

# FEMINISTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY



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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last year or so the Libertarian Alliance has published a number of articles by Avedon Carol of Feminists Against Censorship. Each of these argues against censorship of pornographic material. To that extent, the articles are good; and that is presumably why they have been published by the Libertarian Alliance. However, Ms Carol and the other Feminists Against Censorship approach this and other issues from an essentially left-wing perspective. As a consequence, while they are opposed to overt sex censorship, they nevertheless find themselves supporting measures that entail restrictive state control over sexual and other aspects of our lives. Ms Carol's articles also contain some faulty diagnosis and prescription for current social ills. Further, because Feminists Against Censorship see the world through the distorting spectacles of left-wing feminism, some of their pronouncements are just arrant nonsense, not construable or discussable by people who have not suspended disbelief in order to enter that fantasy world.

Apart from Ms Carol's Libertarian Alliance papers, I have read a pamphlet produced by Feminists Against Censorship to introduce the group (they sent it to me a couple of years ago after I wrote to them asking for some information, but it was enough to put me off having any further contact with them). What follows is a brief assessment of Feminists Against Censorship — the good, the bad and the ugly — as seen through these publications. (In what follows, numbers in square brackets refer to the works listed in the References at the end.)

## THE GOOD

In her contribution to the pornography debate in [1]-[4], Ms Carol makes the following good points.

Censorship campaigners give descriptions of the content, and availability, of pornography that are wildly inaccurate. The truth is that pornography involving children or animals or violence is relatively scarce and is not representative of pornography in general. The scare stories about children and violence in pornography are used to justify suppression of mainstream pornography showing sex between consenting adults; and the hysteria over child pornography has put ordinary families at risk of police investigation and forcible separation. The picture (painted by police and others with a vested interest) of children trading in computer porn is fanciful and IT-illiterate. In any case, exposure to pornography is not likely to cause children any harm or distress. Many pro-censorship puritans (including high-ranking police officers) plainly believe that all sexual imagery is bad, that masturbation is bad, and that some sexual acts that are common among the populace are disgusting and perverted.

Contrary to left-wing feminist claims, many women enjoy pornography rather than being offended or threatened by it. And most people think that pornography portraying sex acts between consenting adults should not be illegal. Furthermore, very large numbers of law-abiding people own such material (often without realising that it is illegal) and increasing numbers have produced their own "home-grown" versions, so criminalisation of the possession of such ma-

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terial will confer arbitrary power on law-enforcement officers who will be able to use the law selectively.

More than 50 years of research into sex offenders and the effects of pornography does not support the oft-repeated claims that pornography is implicated in sexual violence. Rather, empirical research links sex offences with sexually repressive childhood backgrounds. This may be surprising to many because the pornography debate is afflicted by the problem of junk science, i.e. pseudo-scientific studies which claim evidence for startling conclusions, which are then seized upon by zealous pressure groups with an axe to grind and given wide publicity by the press, so that the conclusions are accorded credence by the general population. In particular, television broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, LWT, ITV) are responsible for what amounts to a campaign of misinformation about pornography that promotes puritanical feminist calls for greater censorship and fascistic methods of enforcement.

It is particularly good to hear such points being made by a left-wing feminist because, as Ms Carol herself complains, such “radical” feminists are characteristically some of the worst offenders on the anti-pornography bandwagon. In an amusing passage, she highlights the irony that puritanical feminist campaigns for censorship repine at features of pornography which, actually, are imposed upon it by the censorship that we already have. Thus it is said that pornography shows “no mutuality”, but existing censorship does not allow couples to be shown in action; and that it is only “for men”, but erections are not allowed to be shown!

A paradox that she does not point out is the following. Puritanical feminists urge censorship of pornography on the ground of the premise that it gives rise to sexual offences. However, while the empirical evidence gives no support to that premise, it does support a link between sexually repressive attitudes and people developing into sex offenders. It is exactly such sexually repressive attitudes that are expressed by the puritanical feminists. So by their own lights, their own views ought to be censored. That seems to be something of a *reductio ad absurdum* of puritanical feminism.

Ms Carol’s fully justified conclusion is that sex censorship is not just a pointless waste of taxpayers’ money and a curtailment of our liberty, but is also harmful.

