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Not Your Father’s Playboy, Not Your Mother’s Feminist Movement: Feminism in a Porn Culture

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Not your father’s *Playboy*, not your mother’s feminist movement: feminism in porn culture

Rebecca Whisnant

*We kind of realised ... that feminism is really just owning your shit and feeling good about your decisions and just being equal with men.*  
— Krystyna Hutchinson

This chapter is about the state of contemporary feminism and how it relates to the porn culture that surrounds us. This is important because whatever porn culture is, and there are a variety of definitions, it’s not what feminists, or women, or anybody with a lick of sense, ever meant by ‘sexual liberation’. There have, however, been contentious debates between radical and liberal feminists about the relationship between pornography, power and choice. I aim to unravel some of those debates here and highlight how liberal notions of ‘choice’, favoured by self-proclaimed ‘third wave feminists’, confuse and undermine our thinking not only about pornography, but about women’s oppression and patriarchy generally.

Let me begin with a major caveat. Whenever we talk about patriarchy, either in general or any particular element, we need to bear in mind that the main problem is men: men’s choices, men’s ways of seeing and treating women and, in the case of pornography, the material that mostly men produce and sell mostly to other men. Nonetheless, women have to live and make our own choices in the world that men have made. That’s unfair enough, but what’s even more unfair is that, as with all forms of oppression, much of the burden of resistance inevitably falls on those who are oppressed. The resistance movement of, and for, women – against patriarchy – is
called feminism, and its strength depends significantly on the cogency
of the political analysis that underlies it.

With this in mind, I want to provide a bit of historical and
conceptual backdrop for further conversations about pornography
and contemporary feminism. Here, then, is my brief thumbnail
history of United States ('US') feminist perspectives on, and political
action around, pornography over roughly the last 40 years.

How we got here

The early women's liberationists in the late 1960s and very early 1970s
did not think very much about pornography, or at least they didn't
write much about it. But this changed in the mid- to late 1970s, no
doubt due partly to pornography's increasing cultural visibility as well
as to many feminists' growing focus on rape and other forms of male
violence against women. To these early feminists, it was clear that
pornography contained and conveyed the ideology of male supremacy
in a particularly visceral and vicious form that, as Robin Morgan
famously put it in 1974: 'Pornography is the theory, and rape is the
practice.'

Susan Brownmiller took up a similar theme as part of her
1975 book on rape, asserting - presciently, as it turned out - that:

There can be no equality in porn, no female equivalent, no
turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography,
like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanise women
... Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female
propaganda.

The first feminist conference on pornography was held in San
Francisco in 1978, and in October 1979, 5000 women (accompanied
by a few renegade men) marched on New York's Times Square to
protest against industries of sexual exploitation. That same year saw
the publication of Andrea Dworkin's searing and heartbreaking book
Pornography: Men Possessing Women, and in 1980 Laura Lederer published
Take Back the Night, the first major feminist anthology on the subject.

As feminists continued thinking about pornography, and observing
how it functions in the social world, many became inclined to revise
Morgan's original dictum, to assert that pornography was not only a
theory but also, itself, a practice; often a practice of rape, and always a
practice of harm and subordination. This understanding animated the
groundbreaking legal approach to pornography that Andrea Dworkin
and Catharine MacKinnon brought to fruition in their Antipornography
Civil Rights Ordinance. The ordinance defined pornography as sex
discrimination and allowed those harmed in and through pornography
to sue for civil damages.

The Dworkin–MacKinnon Ordinance, as it became widely known,
was passed by the Minneapolis City Council in 1983 and in several
other municipalities thereafter, but higher courts later overturned it as
unconstitutional. There was then, and is now, room for reasonable
and conscientious people to disagree about whether the ordinance was
the best strategy for combating pornography's harms. What occurred,
however, was something far beyond this: an organised and vocal
campaign by some self-described feminists, in open cooperation with
pornographers, not only to defeat the ordinance, but also to mock
and discredit the feminist critique on which it was based. Thus was
the early feminist consensus around pornography shattered, much to
the shock and dismay of many who had put so much of themselves
into developing it.

Meanwhile – and, I think, non-coincidentally – a conservative
backlash movement in American political culture had started to gather
steam. Remember, this was the 1980s: Ronald Reagan was in office,
busily undoing various progressive gains of the 1960s and 1970s and
overseeing a spectacular resurgence of both social conservatism and
unrestrained capitalism. A backlash is meant to scare people and shut
them up and, to some extent, almost inevitably, it succeeds. The whole
point, after all, is to back us into a corner where we don't have much
choice – or at least it seems to us that we don’t have much choice – but to buckle under.

