

Pornographic Values: Hierarchy and Hubris

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Abstract

Although the radical feminist critique has been eclipsed by postmodern and liberal positions in the debate over pornography during the past two decades, that radical critique remains the best framework for understanding sexually explicit material. When combined with a critique of the assumptions and values of a hypermediated society, radical feminism helps sharpen our inquiry into what it means to be human at this point in history. The contemporary pornography industry is based on a patriarchal gender fundamentalism and pornographic/media fundamentalism that undermine our ability to achieve self-realization in stable, respectful communities. Public Health Significance Statement: The sexual exploitation of women in pornography and the hypermediated nature of life in the contemporary United States can undermine the ability of people, especially men, to build the relationships needed for stable, respectful human communities.

Keywords

pornography, media, patriarchy, feminism

Political debates grow out of differing answers to one of our most fundamental questions, “What does it mean to be human?” This is especially true of the pornography debate.

That question reminds us that all political positions are based on underlying moral claims. In this context, “moral” does not mean preachy judgments about conventional rules, especially for sexual behavior, but rather how we might balance a yearning for self-realization with the need for stable, respectful communities that make it possible for individuals to fulfill their potential, as free as possible from the constraining effects of systems of domination. What do we owe ourselves and what obligations do we have to others? Answers not only vary among individuals within a culture and between different cultures but also change over time with new challenges, hence “what does it mean to be human at this particular moment in history?”

Despite the cliché “you can’t legislate morality,” there are moral claims at the core of all political proposals. Every position in the pornography debate is based on a sexual ethic, and the outcome of the political struggle will advance the underlying ethic.

I have been involved in that debate—within feminism and progressive politics as well as the wider culture—for a quarter century. More than ever, I believe the radical feminist critique of pornography provides the best framework for understanding the production and consumption of graphic sexually explicit material. In that quarter century, the trends—in the pornography industry, the material it produces, and the ways images are used (Dines, 2010; Jensen, 2011)—demonstrate the compelling

nature of that analysis, even though in that same period this radical feminist critique has been eclipsed by postmodern and liberal positions (Taormino, Penley, Shimizu, & Miller-Young, 2013) that either celebrate or capitulate to an increasingly pornographic culture.

To state it bluntly, over the past 25 years, the pornographers and their allies have won, and radical feminism has lost. There is more pornography, more easily available, and much of it more openly cruel and degrading to women and more overtly racist than ever. Pornographers and their allies have advanced their underlying libertarian sexual ethic, which focuses on individual choices in the moment and ignores or downplays the constraints and opportunities that structure choices.

How does a pornographic culture answer the question about “being human,” in regard to our relationship to each other and to mediated images?

Pornography’s answer about human relationships and the nature of power: The domination/subordination dynamic is inevitable, because it is the way humans are designed. So get used to the same old hierarchy.

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Pornography's answer about images and the nature of technology: The more mediated our lives, the better, because it gives us a sense of control over our experience. So get used to a new level of hubris.

My response: Both these answers are wrong, with destructive consequences beyond pornography. This article explains the feminist critique of pornography, analyzes the corrosive nature of hierarchical power and technological hubris, and poses questions about a healthy sexual ethic.

Pornography: A Radical Feminist Critique

"Radical" is often used to dismiss people or ideas as "crazy" or "extreme," but here it describes an analysis that seeks to understand, address, and eventually eliminate the root causes of inequality. Radical feminism opposes patriarchy, the system of institutionalized male dominance, and understands gender as a category that established and reinforces inequality. The goal is the end of—not accommodation with—patriarchy's gender system and other domination/subordination dynamics.

Radical feminists understand men's efforts to control women's sexuality and reproduction as a key feature of patriarchy. As feminist philosopher Frye (1992) puts it,

For females to be subordinated and subjugated to males on a global scale . . . billions of female individuals, virtually all who see life on this planet, must be reduced to a more-or-less willing toleration of subordination and servitude to men," and "[t]he primary sites of this reduction are the sites of heterosexual relation and encounter. (p. 130)

Beyond the sex/gender system, radical feminism's focus on the way in which patriarchy normalizes hierarchy leads not just to a critique of men's domination of women but also to a deeper understanding of systems of power more generally. While not sufficient by itself, the end of patriarchy is a necessary condition for liberation more generally.

Radical feminism addresses many issues, including men's violence and the sexual exploitation of women and children. Pornography, prostitution, and stripping are the major sexual-exploitation industries in the contemporary United States, presenting objectified female bodies to men for sexual pleasure. Boys and vulnerable men are also used in the exploitation industries that cater to gay men, but the vast majority of people used are girls and women. In heterosexual pornography, the negative psychological and physical consequences for female performers are far more dramatic than for male performers (Whisnant & Stark, 2004).

