

THE MODERN PORNOGRAPHY DEBATES

NETTIE POLLARD

Over the last 10 to 15 years, pornography has gone from being a marginal issue to being central in the public perception as a source of anxiety in modern culture. Where once only a faintly laughable minority of moral rightists cried out for the government to 'do something' about recreational sexual materials, now the Prime Minister himself has used the issue in an attempt to gather popularity and votes. And where once the subject of pornography was of interest principally to those who wanted to look at it and read it, we have recently seen an extraordinary number of books aimed at people who want to read about pornography.

For much of modern history, the arguments between those who would censor pornography and those who would not had seemed at a stalemate between a moralistic position and progressive, liberal arguments. A new vitality came to this discourse as the feminist movement itself became loudly and vocally split over the issue. Although some feminists maintain that they have brought an entirely new analysis of pornography to bear, it is more accurate to say that the feminist arguments have given new credibility to both sides of the existing debate.

THE BRITISH POSITION

Although the debates among feminists and social scientists are far from reaching a conclusion, the government appears to have ac-

cepted the view that pornography is harmful and something must be done. Prodded by public concern about pornography, the government commissioned a thorough review of all the existing research from around the world, which was released by the Home Office in 1990. That report concluded that the existing research could not support the view that pornography was implicated in causing harm to society or to individuals within society.¹ Nevertheless, Chief Inspector Michael Hames, head of the Obscene Publications Squad, has declared that the link between pornography and violence is proven, and he has openly campaigned for increases in censorship and police powers to enforce it. On 8 October 1993, Prime Minister John Major announced at the Conservative Party Conference that there would be a crackdown on pornography.

Over recent years, there have been attempts from both sides of the House of Commons, not just from the right wing but also from MPs normally associated with the left wing such as Dawn Primarolo and Clare Short, to restrict what sexual material we can see. Short's 'page 3' bill is much better known, largely because it was laughed out of the Commons by sexist MPs, but Dawn Primarolo's Location of Pornographic Material bill has also generated a great deal of activity, pro and con, from some feminists. For our legislators, the question already seems to have been answered, but those of us who have concerns about the policy implications of censor-

Libertarian Alliance Pamphlet No. 22

ISSN 0953-7783 ISBN 1 85637 237 5

A Joint Libertarian Alliance/British Association of
Libertarian Feminists Publication

© 1994: Libertarian Alliance; British Association of
Libertarian Feminists; *Media Law and Practice*; Nettie Pollard.

Nettie Pollard is a founding member of Feminists Against
Censorship and was a member of the *Red Rag* collective.
She does not support free market libertarianism.

This article was first published in *Media Law and Practice*,
Vol. 14 No. 4, 1993 and is reprinted with permission.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance,
the Association of Libertarian Feminists, their Committees,
Advisory Councils or subscribers.

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF LIBERTARIAN FEMINISTS

Chairwoman: Judy Tame

Libertarian Alliance

25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

Director: Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

ship and the way it is enforced might welcome the flurry of books seeking to illuminate this issue more fully.

Civil libertarians have traditionally opposed censorship of all kinds, but in 1989 Campaign Against Pornography & Censorship (CPC) put up a motion to the annual general meeting of the National Council for Civil Liberties ('Liberty') to consider legislation against pornography, arguing that pornography silences women and causes sexual violence, and that if the delegates really cared about women, they would have to vote in favour of the motion. Only a civil libertarian argument was brought up in opposition, and the motion was passed by a narrow majority. A year later, a motion virtually overturning the 1989 vote also passed narrowly, this time with the support of arguments from Feminists Against Censorship (FAC). In the following year, FAC's own motion passed overwhelmingly. Since then, CPC's presence has dwindled and the organisation has returned to its original anti-censorship stance.

The debate, however, rages on. The books that have been produced on the subject in the last few years range from what appear to be purely academic discussions to those that make clear their intention to influence policy. Books by feminists even more clearly show a desire to get through to women. Publications of both kinds can be found propounding all of the positions in this debate.

THE MORALIST POSITION

The traditional, conservative critique of pornography has portrayed sexual material as disgusting and as a threat to moral order. Traditionalists wanted to uphold their ideal of a well-ordered society where strong men provide for the soft, nurturing women who would look first to their fathers and then to their husbands. Men and women should live in monogamous marriage or celibacy, and any expression of sexuality outside traditional reproductive intercourse in marriage is deviant and to be condemned. Men are the sexual actors and women receive sex from men passively. Some even say women should receive their sexual fulfilment through childbirth.

