Building Feminism, Resisting Porn Culture: Where To from Here

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where to from here?

Rebecca Whisnant

In chapter one, I wrote about some of the fundamental differences between radical feminism and liberal or third wave feminism and, in particular, how these branches of feminism approach pornography. I also wrote about the importance of radical feminism for recognising and resisting oppression. In this chapter, I pick up these threads again and discuss the key elements that radical feminism can contribute to the rebuilding of a powerful movement for women's liberation in the era of porn culture.

First things first, we need more people, more of the time, out there presenting radical feminist critique. I happen to know, for instance, that many bright and well-intentioned young people are toeing the third wave, sexual libertarian line because it's *all they've been taught* in their women's studies classes. And, of course, many people outside the academy have very little exposure to feminist critiques of virtually anything. So part of this is a sheer labour problem. We need more bodies and more voices. But not only do we need more people doing and saying the same things, I think that we also need to do and say some different things, or at least some additional things. As porn culture becomes ever more pervasive and soul-destroying, and as it starts to directly affect more people's lives in ways they're aware of, many people are looking for a way out. The problem is that they don't see any alternative, and much of what they're told is different and alternative really isn't.

For instance, the most obvious cultural and political force that presents itself as an alternative – indeed, is often seen as the only
alternative — to porn culture is a religious, predominantly Christian, social conservatism. Now that’s no good for women, and part of the appeal of third wave, pro-porn politics resides in its apparent rebellion against such conservatism. This leads me to my first suggestion about how to frame our critique of porn culture: namely by showing that — contrary to popular belief — conservative and pornographic ideologies of sex and gender are very nearly synonymous, the surface differences between the two obscuring their fundamental unity. As radical feminists have long observed, male sexual ownership and control of women is a matter of fundamental agreement between the male-defined political right and the almost equally male-defined political left. The right typically supports the private male ownership of women one at a time, as wives and daughters, localised in the home and the ‘traditional family’; whereas the left too often defends men’s collective sexual ownership of women outside the home, in the ‘public domain’, including in pornography and prostitution. To reject both forms of male sexual ownership, as radical feminists do, is thus to commit the ultimate heresy.

Yet only such principled rejection can effectively challenge the sexual abuse and commodification of women and girls both inside and outside the ‘traditional family’. Until we find ways to communicate the linked dangers of both forms of male control, the fear of one form will continue to send women and girls directly into the lap of the other. The conservatives say to us:

Hey, ladies, don’t like what you see in pornography? Ugly, isn’t it? You say you don’t want that to happen to you, or for men to think of you like that? Well, then, be good girls and keep your legs closed. Be abstinent until marriage, and then God says your husband has to honour and value you and protect you from other men. (You just have to obey him).

Meanwhile, women and girls who recognise the patriarchal trap of ‘traditional family values’ are urged to demonstrate their independence and rebellion against said values by buying a stripper pole and learning to lap dance. What? You say that doesn’t seem like authentic female sexuality or sexual liberation to you? What are you, a right-wing, “anti-sex” prude?

This surface conflict in sexual ideology between right and left serves male power by masking a deeper agreement. For both camps, after all, it is an article of faith that sex makes women dirty, cheap, less valuable, that being fucked literally degrades women and girls. Furthermore, in both camps, women and girls are systematically made to suffer for having sex. In the world of pornography, the sex itself — aggressive, hostile, humiliating — is the punishment, the mechanism by which men viscerally experience their manhood by putting women in our place. In the world of ‘traditional family values’ the suffering of shame, stigma, unwanted pregnancy (or at least the fear of it), and forced childbirth is a woman’s just punishment for having had sex that she shouldn’t have had. And in both worlds we hear the constant refrain — sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted — ‘Bitch. Slut. Dirty whore. You’re getting what you deserve.’ As Andrea Dworkin once put it: ‘Pretending to argue, they collude. And if one don’t get you, the other will.’

As daunting as this convergence is, it also suggests a certain hermeneutic of feminist resistance, one that, happily, is pretty easy to communicate. People who care about justice and who want a way out of porn culture need to act and think in ways that won’t make either bunch of woman-haters happy. If you’re doing and saying things that the religious right and the libertarian left both really hate, then you’re on the right track! So that’s my first suggestion.

My second suggestion is that we connect our critique of pornography and porn culture to a broader critique of the commodification of everyday life and, in so doing, promote a non-marketised conception of freedom. Now that’s a mouthful, I know. To start illustrating it, I want to share with you a couple of anecdotes from my recent trip
to a college which shall remain nameless, but which is known both for its stellar academics and for its progressive politics. I'll call it ‘Alt. College’.

Overall, my visit to Alt. College was wonderful: I visited some classes and gave an anti-pornography slideshow in the evening to a large and receptive audience. During the question and answer period that followed, a young woman raised her hand. Clearly troubled by what she had heard and seen, she asked: ‘Well, what if we all just get together and tell the porn industry that this isn’t what we want – that we want something more complex, more diverse, less hateful and one-dimensional? Wouldn’t they have to change their ways and give us what we want?’

There are many assumptions lurking in this query that we would do well to challenge, but what I want to highlight is the faith that’s being shown in the wonders of the capitalist marketplace. To this very bright, progressive, feminist young woman, here in this bastion of liberal-to-radical politics, it seemed plausible to think that – in this connection at least – the market will solve all of our problems. Now in making this assumption, there is something important that she fails to understand, namely that the cultural products of mega-corporations are much more like advertising than they are like art. When powerful and profit-hungry entities go hunting for market share at any cost, what those entities will produce and sell is whatever gets the most people in the gut the fastest and makes them want more of that now. This will never be equality. It will never be complexity. It will never be anything thoughtful or meaningful or reflective. Not ever.