The critical feminist analysis demonstrates that pornography is not "just sex on film," but sex routinely presented within a domination/subordination dynamic. Pornography eroticizes men's domination of women, along with other forms of inequality, especially racism. This analysis, developed within the larger feminist project of challenging men's violence

against women, was first articulated clearly by Andrea Dworkin (1979) who identified what we can call the elements of the pornographic:

1. Objectification: when "a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, bought, and sold."
2. Hierarchy: "a group on top (men) and a group on the bottom (women)."
3. Submission: when acts of obedience and compliance become necessary for survival, members of oppressed groups learn to anticipate the orders and desires of those who have power over them, and their compliance is then used by the dominant group to justify its dominance.
4. Violence: "systematic, endemic enough to be unremarkable and normative, usually taken as an implicit right of the one committing the violence" (Dworkin, 1988, p. 266–267).

This framework, developed further by Dworkin along with MacKinnon (1987), sparked organizing efforts for a civil rights approach to replace failed obscenity laws (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997). Although the law didn't change, this analytic framework continues to be useful in understanding the pornography industry's expansion (Dines, 2010). As pornography depicting relatively conventional sexual acts became commonplace, producers of "gonzo" pornography (industry terminology for movies with no pretense of plot, in which performers acknowledge the camera and speak directly to the audience) dominated the market and pushed the limits of social norms and women's bodies with the routine use of double penetrations (vaginal and anal penetration by two men at the same time), double vag (two men penetrating a woman vaginally), double anal (two men penetrating a woman anally), gagging (forcing the penis down a woman's throat so far that she gags), and ass-to-mouth (a man removing his penis from a woman's anus and placing it directly into her mouth or the mouth of another woman).

Although there is variation in the thousands of pornographic films produced commercially each year, the main themes have remained consistent: (1) all women always want sex from men, (2) women like all the sexual acts that men perform or demand, and (3) any woman who resists can be aroused by force, which is rarely necessary because most of the women in pornography are the "nymphomaniacs" of men's fantasies (Jensen, 2007, p. 56–57). While both men and women are portrayed as hypersexual, men typically are the sexual subjects who control the action and dictate the terms of the sex. Women are the sexual objects that fulfill male desire.

The radical feminist critique highlights not only that much of pornography is pornographic, reflecting, and reinforcing patriarchy's domination/subordination dynamic, but that pop culture is increasingly pornified (Paul, 2005). Pornography is a specific genre, but those elements of the pornographic also are present in other media.

Pornography's Hierarchy

It is common to distinguish between sex categories based on biological realities of reproduction (male and female) and gender categories based on culture (men and women). While we have limited understanding of how differences in male and female biology might influence intellectual, emotional, and moral differences between the sexes, there is no evidence those differences are relevant to political status: Men and women have equal claim to citizenship.

The denial of equality to women is a product of patriarchy, typically rationalized with God or evolution. "Gender fundamentalists," whether conservatives rooted in theology or secular folk offering sociobiology/evolutionary psychology arguments for patriarchal practices (Buss, 1994), assert that there are large differences between male and female humans that are largely immutable, despite considerable evidence to the contrary (Zell, Krizan, & Teeter, 2015). The equality claim, which is accepted in the formal political sphere, is routinely ignored in other realms of contemporary life—people assert the need for, or inevitability of, inequality, most notably in sexual behavior, intimate relationships, and family life. Gender fundamentalists refuse to consider whether patriarchal ideology is consistent with decent answers to "what does it mean to be human?"

In the version of patriarchy dominant in the United States, the sexual-exploitation industries are a routine part of contemporary culture. Some aspects are criminalized and other aspects regulated, but the vast majority of men have some experience with at least one of these industries that buy and sell women's bodies for sex.

Whatever one's view of the role of intimacy and sexuality in human society, it is difficult to imagine achieving gender equality when members of one group (women) can routinely be bought and sold by members of another group (men) for sexual pleasure. Supporters of the sexual-exploitation industries focus on women's right to choose to participate in these activities. While individual choice is a component of any free society, people choose within parameters set by larger cultural and economic forces. To define freedom as choice, abstracted from the reality of a society and its values/norms/practices, is simplistic. To contend that such a thin conception of freedom can produce gender equality is to obscure hierarchy. Under conditions of real equality, it is hard to imagine that such exploitation practices would exist.

Pornography's Hubris

Human beings are storytelling animals, and stories often deal with intimacy and sexual behavior. Humans also are tool-making animals, and we have invented increasingly complex tools for telling stories. What we might call "pornographic fundamentalists" believe it is a good thing for people to tell any sexual stories they find arousing, and "media fundamentalists" believe it is a good thing for people to use every media technology to tell all stories.

Fundamentalists refuse to consider whether specific sexual stories told with specific media technologies are consistent with our best answers to "what does it mean to be human?" That pornographic/media fundamentalism does not just critique narrow-minded moralistic judgments but rejects the possibility of any deeper moral evaluation of these cultural practices.