In this perspective, pornography is threatening to society and must be suppressed. If men are allowed to see the naked bodies of other women, they may become dissatisfied with their wives and be tempted to commit adultery. Unmarried men might consort with prostitutes or try to seduce decent girls. Respectable women would be totally shocked and distraught if they should see pornography, especially if they came across it in their husbands' belongings. More impressionable women might even be led astray by such materials.

Progressives have never felt that sex itself was so dangerous. Pleasure, they feel, is a normal, healthy part of sexual relations, and does not harm society. Repression, in the liberal view, presents the far greater threat. In fact, repression is associated with sexual dysfunction and relational problems between men and women. Openness about sex is seen as positive and may actually free women from some of the negative effects of an anti-sexual culture. Moreover, liberals oppose strong controls by the state of personal morality, and perceive censorship in particular as harmful to society.

Feminists have historically supported the liberal position with regard to both pornography and censorship in general. They experienced censorship of sexual material as a particular threat to the production of feminist materials dealing with sex and had no faith in the ability of a sexist culture to suppress pornography without also suppressing materials created by feminists for the exploration of women's sexuality and position in society. The liberal position generally held that censorship is a political tool used by the state and the establishment to suppress debate.

ANTI-PORNOGRAPHY FEMINISM

A feminist analysis of pornography that departed from the mainstream feminist view emerged during the 1970s in the United States and has become prominent in Britain over the last decade. In this perspective, pornography actually leads men to treat women

as objects and inferiors, both intellectually and in the workplace. It leads to sex discrimination as well as a predisposition to find sexual violence acceptable. Ultimately, pornography is causal to rape, child abuse, and other sexual violence. If this is so, civil liberties arguments and concerns about freedom of expression versus censorship become trivial when compared to the harm pornography may do to women.

Women who support this view frequently distinguish between 'pornography', which is harmful, and 'erotica', which is not; 'erotica' would be sexual representations 'premised on equality'. However, these women are in wide disagreement about which materials fall into each of these categories. In fact, not all anti-pornography women accept this distinction, saying that all sexual representations of women are degrading and harmful.² Similarly, some anti-pornography women feel that only certain sexual acts, and therefore their depictions, are harmful, while others maintain that all genital acts harm women.³

There had been no such thing as 'anti-censorship feminism' at first, because feminists were virtually anti-censorship by definition. The emergence of anti-pornography feminism forced others in the women's movement to define and crystallise their reasons for opposing censorship in specifically feminist terms. Suppression of information for women is one of the ways women have been kept under the power of men. In this way, men have been able to define women and women's sexuality. The presence of sexual material in society gave women permission to explore their sexuality and removed guilt about the experience and expression of sexuality. Pornography has traditionally been male-dominated, as with other media, but the answer to that is not to suppress pornography, but rather to have a much greater variety of pornography, including that produced by women and for women.⁴

Anti-censorship feminists believe that censorship is just a means for the state to continue to control women. The right-wing has capitalised on the feminist anti-pornography movement, gaining credibility from feminists for programmes which are themselves anti-feminist. Conservative legislators can pretend to support programmes for women by increasing censorship of pornography while doing nothing of substance for women. Thus, child-care, jobs, economic equality, reproductive freedom and other feminist issues can be ignored while politicians feel they've 'done their bit' for women. The result, however, is further stigmatisation and danger for women in the sex industry as well as other sexually active women.

'A RADICAL NEW VIEW'

The media in Britain has tended to operate on the assumption that there is a single feminist position with regard to pornography and censorship: that pornography creates harm to women and should be restricted.⁵ This view provides the backbone of Catherine Itzin's *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, a collection of articles by a number of anti-pornography activists and researchers, most of whom have high profiles in the pornography campaigns. Unlike most media presentations, however, Itzin does acknowledge in her introduction that there are feminists who quite specifically oppose this view. But she dismisses them as either having failed to understand the anti-pornography arguments or as deliberately misrepresenting the position she and those like her hold.