Now think about it in this cultural and political context, a feminism that acquiesces to certain key male entitlements, while simultaneously presenting itself as bold and liberated and rebellious, is likely to be appealing to many women. A version of feminism that supports girls’ and women’s desired self-conception as independent and powerful, while actually requiring very little of them as far as confronting real male power, will similarly have wide appeal. It is my contention that the versions of feminism currently most popular in the academy and in US popular culture more broadly are of exactly this kind, and that the backlash dynamics I just described are on especially clear display with respect to the politics of pornography.

After all, in one important sense, what happened in the 1980s was good news: back then, the feminist critique of pornography had enough cultural, political, and intellectual momentum that an orchestrated campaign was required to defeat it. During the 1990s and early 2000s, however, despite the best efforts of many of us, that critique largely dropped off the radar screen, replaced in some quarters by a depoliticised faux-feminism that caters to, rather than challenges, porn culture.

In The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order, for example, Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller state that:

We don’t have a problem with pornography unless, of course, it doesn’t turn us on. We realise that American porn culture is here to stay. So rather than trying to rid the world of sexual images we think are negative, as some of our sisters have done, we’re far more interested in encouraging women to explore porn, to find out whether it gets them hot or merely bothered ... While the female market for fuck films is still far less than that of men, it’s a central tenet of our version of feminism to acknowledge that it exists at all.  

At a certain level, the logic here is hard to fault: we can’t defeat this beast, Karp and Stoller figure, so we might as well see if we can get our jollies from it too. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

This is a common and familiar phenomenon: we adjust our desires based on what’s actually happening and on what we think is, and is not, possible. Philosophers have a useful term for the results of this process: ‘adaptive preferences’. The basic idea is simple: if I can’t have something (or think I can’t have it), then I behooves me not to want that thing. Conversely, if I’m going to get something whether I like it or not, then I’ll be happier if I can get myself to want it and like it. So people adapt their desires to fit their situations, rather than vice versa, thus minimising the pain of continuing to want something that they don’t think they can get.

The concept of adaptive preferences is indispensable to understanding the self-reproducing dynamics of oppressive systems. In particular, I think it can help us understand the brand of feminism of which I am, for the moment, taking Karp and Stoller as representatives, the brand that’s sometimes called ‘do-me feminism’, but for which the less polite moniker is ‘fuck-me feminism’. One blogger sums it up as follows (unsympathetically but still, I think, pretty accurately):

F**k-me feminism ... is a school of thought that suggests [women] are empowered by reclaiming and controlling our own sexual objectification, by reclaiming the power of pornography and the sex industry for ourselves, and by flaunting our desire and willingness to have sex. In other words, being a man’s sexual object can’t hurt me if I want to be objectified; pornography and the sex industry can’t degrade me if I enjoy it or if I profit from it; being used for sex can’t devalue me if I’m using him too; being regarded as nothing more than a pussy to fuck can’t dehumanise me if I want him to fuck my pussy.
Now we should note an important theme here: that on this view, as far as feminism is concerned, it's not what I'm doing that matters, but whether I really want (or choose) to do it. File this away; I'll come back to it.

So here is the situation we now face. Over the last 15 to 20 years, the pornography industry has exploded in size and reach, and its themes and messages have increasingly colonised the rest of popular culture. During that same period, mainstream commercial pornography has become steadily more suffused with overt degradation, humiliation, and violence. This much is disturbing enough. What’s even more distressing is that, as pornography becomes both more brutal and more pervasive, we are offered a version of feminism that is less and less able to help us understand and resist it, a significantly depoliticised feminism inadequate to the task of challenging male power, especially (though not only) in its pornographic form. In the next section, I contrast this new version, or ‘wave’, of feminism to the version that preceded it, and that, thankfully, still persists alongside it.

‘Wave’-ing goodbye to radical feminism

For those uninitiated to the ‘wave’ model of feminism, the feminist movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, which focused most centrally on women’s rights in marriage, and then later on the right to vote, is usually called the ‘first wave’. The radical women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and to some degree into the 1980s, is called the ‘second wave’. Starting in the early 1990s, some young feminists began to identify as part of what is often called the ‘third wave’.