## THE BAD

In [4] Ms Carol speaks of the values present in pornography as though pornography were a uniform medium representing a single perspective, which I am afraid is more than a little simplistic. For example, she says: “the ‘kill the bitch’ syndrome is never present in pornography”. She also says that, while violence is a common male reaction to wifely infidelity in society at large, in pornography such a discovery is more likely to lead to group sex (caring and sharing?). She infers from this that the claim that pornographic values enter the culture is spurious.

I have a number of problems with these statements. *First*, to qualify as pornography something needs only to be sexually explicit material intended to arouse sexually; and material of which that is true may additionally express any number of attitudes or propositions, some of them crass or anti-social. Ms Carol is right that the bulk of mainstream hardcore pornography, of the type freely available on the conti-

nent but banned over here, tends to be a celebration of no-strings sex, in which the over-riding concern of everyone is mutual enjoyment. However, she seems to overlook the fact that some pornography unreflectingly incorporates stupid attitudes and beliefs that abound in the outside world; and the further fact that some pornography, particularly of the sado-masochistic (S/M) sort, exemplifies the ‘kill the bitch’ syndrome in a strikingly vivid way. Has she never read the Marquis de Sade? A ‘kill the bitch’ attitude leaps out from almost every page.

*Second*, while ‘kill the bitch’ or, for that matter, ‘kill the prick’ pornography is not to everybody’s taste, it nevertheless appeals to large numbers of people and represents fantasies that can be enjoyed *as fantasies*, and which people may even enjoy acting out in a make-believe, game-playing way (whether they are ‘bitches’ or ‘pricks’ or ‘killers’). Such pornography is in even greater need of defence than the mainstream variety. In fairness to Ms Carol, she does, at a later point in [4], try to defend S/M pornography by saying that it does not lead to violence. However, this recognition of the existence of S/M pornography does not really cohere with the passage I am discussing now. (One also needs to be careful with terms, since S/M pornography will often lead to S/M sex involving physical harm and pain, sometimes of a copy-cat variety, but one may be reluctant to describe these activities as “violence” given that they take place with consent.)

*Third*, I think Ms Carol is just mistaken in denying the impact of pornography on the culture. There is today a much greater openness about sex than there used to be. Pornography is in part a product of that openness and in part a cause of it. It is a product of it because people had to start being open about sex in order to produce and distribute pornography. It is a cause of openness because it is a way in which people communicate about sex to other people (and it is an effective way of communicating because it is *arousing* and therefore far more interesting than some dull sex education lecture). I know that I have been affected by pornography, both the mainstream and the sado-masochistic types, *and I am much the better for it*. It is a source of information and ideas, and it broadens one’s outlook on sexual matters; and it certainly alters one’s behaviour (e.g. I remember seeing something in a film that turned me on so much that for some time afterward the depicted activity became a standard item in my repertoire of sexual actions). Best of all, it opens the mind, making people more willing to experiment and, I believe, more understanding of other people’s different needs and desires. And the more bizarre, sado-masochistic pornography is the best at doing this. In a word, people who come into contact with pornography are changed by it (for the better), so the values in pornography cannot but enter the culture.

In [2] Ms Carol relates how the recession led to many “respectable” enterprises in Soho (e.g. restaurants) going out of business to be replaced by outlets for the sex industry which could afford to pay the rents. She is concerned that the state should not resort to censorship in order to eliminate this problem, preferring instead economic programmes like commercial rent control. This, I am afraid, I find quite bewildering.

*First*, why does she regard it as a problem that sex shops are ousting other types of business such as restaurants? Surely all that that shows is that the demand for sex shops

in that part of town is higher than the demand for eateries, i.e. that people prefer to buy their porno, rather than their meals, in Soho. If that is what people want, why is it a problem? Ms Carol is perhaps not entirely free of the puritanism which ensnares the other left-wing feminists.