Itzin, a founder of the Campaign Against Pornography and Censorship, supports legislation of the sort that has been promoted in the United States by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, leading figures in the pornography debates. The Dworkin-MacKinnon law begins by redefining pornography, Itzin says, as '*a practice of sex discrimination which sexualizes the subordination of women and which eroticizes violence against women*: as 'a political practice of power and powerlessness' which 'eroticizes dominance and submission'.⁶ In an effort to remove First Amendment protections from pornography as so defined, the law is called 'civil rights legislation', specifies that pornography does actual harm, and offers 'victims of pornography' the right to sue the producers of sexual materials.

It is unlikely that juries would award compensation to women who had been raped on the basis that it was not the rapist, but the pornographer, who was responsible for the crime. However, multiple lawsuits of this type could effectively put even a relatively secure publisher out of business, which would amount to economic censorship. Itzin insists, however, that what she advocates is not censorship at all, but empowerment of women. Nevertheless, she and her colleagues have said that the harm pornography is said to do to women would justify such action. Freedom of speech, they say, is a right that only the powerful have access to anyway, and the First Amendment or similar laws only protect their power.⁷

To underscore this position, reductive laboratory research is selectively used to support the belief that pornography causes harm. Feminists have historically been critical of the use of such research, which was often brought in to 'prove' that females are inferior to males. Ironically, the vast array of research dealing with real sex criminals is given short shrift in this book, although sexual violence appears to be one of its principal concerns. Even those sections dealing specifically with child abuse make no mention of the copious data from research facilities and treatment centres that provide a remarkably consistent profile of the backgrounds of child abusers and other sexually violent offenders. Perhaps this is because such research is inconsistent with Itzin's programme.

This is just one aspect of the difficulty with this book's lack of academic rigour. Additionally, there is no index, and much of the content is polemic studded with footnotes. References to US *Penthouse* describing stronger material than can legally be found in Britain are never accompanied by clarification that this is an altogether different magazine than the one by the same name sold in W. H. Smith's; Itzin's discussion of pornographic magazines in the UK, although it mentions UK *Penthouse*, again does not distinguish it from the US version. Corrine Sweet attacks pornography as a form of addiction, but her use of that term is not consistent with our understanding of addiction in other contexts and her beliefs are certainly not supported by any research. Ray Wyre presents an analysis of pornography with regard to child abuse that seems to be based entirely on his own prior lack of exposure to pornography, rather than any broader understanding of its content or its uses in society. Andrea Dworkin says that pornography is an '\$8 billion trade in sexual exploitation' in America, but the United States Bureau of Statistics gives that same figure for the *worldwide* pornography industry. Although Peter Baker acknowledges that young males probably respond to pornography in a context where there is a lack of other sexual information, he still seems to overlook the greater importance of sex education, as opposed to restraint on pornography.

Attempting to establish a link between pornography, sexism and sexual violence, anti-porn researchers James Check and James Weaver each contribute articles. An extract from Edna Einsiedel's report to the Meese Commission is also included.

Only Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer question the grounds upon which the debate has been posed, but it is such a contradiction to the entire premise the other articles work from that it stands alone and outside of the book. It is not surprising that their piece is buried in the middle of the book where it is least likely to be noticed, having far more in common with the anti-censorship arguments than with those others in the book.

'EVIDENCE OF HARM'

Most of the academic researchers who were once cited as having proven the harm of pornography have since been changing their minds. Neil Malamuth is a good example of a man who seemed to be bent on proving that pornography was dangerous, but even he appears to have come to distrust the use of his research to support censorship. It seems that when anti-pornography researchers start reading each other's work, they begin to see that there is no reliable pattern showing harm. In *Communication Concepts 5: Pornography*, Daniel Linz and Neil Malamuth review the laboratory research that has so often been cited by anti-pornography femin-

ists, conservatives, and politicians to justify censorship. Although they never discuss the methodological problems with the research, they still are unable to conclude that pornography is a danger to women.

The principal focus of this book is the effect that the different perspectives on pornography have brought to research on sexual media as a means of communication. However, Linz and Malamuth recognise only three perspectives on the issue: the moral/authoritarian, the liberal/civil libertarian, and what they call the feminist position, although this is only the anti-pornography feminist view.