Let me share one more anecdote from Alt. College that will help me go a bit deeper with this idea. That afternoon, I had visited the gender studies senior seminar course to talk with the students about feminist politics and pornography. At one point in the discussion, a young woman raised her hand, and said: ‘Well, these days things are different. People in my generation want sexuality to be an important part of their lives; they want to be free and open with their sexuality. So that’s why they want to make and use pornography.’ There’s a sweet kind of humour here: every generation thinks it invented sex. But more relevant, for our purposes, there are two massive assumptions underlying this young woman’s comment, both of which we need to challenge whenever we see an opening to do so.

The first assumption is that, for some experience or activity to be important, real, and considerable, it must be made into an image: take a picture, roll video, turn on the webcam. As Gail Dines is fond of pointing out, we live in an image-based culture. Everything has to be made into an image, and we derive our conception of who and what we are largely from the images that surround us. But here is a question: when you are doing something – virtually anything – are you more or less free in doing it when you know someone is watching? What if they’re taking pictures? What if they’re going to show those pictures to a whole bunch of people you don’t even know? (Are you feeling free yet?) For instance, do you dance crazier and more freely when you’re by yourself in your bedroom, or out at the nightclub when your image is being projected on the big screen?

The second assumption underlying this young woman’s comment is that, for some experience or activity to be important, real, and considerable, it must be made into a commodity. But here is another question: when you put some activity into the marketplace – that is, you decide to sell it instead of just doing it – does that make you more or less free in doing it? For instance, suppose you like to make music. Up until now it’s been a hobby, something you do in your spare time, but now you’ve decided that you want to get signed with a major label. All of a sudden you’re not free to make any old kind of music you want, are you? Now it’s: ‘What do they think they can sell? What’s in vogue this week, and are you it, and if not, can they make you into it?’

So we face a bizarre phenomenon in many discussions of pornography, in that it’s only with respect to sex that many otherwise
progressive and leftist people assume that putting something into the capitalist marketplace makes it \textit{more free} (or is evidence that one is free in doing it). We need to find ways to challenge the naïve and regressive conceptions of freedom as the freedom to enter the marketplace and/or to choose among the options that the marketplace offers us. We need to suggest to people that – in many everyday contexts, but perhaps especially for the most intimate and potentially creative activities of our lives, like sex and sexuality – \textit{real} freedom in that activity means neither selling it nor letting somebody with a profit motive tell us what it is supposed to look and feel like.

My final suggestion is one that’s been made before, and that is that we need a vision of alternatives. The makers of ostensibly-feminist porn claim to be providing such a vision, and that’s why their message is appealing to many: we sense a need for alternatives, and that need is real, but more commodified images isn’t it. But it is true that our side needs to be more than just, as Dworkin once aptly put it: ‘the morbid side of the women’s movement’. \textsuperscript{2} There’s something to that, inevitably, and rightly so: there is no way to face down the industries of sexual exploitation without confronting some very ugly realities. We must not flinch from that task, and we must continue to find ways to help others face those realities without dying inside. But we can’t just be ‘Atrocities“R”Us’. We also have to give people (including ourselves) some inspiration and some room to move. This is a tall order but I’m going to provide here three quick ideas for moving in this direction.

First, note the connection to my point about withdrawing from the market. To open up the space for new thinking and experimentation, we need to detox, to get out of the path of porn culture’s cynical, manipulative, and hateful messages. To start thinking our own thoughts and dreaming our own dreams, first we have to get away from the bastards who are shouting at us through megaphones. Second, we need to draw on our own experiences of love and sex as joy and communion (and encourage others to draw on theirs). As radical feminists have long emphasised, patriarchy constructs our sexuality very profoundly, and even the most enlightened among us are not immune to that construction. But the construction, for most people at least, does not go ‘all the way down’. Despite everything, many people do have experiences of mutual and egalitarian sexuality – or at least hints or glimmers of it – and that’s really good news. We need to encourage people to tap into these experiences, hints, and glimmers, to remember what they know from their own lives: that no pimp or corporation sold to them or ever could, and to want more of it.

Third and finally, as we continue to tell people what sexual freedom isn’t, we should also encourage them to think deeply and creatively about what it is. What would \textit{real} sexual freedom look and feel like, the kind that \textit{everyone} can have, instead of the kind that amounts to freedom for some at others’ expense? We need to richly imagine, and encourage others to richly imagine, another world: one in which no woman or girl is ever called ‘slut’, ‘prude’, ‘bitch’, ‘cunt’, or ‘dyke’; in which no woman, man, or child ever has to fear rape or suffer its damage to their spirits; in which men do not control their own and other men’s behaviour by the threat of being seen and treated as women; and in which lesbian love and connection is not reduced to a pornographic fetish for men. In this world, every woman and girl sees her own body as beautiful, no man or boy is made to see his as a weapon, and people take part in sexual activity only when (and only because) they expect to enjoy it and to be honoured and fulfilled therein. It can be painful to think in this way, because we become more acutely aware of just how far away we are from this better world. But the third wave has one thing right: desire can be, or can become, a form of power. We need to use the power of our desire for this world – our desire to bring it into being for ourselves and for our children and our grandchildren – to unite us and to animate our thinking and strategising about how to take our culture back from the pornographers.
236 Freedom Fallacy


20 Pateman, above n 6.


24 Baxter, ‘To Marry or Not to Marry’, above n 22.

25 Stevi Jackson, Heterosexuality in Question (Sage, 1999); Sheila Jeffreys, The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution (Spinifex, 1993).

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1 Andrea Dworkin, ‘Women in the Public Domain: Sexual Harassment and Date Rape’ in Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women (Free Press, 1997)199.

2 Andrea Dworkin, ‘Feminism: An Agenda’ in Letters From a War Zone (Lawrence Hill Books, 1993) 133.