*Second*, rent control would mean that incumbent businesses would get their premises on the cheap, not only at the expense of the property owner who lets out the premises, but also at the expense of other businesses that would be prepared to pay more to rent the property. As a consequence, the customers of the excluded businesses have to travel farther afield for their goods, thereby bearing additional costs in time, money and general convenience; while the customers of the incumbent businesses get the benefit of purchasing their goods in their favoured location without paying the full costs of this. This represents a transfer of wealth from the customers of the excluded businesses to the customers of the incumbent. But, to return to our example, why should the sex-seekers be forced in this way to subsidise the eaters-out? Further, rent control encourages invidious discrimination on the part of those who let property. For, with rents held artificially low, demand will outstrip supply; but as premises cannot be allocated to the business that makes the highest bid (i.e. the one that represents popular demand), premises will be allotted instead on other grounds, e.g. prejudice or whatever makes for a quiet life. The sex industry, and therefore its consumers, are bound to suffer under this arrangement. So while there may be no censorship, the state would still be violating our sexual freedom through other means. Can Ms Carol explain: why is state interference in our sex lives abhorrent *only* when exercised through censorship? Why is it not also abhorrent when it is expressed in commercial rent control?

I just indicated some of the evils of commercial rent control, namely: the protection of established interests which puts up obstacles to innovation; production becoming unresponsive to the desires of consumers (or would-be consumers); invidious transfers of wealth from consumers of one type of good to consumers of another; and the scope given for arbitrary discrimination. But there are other evils too. For there will be a significant chunk of public money spent on enforcement of the state controls, and a deplorable waste of resources in non-productive activities as businesses competing for premises devote considerable time, money and ingenuity to whatever machinations are necessary in order to see that they win the favour of those who let property. There will also be a lack of new property for rent coming on to the market, long waiting lists for premises, deterioration in the quality of property for rent, and other problems reminiscent of the nightmare of socialism. If Ms Carol offers people a choice between all these horrors and censorship, which do you think they would choose? Why on earth does she not just demand a free market, so that people can have what they want, instead of what some priggish state official thinks they should have?

In [3] we read that “the purpose of the criminal law is to protect the populace from harm” and that therefore any restriction of freedom requires compelling evidence that the freedom in question constitutes a clear and present danger to the public. In the case of pornography, of course, there is no such evidence. I am afraid, however, that the principle proposed here expresses a typical left-wing paternalism that amounts in fact to a tyrant’s charter. For example, how

many people are killed or injured in road accidents every year? I cannot remember the figure, but it runs to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, year after year. This continual carnage, which is not open to dispute, surely constitutes a clear and present danger to the public. But could it justify criminalising the use of motor vehicles? I can already hear the green lefties exuberantly shouting *yes!*; but no-one with any fondness for freedom would agree with them. The same applies to heavy smoking (which many paternalistic lefties are keen virtually to outlaw), to heavy drinking, to over-eating, to buggery, to sado-masochism, to casual sex, even to sport (which exacts a heavy toll of injury and death). Let us give short shrift to paternalistic suppression of our freedom in the name of safety, and instead proclaim that the purpose of the criminal law is to protect our rights. One of our rights is the right to harm ourselves if we want to; another is the right to harm others provided they consent; and another is the right to expose others to small risks of harm whether they consent to it or not, provided there is some mechanism of compensation in cases where actual harm results.

In [4], after contrasting the caring and sharing values of (some) pornography with the violence exhibited by some men toward women in society at large, Ms Carol goes off at a tangent to discuss the causes of violence and crime in general. It is unfortunate that she does not keep her *insistence* that pornography does not cause anti-social behaviour separate from her *speculation* as to what does, for a recognition that the speculation is rubbish might incline some readers to the conclusion that perhaps the insistence is too. The rise in crime, she says, is not caused by pornography or video nasties: what is to blame, she says, is unemployment, “alienation”, deterioration in state-funded services, rising VAT, and the resulting “poverty” (she uses this term despite the fact that the welfare-sponging “poor” in this country have a better standard of living than the relatively well-off in socialist, or ex-socialist, countries). I will not go off at a tangent myself in order to discuss these issues except briefly to make the following points:

- (a) how people behave depends in part upon what they expect to be the consequences of their actions;
- (b) the vast majority of people are nice and have no will to go about violating the rights of other people in order to secure benefits for themselves (even if they are unemployed, short of cash and generally pissed-off);
- (c) there will always be a significant minority of bastards who are inclined to violate the rights of others, either for its own sake, or in order to secure benefits for themselves;
- (d) if bad actions have bad consequences for the perpetrator, the bastards will be less inclined to perform them;
- (e) the reduction of such penalties encourages the bastards to do their worst and can entice some nice people on to the road to becoming bastards;
- (f) over the last forty years or so, the penalties for bad actions have very largely been removed, both legal penalties (less risk of being caught, of being convicted if caught, of receiving any serious punishment if convicted) and economic penalties (good-for-nothings and ex-cons are maintained in a life of ease on the

welfare state, which guarantees a minimum level below which no-one will fall *no matter how big a bastard they become*).