Now as many before me have pointed out, this ‘wave’ model has a number of shortcomings. For one thing, it tends to downplay important feminist work, particularly by women of colour, between, throughout, and independent of the ‘waves’. Furthermore, at least as commonly deployed in feminist circles, it wrongly suggests that the differences under consideration are primarily generational rather than political. It seems to me, on the contrary, that the difference between the second and the third wave is not primarily a matter of age or generation but that, in fact, most of this much-vaunted difference ultimately reduces to the timeworn distinction between radical feminism and liberal feminism.

As an unrepentant (though generationally anomalous) second wave feminist, let me attempt to articulate three central themes of second wave radical feminism, contrasting each in turn with the perspectives of some self-described third wave feminists. The first is the idea that women can be understood as a class, the second is the notion that the personal is political, and the third is the concept of sexual politics. I’ll then return to the pornography issue with this rudimentary theory in hand; after all, in my opinion, the second wave got things right with respect to pornography because it got things right in its overall political analysis, in its understanding of how systems of oppression work and of how, therefore, such systems must be combated.

One claim central to second wave radical feminism is that women are a class sharing a common condition. This claim sets off a lot of people’s alarm bells, sometimes with good reason, as it is subject to widely varying interpretations. If we take it to mean, for instance, that all women face the same problems, have the same beliefs, values, and priorities, make or ought to make the same choices in life, and so on, then it is clearly problematic. If we take it to mean that women are not also members of other politically important classes — racial, ethnic, economic, and so on — which multiply complicate their relationships to other women, to men, and to feminism, then it is clearly problematic. But the claim that women are a class sharing a common condition does not mean any of this. It means that there exist patriarchal forces and structures which, regardless of how any particular woman feels about them or chooses to relate to them, objectively function to uphold the power and privilege of men while keeping women as a group
down. And this in turn means that, as Andrea Dworkin once put it: ‘the fate of every individual woman – no matter what her politics, character, values, qualities – is tied to the fate of all women whether she likes it or not’.  

So understood, the claim that women are a class sharing a common condition suggests a particular aim and purpose for feminist endeavour: namely, to figure out as best we can what serves the interests of women as a class (not just our own personal interests) and then to try as best we can – imperfectly, messily, but in good faith – to do that, support that, be that. Or, to put the same point a different way: what we do as feminists is figure out what the institutions, ideologies, and practices are that keep women down, and then try as best we can to challenge them, chip away at them, withdraw from them, take a sledgehammer to them, or in any other way diminish their power to harm and to subjugate women.

It is instructive to contrast this approach with claims of ‘essentialism’ from the third wave, that is, the suggestion that radical feminist claims appeal to some innate sameness shared by all women. Again, it’s important to clarify: charges of essentialism are often made in connection with the failure to recognise racial, class, and other such hierarchical differences among women. Although this is an important challenge, it is not the one I am targeting here. Rather I have in mind the oft-expressed reluctance among third wave feminists to, as Jennifer Gilley has put it: ‘speak in an assumed – and potentially false – solidarity’. In short, the idea seems to be this: if I say that some act or institution is bad, sexist, patriarchal, and so on, then I am implicitly assuming something about ‘all women’ (that’s the essentialism part): namely that, as women, they don’t like and thus would never freely choose to undertake that act or engage with that institution. But then what about some woman somewhere who does, apparently, like or choose these things? I must be saying she is stupid, self-deceived, and/or a bad feminist (or not a feminist at all), and that doesn’t seem like a nice or sisterly thing to say.

Second wave feminists also famously developed the slogan: ‘the personal is political’. Through formal and informal consciousness-raising, the women of the second wave discovered that various experiences that they had previously thought were unique to them – from sexual harassment to rape to feeling burdened by domestic labour – were in fact common to many women’s lives. This discovery opened the door to seeing such experiences as having political and feminist significance, as revealing something about the condition of women as a group, rather than merely as unfortunate, but quirky, features of one’s own personal life. Thus second wave feminists newly claimed certain ‘personal’ or ‘private’ areas of life – home, sex, marriage, relationships, household chores, and more – as the domain of politics. This is great, in that it enables the expression of righteously political outrage about all manner of things previously suffered in silence. But there’s a flip side to it, too: in recognising the personal as political, second wave feminists also recognised and embraced responsibility for the broader implications and consequences of their own ‘personal’ choices around everything from work, family, and parenting to beauty, sexuality, and self-defence.

Compare this perspective to that of third wave author/activists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, who write in their book Manifesta that: ‘feminism isn’t about what choice you make but the freedom to make that choice’. It follows on this view that, in order to establish that a choice in any given situation is a feminist one, we need only show that it is, in fact, really and authentically, one’s own choice, that whatever one is doing, one has freely chosen to do it.