Yet, despite the fact that they show no recognition of the feminist anti-censorship position, their discussion of the moralists uses such strong and specific language that it is hard to believe they didn't recognise the direct conflict between the moral/authoritarian desire to censor and the feminist desire to free women from traditional sex roles. In discussing the works of Zillmann and Bryant, the researchers who are most often cited as having proved that pornography makes men callous toward women, they mention that these men wanted to test their belief that, 'pornography fosters lack of respect for, and belief in, traditional institutions such as marriage, traditional relations between the sexes, and traditional roles for women. They hypothesise that the use of pornographic material may lead to a general acceptance of sex crimes, alter perceptions and evaluations of marriage, spawn distrust among intimate partners, inspire claims for sexual freedom, and even diminish the desire to have children.' With the exception of 'general acceptance of sex crimes', it could be argued that much feminist literature has done or demanded these same things. This analysis makes pornography sound like a library of feminist tracts. Under the circumstances, it is particularly startling that Zillmann and Bryant's research is so frequently cited by feminists as evidence of harm.

GOVERNMENTS AND PORNOGRAPHY

Like Linz and Malamuth, Gordon Hawkins and Franklin E. Zimring take a relatively value-free approach to the pornography debates. Although they clearly place a value on freedom of expression, they seem equally prepared to accept the view that pornography poses dangers to society and requires imaginative action.

Pornography in a Free Society begins by examining enquiries on pornography by governments in America and Britain. These are: The President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, US, 1970; the Williams Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, UK, 1977; and the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (the Meese Commission), US, 1986. Unfortunately, the authors appear to be relying entirely on the published reports in all cases, as there is no mention of the suppressed material from the Meese Commission, such as the overview of soft core magazines that was commissioned, or the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography. Nevertheless, they provide interesting insights into the ways the committees were set up and worked, as well as some of the responses to the reports after publication. There is certainly a great deal of interesting factual information about the classification, distribution and marketing of sexual materials in America.

Hawkins and Zimring discuss the anti-pornography arguments as posed by its two leading proponents, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, with remarkably close attention to the inconsistencies in their arguments. They politely decline to support the Dworkin-MacKinnon view, although they do not exonerate pornography. Nevertheless, they conclude that pornography is not a very important issue when all is said and done.

'THE CHALLENGE TO RECLAIM FEMINISM'

In *Bad Girls & Dirty Pictures*, Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol present what is intended to be an antidote to anti-pornography feminism. This book is the third produced by members of Feminists Against Censorship,⁸ a group of long-time feminists who joined together in 1989 to fight both censorship and the impression that feminists generally agree that pornography should be re-

stricted. Of those books discussed here, it is the only one written entirely by women. All but one of the articles is accessible to the general reader and require no prior knowledge of the social sciences to be readily understood.

Carol's introduction reads in many respects as if it intended a direct dialogue with Itzin and Dworkin. She begins with the social purity movements that destroyed the previous wave of feminism and warns that the present anti-pornography movement may be having the same effect on modern women's liberation. Although she does not name her, she is clearly disputing a claim often made by Itzin when she says that, 'If women in the 1990s note that men are still given greater stature in public regard, we would do well to remember how much less we had before. In the days when pornography was rare, so were female authorities in the intellectual arena.' Against the assertions of what she calls 'cultural feminists' that pornography lowers women in men's regard, Carol disputes this link, pointing out that women's position has in fact improved as mass-produced commercial pornography has become widely available.

The first and best article in the book is a specific, point-by-point refutation of anti-pornography feminist arguments, written by Gayle Rubin, the American feminist activist. Entitled 'Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics', the article bemoans the 'premature orthodoxy' that anti-porn feminism has created and calls on women to oppose censorship, decriminalise prostitution and support sex education. This, she says, 'would revive feminism as a progressive, visionary force in the domain of sexuality.'

In answer to the claims that there is scientific evidence of a link between pornography and sexual violence, Alison King of Reading University provides her own overview of the research. She shows that the laboratory research is unreliable and suggests closer scrutiny to the effects of conservative attitudes on the formation of violent tendencies. King clearly feels that those attitudes, and not pornography, account for most sexual violence in society. She points out that research on sex offenders themselves shows a consistency in such attitudes in the backgrounds of rapists.

In another chapter, Avedon Carol exposes the myth of 'snuff' movies; that is, films made for erotic entertainment by actually killing the women in the movies. Although so many anti-porn arguments rest on horror at the existence of snuff movies, in fact, no such film has ever been discovered by any police force in the world. In, 'Snuff: Believing the Worst', Carol theorises that the urban legend of snuff is a paranoid projection of violence onto sex.

