the abuse, left and tried to protect the child, were simply not playing their role in the drama as now scripted. For this outrageous failure to read their lines as written in a script essential to defraying male accountability, the mothers had to be viciously punished. And so these "vindictive, hysterical" women lost custody of their



permission from the Director of Public Prosecutions must be granted before it goes to court—like treason, incest is treated as unpleasant and unusual. In the USA, in an intervention that would target, not rapist fathers, but "incest families", civil statutes were written that faulted the mother who "knew or should have known." Well, looked at generously, even that message was not so very different from our own: Women should know that men feel a liberty to rape children.

One problem with their way of putting things was that in order to have "intra-familial child sexual abuse" for which the woman was equally (or more) culpable, you absolutely had to have this "incest mother" hanging around in the picture,

children—to the alleged abusers. They were that dangerous. They threatened to expose the whole conceptual fraud. War on children and their mothers had been declared.

Another problem with the new experts' way of putting things was that in practice a policy of decriminalisation not only resulted in punishing women and children, it also diminished the import of adult survivors' testimony. It rendered individual survivors vulnerable to the newly emerging specialists in problem management—those in the therapeutic arena who, alone, assured survivors that what had happened to them mattered. Alas, in this medicalized world, survivors' experience mattered in direct proportion to the degree

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of manifest illness. How sick you were proved how bad it was. Checklists offered expanding lists of expected symptoms, the display of which was said to be evidence of your past abuse.

Within this individualised universe, some individual survivors sought personal—rather than united, political—action. They did battle against statutes of limitation and instigated lawsuits against alleged perpetrators. Making incest a financial issue for offenders in the USA of course galvanised a spirited, quickly organised, political response. The oxymoronic False Memory Syndrome was born. War on adult survivors' credibility had been declared.

On both fronts of this war against children and mothers and against adult survivors, it was the other side that had the army. Individualisation and medicalization had precluded

political organisation. By now, friends in this struggle would say: "Things are not going well." To which I replied: "Things are going very well. Just not for us."

We have been re-silenced. Within the larger world. And within a world that is labeled feminist as well.

You cannot hear us anymore—those of us who have spoken out about incest as a licensed abuse of male power. Our voices have been drowned out by those who speak of incest as "gender neutral." Drowned out by those who speak of incest-as-illness, who would have us hear only that women survivors had been made fragile and helpless by the event in their childhood vaguely rendered by the word incest. Women are portrayed to us, in tones of great sympathy, as damaged, suffering from diminished capacity. And signs of damage, of diminished capacity—working backwards—are taken as "indicators" that they have been wounded by incest. Incest has become a metaphor for all the oppressions that feminism named.

What has happened in this brief 15 years since feminists first spoke out on incest as the explicit exoneration of fathers, the implication of mothers and the infantilization of women as survivors.

The personal is political. You may still hear the words but you can no longer hear the meaning behind them. You cannot hear that the point of speaking out was to identify commonalities that, once identified, could lead to political action for change. We spoke out publicly to break a silence—when there was silence to break. But speaking out was never intended to be all there was. We



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endorsed help for individual women. But that was never meant to be all there was: the building of field hospitals to tend a predictably endless supply of wounded.

You cannot hear us anymore. Even though you cannot any longer hear silence on the prevalence of incest, you cannot anywhere hear what all this talk of incest means. You can't hear that it is about a license that is historical. Or that, until recently, what silenced women was not reticence or shame, but intimidation. You can't hear that, as recently as 1978, the law in Texas for instance held the complaining child liable as an accomplice-witness, a "participant," an instigator. For all the loose talk of the "crime" of incest, you can not hear that this male abuse of power continues to be quasi, semi, more-or-less legal in the USA. Or that where children and their protective mothers refuse to be silent, they will be silenced by the courts, and punished. And you cannot hear that these things are all connected, all part of the same weave. That the myth of the incest "triad" and the exclusive focus on victims' pathology are both tailored to protect the male offender. You can not hear this even within most gatherings of feminists.

Even the incest stories you now hear are selective. The stories of children yanked into the child welfare system are unheard. The stories of those placed under psychiatric surveillance, sometimes institutionalised, presumed according to mental health ideology to be at risk of emotional disturbance because their fathers raped them, are unheard. And yet we are

everywhere told that we are, at last, listening to children.

Nor do survivors' stories speak clearly of incest as male violence, nor of the deliberateness of that violence. Indeed, with the focus so heavily on illness, you can barely discern the fact of human agency: It is as though "incest" is a natural catastrophe—not rape by Daddy, who could just as easily have not done it.

What you can hear now is that we are at last—15 years after women began publicly speaking out, 10 years after the televising of the breakthrough documentary "Something About Amelia," five years after every talk show in the USA has routinised the airing of incest stories—breaking the silence.

Women continue to speak out but seldom in their own authentic voices. Rather, their speech echoes that of therapists; they speak the language of mental health—of their disorders and their path to healing. They speak of being in recovery, as though it were a geographical space. Their stories are absent of context, without larger meaning. In being framed as medical, incest has been rendered trivial.

Somehow, mental health ideology infiltrated and subverted feminist rationality. Once incest was re-formulated by treaters and healers, speaking out itself was transformed. Its meaning was changed. The personal became public but not political. It was not the abuse of male power but individual women and their symptoms who needed to change.

What we are speaking of here is not therapy, the private event. What we are referring to is the therapeutic ideology—



whose world enlarges the personal, with no agenda for the political. It is a belief system, a way of seeing the world that subverts the goals of feminism.

It promotes the personal to the paramount, sells belonging in suffering, offers consolation that what afflicts you is not politically engineered but an individual fate. When the therapeutic ideology triumphs, feminism loses.

Alas, it has proved very seductive. The therapeutic ideology infiltrated feminism through the issue of incest. It hijacked the issue from under feminism's nose. It pretended to feminism by hijacking feminist language. Combining that language with mental health credo, it offered to survivors something it called empowerment. All women needed was the courage to cede their power to experts. The language promised liberation, spoke of the struggle. By the early 1990s you could no longer distinguish what survivors were calling the survivor movement from what everyone else was calling the recovery movement. And all of

this in the name of feminism.

Speaking out, lopped free from all political foundation, was bankrupt. No more than confession. It was now said to be a "stage" in healing. But who would dare challenge such things? To speak out is to seem to be making rude noises on an

intensive care ward. Who among us is brutal enough to speak against healing?

We have been re-silenced.

Fathers and stepfathers continue to rape children. Children pay a high price for that. Their mothers pay a high price for that. The cost benefit analysis of incest remains the same. The fact of incest, the incidence of incest—routine, banal, non-exotic incest—is the sexualization of children in everyday reality: the expression of rage at women by wounding their children, in everyday reality.

Pictures in the media of children sexualized are signifiers of the licensed act. Images of women dressed as children, of children made up and photographed as little women, are signifiers, a warning of license. As long as the act itself remains uncensored, and the aggressors remain publicly unchallenged as a collective force, by a collective force, as long as feminist analysis and energy is submerged in and overridden by mental health doctrine, images of the sexualization of children are the "tip of the iceberg."

The iceberg remains the socially tolerated act of child-rape by fathers.

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courtesy of Deirdre McCartin of T.V. One