Do the sexual stories of the pornography industry, which so routinely celebrate men's dominance, advance self-realization? Do those stories help build stable, respectful communities? Does the intensity of graphic sexually explicit images delivered through film/video enhance our capacity to achieve these goals? Exploring sexual themes in art can help people struggle with the power and mystery of desire, but what are the long-term effects of reducing sex to pleasure acquisition through a screen? Do those mediated experiences erode our ability to connect to each other sexually in person? Is it possible that sex and intimacy are realms of human experience that do not translate well to explicit representation in mass media?

My experience has led to clear choices for myself, but these are not questions that have single, definitive answers for all. Fearful of the conversation, pornographic/media fundamentalists tend to avoid these questions and try to marginalize anyone who wants to ask them. Better that we check our hubris—the assumption that our ability to do something means we have the wisdom to understand what we are doing and can control its effects—and proceed with caution.

A Sexual Ethic: What Is Sex For?

Radical feminism challenges us to ask an often overlooked question: What is sex for? Of the ways people might understand sexuality in their lives, which are most consistent with self-realization and stable, respectful communities? At times, especially within certain religious traditions, rigid answers to the question have been imposed on people in ways that were routinely constraining and sometimes inhumane. But because some people have answered a question badly does not mean we should, or can, avoid the question (Jensen, 2014).

Sex is central to reproduction but clearly plays a role in human life far beyond reproduction. The varied ways that different societies have made sense of these questions indicates that there likely is no single answer for all times and places. Even within an individual's life, sex can play a different role at different times. As young people, sex may be primarily about exploring ourselves and our limits as we mature, while as adults, the most important function of sex may be to foster intimacy within a primary relationship. In general, we can think of sex as a form of communication, a way we learn not only about others but about ourselves. We can collectively try to understand which conceptions of sex are most healthful without claiming definitive knowledge or the right to impose judgments on others.

An analogy to food is helpful. Just as we recognize that sex is more than the acquisition of pleasure, eating is more than just the acquisition of calories. U.S. food companies tend to

encourage what Berry (1990, p. 147) calls “industrial eating,” just as pornography offers a kind of “industrial sex.” Eating processed fast food is a different experience than eating food to which one has a more direct connection in production or preparation. Processed fast food creates distance between us and the living world, and the same is true of processed fast sex. In both cases, people’s reflexive response often is, “But I like it.” Fast food and fast sex both are efficient at producing a certain type of pleasure, but what is lost in normalizing those forms of pleasure?

Conclusion

What does it mean to be human at this particular moment in history? Our answer must be consistent with core progressive principles of dignity (all people have the same claim to being human), solidarity (human flourishing depends on loving connections to others), and equality (dignity and solidarity are impossible without social and economic justice).

A sexual ethic consistent with these widely held moral principles would reject the hierarchy of patriarchy, and hierarchy more generally, recognizing that systems of domination and subordination are inherently abusive. When there is no common understanding of what roles sex plays in our lives, people are more likely to get hurt more often, not just psychologically but physically. In patriarchy, those injuries will be endured mostly by women and children. The conversation about a sexual ethic is not a restriction of anyone’s freedom but a part of the quest for a more expansive freedom for all.

A sexual ethic consistent with just, sustainable communities would question the technologizing of all human activity. That does not mean that mediated storytelling with sexual themes is inherently negative, only that we need to consider not only the pleasures of sex through technology but the deeper implications. We need not romanticize a mythical golden age to recognize that what we call progress does not always enhance the quality of our lives.

Radical feminist critics of pornography are often accused of being prudish, or the more academically fashionable pejorative “sex negative,” but critiquing the negative aspects of patriarchal sex is not prudish. It is not antisex to critique a pornographic culture that accepts overtly misogynistic and racist images designed to produce sexual stimulation, which are easily accessible not only to adults but to children at the beginning stages of their sexual development.

A friend, who does not share the radical feminist position, once suggested I was “overwrought” about the subject. Would it be better to be underwrought? Or to not be wrought at all? My level of “wroughtness” is based on research and critical thinking, along with my experience and the experiences of hundreds of people I have talked to in the course of this work—men who have told me they feel trapped by their habitual use of pornography, which was undermining their ability to be truly intimate with a partner; women whose partners lost interest in intimacy and sex once the men started using pornography

habitually; and other women whose partners started demanding degrading and/or painful sexual acts they had seen in pornography. Are those people overwrought in their struggles?

Our pornified and pornographic culture leaves us with challenging questions: Why do so many people need films of other people having sex to feel sexual, and why do so many people want pictures of sex that eroticize domination/subordination? Why are most of those people men? Are we afraid that we can’t transcend patriarchal ideas that are deeply woven into the fabric of contemporary society and that we cannot turn away from the screens that proliferate in our lives? Are we afraid that we have not only become consumers of goods but consumers of the most basic human experiences?

Those questions have nothing to do with a fear of sex but rather identify reasonable fears of who, or what, we have become in hypermediated patriarchal society. If we were to look to pornography for answers to this most basic question—what does it mean to be human at this particular moment in history?—it is difficult to imagine a just, sustainable human future. Our task is to face those fears and imagine the future differently.

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