Now I’m going to ask you to indulge me in a bit of heavy theory here. Structurally speaking, as a person facing oppression of whatever kind, one has two choices: resist or obey. One can resist the oppression – in general, or in any particular instance – in which case one is likely
to get viciously slapped down. Alternatively, one can obey, that is, act in ways that please the oppressors, perhaps in hopes of gaining some limited reward (or at least of avoiding the oppressive system’s very worst consequences). As you may have noticed, neither option is altogether attractive; as the feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye points out, oppression systematically puts oppressed people in double binds, catch-22s, situations in which they ‘can’t win for losing’. 11 But the crucial point for our purposes here is that one way, arguably the central way, in which oppressive systems perpetuate themselves is by giving individual members of the oppressed group an apparent stake in toeing the line. At the very least, we ‘go along to get along’ in many situations, and we may find that the more we curry favour with those in power, the more we are rewarded on an individual basis.

Because of this dynamic, if a particular role or practice harms women as a group, in that it sustains and reinforces patriarchy, it is utterly predictable that some women will choose to engage in it. Thus, again, the fundamental feminist question is not whether some individual women ‘like’ or ‘choose’ that role or practice but whether the overall effect of the role or practice is to keep women as a group subordinate to men.

The third defining element of radical feminism I’ll discuss here is the notion of sexual politics. In the English language, the word ‘sex’ is ambiguous: there’s sex in the sense of male and female, and also in the sense of sexuality. Second wave feminism named ‘sex’ in both senses as an arena of politics, that is, an arena in which power is exercised. In short, patriarchy makes sex (as male/female) into an unjust power hierarchy, which then manifests itself in many mutually reinforcing ways, including in and through sex (as sexuality). Whatever supports and maintains that power hierarchy is, from a second wave point of view, problematic and wrong. If this includes, as it is almost sure to, certain ways of understanding and practising sex (as sexuality), then these understandings and practices should be resisted and transformed. Furthermore, in second wave thinking, challenging the sex-based power hierarchy itself requires challenging the very definitions of manhood and womanhood, of masculinity and femininity, on which it is premised: namely, masculinity as dominance and aggression, femininity as submission. These roles themselves are taken to be problematic, not just their coercive association with biological males and females respectively. Thus, on this view, for a woman to be sexually dominant (or a man submissive) does not constitute liberation or resistance.

The third wave also has a take on sexual politics, that is, on the connections between power and sex (both sex as male/female, and sex as sexuality). They too believe that the power hierarchy placing men above women is unjust, but they have different ideas about what counts as challenging that hierarchy, particularly as it is expressed in sex-as-sexuality. On this view, for instance, a woman challenges the hierarchy when she plays a dominatrix role, or when she becomes a sexual consumer (for instance, using pornography or getting a lap dance at a strip club) – that is, when she adopts a standardly masculine set of sexual roles and activities. A woman also resists, on this view, when she uses the ‘power’ of femininity – her beauty, her sex appeal and ‘hotness’ and so on – to her own perceived advantage. According to third wave feminists, then, a woman can enact a liberatory and feminist sexual politics by adopting either a typically feminine or a typically masculine sexual role and persona, and running with it, as long as she does so freely and with the right attitudes and intentions.

‘Feminist porn’?

These elements of third wave feminist thought are in evidence virtually everywhere in contemporary feminism, but perhaps nowhere so clearly as in third wave responses to the pornography issue. Consider, for instance, the idea that what we need to do is to make our own, alternative and feminist pornography. This has become such a standard
response to radical feminist criticism that it is worth our attention. I don’t take a stand here on whether it is possible or desirable to create sexually explicit material that expresses feminist values. Rather I look at some of the people who claim to be doing that, at some of the materials they have produced and promoted, and at the grounds on which they claim those materials to be feminist ones.

Some claims made on behalf of purportedly-feminist pornography sound reasonable enough as far as they go – for instance, that by making and/or consuming pornography one asserts that it’s okay for women to be sexual and to want sex, that women are not merely passive recipients of male sexual desire, but have sexual desires of our own. Furthermore, in ‘alt.’ (alternative) or feminist pornography we do occasionally see women with something other than the Hollywood-prescribed body size and shape. But when we look at the statements of self-described feminist pornographers, the utterly liberal, even libertarian, politics at the core of this enterprise become unmistakable. It turns out that this pornography is said to be feminist because it is made by women, who are freely choosing to make it. For instance, Joanna Angel, a self-described feminist pornographer, has said that ‘you could do a porn where a girl is getting choked and hit and spit on, the guy’s calling her a dirty slut and stuff and ... that can still be feminist as long as everybody there is in control of what they’re doing’.  