In contrast to these articles are those by Tuppy Owens and Claudia which make no pretence to academic concerns. Owens, a former porn star, outlines her life in the sex industry as positive experience. She became involved in pornography, she says, because she really liked sex. Claudia, on the other hand, cites the anti-porn movement as the reason why she stayed away from feminism. Her irreverent, anarchistic approach comes across as refreshingly honest.

The book is a mixed bag of styles and concerns, and sometimes feels uneven and 'bitty'. There is one article that really does not seem to belong in this collection, and that is 'Essentially Sex: A New Look', by co-editor Alison Assiter. In an apparent argument with Sheila Jeffreys' belief that women can simply turn into lesbians in rejection of men and sexism,⁹ Assiter attempts to refute constructionist arguments about the development of sexuality. However, her style is difficult and her position never quite crystallises.

In the conclusion, it is argued that censorship is used to suppress women and others who are 'willing to stand up to sexism'. The authors call for a return to the feminist criticism of reproduction and the family and restate women's liberation's questions about the economic and relational positions of women in society.

It is hard not to agree with Linz and Malamuth's conclusion that it is useful to be aware of all of the varying positions on the pornography issue. These four books certainly provide an interesting

overview of the conflicting points of view that inform the debate. Those who are not already comfortable with reading scientific research critically might not find the Linz and Malamuth useful by itself, but the other three books are more accessible. Hawkins and Zimring provide a good general view, although they do not go into the feminist arguments in any detail. Certainly, the feminist perspective on pornography is best illuminated by reading the two books edited by women in combination. Anyone who wished to become well-versed in the issues of sexual representation and censorship would do well to read all four books for a fuller picture.

Catherine Itzin, *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, Oxford University Press, 1992, ISBN 0-19-825291-9, 645 pp., £19.95, hardback.

Daniel Linz and Neil Malamuth, *Communication Concepts 5: Pornography*, Sage Publications, London, 1993, ISBN 0-80394481-0, 76 pp., paperback.

Gordon Hawkins and Franklin E. Zimring, *Pornography in a Free Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, ISBN 0-521-40600-5, 236 pp., £10.95, paperback.

Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol, *Bad Girls & Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*, Pluto Press, London, 1993, ISBN 0-7453-0524-5, 185 pp., £9.95, paperback.

NOTES

1. Dennis Howitt and Guy Cumberbatch, *Pornography: Impacts and Influences*, Home Office, 1990.
2. See Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Perigee, New York, 1981. Dworkin says she sees no distinction between pornography and erotica, the latter just being high-class porn for rich men.
3. See, for example, Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1987, in which Dworkin argues that sexual intercourse in itself is at the centre of women's oppression.
4. See for example *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography, and Censorship*, Caught Looking, Inc., New York, 1986.
5. For example, an episode of Dispatches (Channel 4, Autumn 1992), dealing with the pornography debates, advocated the passage of anti-pornography laws and featured Catherine Itzin. The 'feminist' anti-pornography law passed in Canada was discussed and recommended. No mention was made of the fact that many feminists objected to this law on the grounds that it would be used against feminist and lesbian materials, nor that this fear had proven true when the first prosecution was of a gay bookshop and a lesbian magazine. (The law has since been used against Andrea Dworkin's anti-pornography book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*.) Alternative views were barely represented at all. One came in the form of dry disagreement from Guy Cumberbatch, author of the Home Office report on pornography, to the effect that the research Itzin cites to condemn pornography can not be duplicated (a fact that matters very much to social scientists, but little to others). The other was from Isabel Koprowski, managing editor of *Penthouse* and *Forum*, who was presented quite clearly as a pornographer rather than as a woman who has concerns about women's rights and safety. Although most long-time feminists in Britain do not support restrictions on pornography, they are seldom called on to present opposing views to the 'feminist' anti-porn position.
6. 'Pornography means the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy humiliation or pain; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape ...' and so on, according to the ordinance.
7. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, 1993, for the most recent version of this argument.
8. See Feminists Against Censorship's *Pornography and Feminism: The Case Against Censorship*, Gillian Rodgerson and Elizabeth Wilson, eds., Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. This book is a collective effort written by the group, giving a brief outline of the basic feminist anti-censorship arguments. Also, *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh, eds., Virago, 1991, an anthology edited by two members of Feminists Against Censorship.
9. Jeffreys is the author of *Anticlimax*, which proposes that women should become lesbians in order to escape from sexism. She believes that the refusal of most women to do so represents an acceptance of a degraded sexuality.