Of course, this is not the whole story. There is also, e.g., the ideology of the welfare state: post-War generations have largely been instilled with the belief that they have a *right* to the good life (that “the world owes them a living”), which can make them resentful and inclined toward anti-social action if they find themselves in uncongenial circumstances. However, I said I would not go off at a tangent.

## THE UGLY

Left-wing feminism has produced its own mythology which takes the myths of Marxism and gives them an additional twist. The mythology has its own jargon which is used to convey the classification and relationships of the fictitious entities and operations. Acceptance of the mythology is necessary in order to understand and take part in the characteristic discussions of these people, which means that anyone interested in discovering and talking about the real world had better by-pass these discussions altogether. Accordingly, I will quote some examples of this nonsense, but I will refrain from any attempt to discuss it. These ugly aspects of Feminists Against Censorship do not surface in Ms Carol’s Libertarian Alliance publications, so all of the following quotations are taken from [5].

Much widely circulated “soft” pornography does mirror society’s sexist view of women ... passive, inviting, unassertive and available.

Our criticism of pornography is ... that much of it is about sex on men’s terms, as is most of our culture whatever words, images or acts it produces.

We should be criticising all sexism, including the unbalanced male orientation of pornography.

The problem is men’s refusal to accept that women own their own bodies.

One of the primary problems is men’s abuse of the power that they have within families, in the context of wider cultural assumptions.

When we focus on the exploitation of women making pornography, we deflect attention from the fact that women are exploited everywhere.

Only since the women’s liberation movement have our eyes been opened to the negative images of women in pornography — and the media in general — and many men would still say that they use pornography because they *like* women such a lot. The hatred is not obvious to everyone.

The problem with the dominant male-defined sexuality is that women are seen as the objects of men’s desire, with no desire of their own other than to please men ... The distinction between the “whore” and the “virtuous” woman was set up to control us.

Pornography is one of the ways some women may want to explore and evolve our own self-directed and self-defined sexuality. We need to empower all women to discuss desire and see ourselves as sexual beings and not the helpless victims of men’s desires

## CONCLUSION

I have identified three aspects of the work and views of Feminists Against Censorship. Their exposure of the errors and dishonesties of sex censorship campaigns is commendable. However, I think it is possible to state the case for pornography and against sex censorship more clearly and more strongly (as I have tried to indicate piecemeal in passing); and their discussion of issues connected with the pornography debate is flawed by acceptance of left-wing assumptions that lead to faulty analysis of problems and threaten to undermine our sexual (and other) freedom. Further, as left-wing feminists, they are prone to the autism of that condition, which means that a lot of their talk does not make contact with reality.

The emergence of Feminists Against Censorship is undoubtedly a good thing. It is a significant dent to the left-wing feminist consensus that pornography is bad and should be censored. It must also have required some critical thinking, independence of mind and personal courage on the part of left-wing feminists like Avedon Carol overtly to reject something that is not only the prevailing view of “radical” feminists but which seems to be so intimately a part of that whole perspective. Her belief in the value of sex and pornography obviously goes deep. However, because Ms Carol and friends accept the usual left-wing assumptions, their opposition to sex censorship is on shaky ground and cannot blossom into a full defence of sexual liberty. Sexual liberty, like liberty in general, is inseparable from free markets; and free markets are by definition incompatible with the state control over our lives that the left-wing persistently advocate (and which follows from their being left-wing). In consequence, if Ms Carol and others like her painstakingly think out the implications of their commitment to the value of sex and the freedom of sexual expression, they will be led to reject more and more of the elements of the left-wing orthodoxy. If they retain their commitment to sexual emancipation and are thoroughly consistent, they will end up being ardent advocates of free market capitalism.

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