Also clearly in evidence here, is the idea that women can enact a liberatory sexual politics by embracing either standardly feminine or standardly masculine sexual roles and activities. Without an overriding critique of sexualised dominance, the perfectly reasonable claim that it’s okay for women to want and seek sexual satisfaction shades easily into claiming women’s right to be sexual dominators and consumers. And of course, at the core of the ‘feminist pornography’ enterprise is the idea that women can and should redefine the feminised, pornographised sexual-object role as, itself, a form of power. Thus in 2007, prominently featured on the website of ‘feminist pornographer’ Nina Hartley, was a film entitled, 0: The Power of Submission. Perusing Hartley’s list of favourite links, one finds a site called Slave Next Door, which carries the tagline ‘real sexual slavery’. The portal page of this website reads, in part: ‘Slave Next Door is the graphic depiction of a female sex slave’s life and training for sexual slavery. It contains extreme BDSM situations and ... sadistic training.’

I am not saying that all of what goes under the banner of ‘feminist pornography’ is this bad, but I will say that I have never once read or heard an account of what constitutes feminist pornography – that is, of what makes it feminist – that does not conform to the analysis I’ve described here as liberal and third wave. That analysis, I contend, is mistaken and dangerous in that it encourages a wilful myopia with respect to the role of one’s choices in a broader system of sexualised dominance. That myopia, in fact – with the freedom it grants us to pretty much do as we please like good consumers – is precisely its appeal. That’s why it’s hard to combat. And that’s why we must find ways to articulate a radical feminist vision that can move and inspire people while also challenging them to take themselves seriously as agents of change.
ENDNOTES

Introduction
Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler


2 Emily Gosden, ‘Germaine Greer: online trolling shows men now even less tolerant of women’, *The Telegraph* (London), 27 April 2014.

3 The concept of women as class is generally traced back to Kate Millett’s foundational text *Sexual Politics*. In *Sexual Politics* (Granada, 1971) Millett posits that men and women are socialised into ‘basic patriarchal polities’ where men as group are bestowed with superior status and power over women as a group (p. 26), an idea which has since been employed by a number of prominent radical feminists including Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin, Alison Jaggar, Catharine MacKinnon, and Monique Wittig. This is not to suggest that women are a totally homogenous group, that all women experience oppression in exactly the same way, or that there are no divisions among women. It is simply to highlight that it is still important to understand women’s inequality – as women – vis-à-vis men.


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1 Jenny Kutner, “‘Feminism is just owning your s*** and feeling good about your decisions’: Salon talks with the hosts of “Guys We F***ed””, *Salon* (online), 29 December 2014, <http://www.salon.com/2014/12/28/feminism_is_just_owning_your_s_and_feeling_good_about_your_decisions_salon_talks_with_the_hosts_of_guys_we_fked/>.
208 Freedom Fallacy


3 Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (Simon & Schuster, 1975).

4 For a full explanation of the ordinance and a defence of its constitutionality, see Dworkin and MacKinnon, Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality (Organising Against Pornography, 1988). The book is out of print, but the full text is available from: <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/other/ordinance/newday/TOC.htm/>.


7 Like virtually any political movement or school of thought, ‘third wave feminism’ is not a monolithic entity, and not everyone who identifies as a third wave feminist will agree with all (or any) of the views described herein as prototypically third wave. Furthermore, many third wave feminists (including some whose writings I cite here) have done valuable political work on a number of fronts.


12 R Whisnant and K Mantilla, ‘Backlash and a Feminism that is Contrary to Feminism’ (2007) 37 Off Our Backs 58, 60.

The Limits of Liberal Feminism

I do what I want, fuck yeah!: moving beyond ‘a woman’s choice’

Meghan Murphy


Depoliticising the personal: individualising body image and disordered eating in The Beauty Myth

Natalie Jovanovski


2 M Love and B Helmbrecht, ‘Teaching the Conflicts: (Re)Engaging Students with Feminism in a Postfeminist World’ (2007) 18 Feminist Teacher 41.

3 Wolf, above n 1, 10.

4 Ibid 11.

5 Andrea Dworkin, Woman Hating (Dutton Press, 1974).

6 Wolf, above n 1, 208.


8 Wolf, above n 1, 277.

9 Groenhout, above n 7, 61.