

# Fashionable Fascism

## The slick misogyny of porn

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The recent opening of a small Nazi “bookstore” on West Vernor has touched off dozens of demonstrations by liberal and leftist pickets. Community, Jewish, civil rights and Marxist organizations have denounced the promulgation of neo-Fascism and the threat to civilization represented by the “white hate” literature sold in the storefront.

The vigilance of the anti-fascists, who are ready to speak out in no uncertain terms at any sign of the resurgence of open Nazi sentiment, is commendable, and would lead one to suspect that fascism has no chance in this city. But hate literature is impermissible only if its targets are men. Fascism is highly fashionable if women are its targets, as is obvious from the largely-unmolested presence of several dozen businesses in this city that sell books, magazines and films advocating the brutalization and enslavement of women. It’s no longer O.K. to say Jews should be tortured and exterminated, but it’s perfectly all right, apparently, to advocate such treatment for women.

That bookstores which sell hate literature directed against women are labeled with the euphemism of “pornographic” (or the double euphemism of “adult”) bookstores should not confuse any clear-thinking person about their real purpose, but unfortunately it does. The confusion is created by the coupling of misogynist propaganda with the message of “sexual liberation” and helped along by the dominant cultural image of sexual relations, itself reinforced by the “porno” literature, in which men celebrate and cement their power over women by using them as objects for the realization of fantasies of sexual enthrallment. So strong is the mystification about the pseudo-liberation pictured in pornography that such displays are widely tolerated or even encouraged by the same liberals who have been picketing on West Vernor. Unlike open Nazi sentiment, which is now repugnant to most of society, the insidious linking of violence against women with libidinal release for men is so much a part of the fabric of our culture that it is accepted as “normal”. In fact, the only visible protesters against pornography are reactionaries and Puritans who seize upon its excesses to justify their crusade against any sexual enjoyment. The fear of being linked with such missionaries of “purity” has long prevented those of us concerned with real human liberation from acting against the misogyny rampant in most “pornography”.

## The Real Message of “Pornography”

Take a look at any of the dozens of slick porno magazines, each containing thousands of dollars worth of advertising, displayed at your local “adult” bookstore or neighborhood drugstore or party store. Ranging from *Playboy*, the once-disreputable pioneer now turned staid and conservative in comparison to its competition, to *Hustler*, now awaiting the impact of its publisher’s conversion to Christianity, the magazines all feature essentially the same ingredients: women on display as objects for passive enjoyment, sexual humiliation, or outright degradation; articles promoting standard male myths about sexuality, e.g., that women like to be raped and physically abused or that women “get off” by catering to every male desire; and “advice columns” and advertisements promoting the latest

variations in expert sexual technique. (Some of the more “reputable” publications also contain some liberal politics, interviews, and occasional information about sexuality, but these are merely window-dressing.)

The striking thing about the “turn-on” photos is that the women are posed in impossibly distorted and unrealistic ways. Of course, the “pets” or “playmates” the “honeys” or “girls” are unusually big-breasted, voluptuous and unhairly, but that is to be expected. More surprising is that most of the photos look like they belong in a gynecology textbook. This is the first way in which pornography noticeably parts paths with genuine eroticism. Sex, even if “purely physical”, is totally human, involving bodies; pornography, on the other hand, is obsessed with body parts. Only in a society of severe sexual repression could men become so fascinated with gazing deep into the genitalia of women whose faces may not even be pictured. It is because such “private parts” are supposed to be sinful and “dirty” that they are focused upon in heterosexual pornography.

The anonymity of the sex objects is an important feature of such pornography. Real names of the women are seldom used. Every trace of human relationships is eliminated. Quantitative aspects of sexuality completely overshadow qualitative features. Porno movies present a sexual Olympics where the goal is to set new records of size, frequency and endurance. The magnifying of the bare essentials of sexual activity cuts away everything else about the people involved: kissing and hugging, real exchanges of affection, are almost verboten. What remains is hardly sex but merely mechanical manipulation, technical achievement, and impersonal performance.

Why this strange telescoping of what is such a variegated, creative and satisfying human activity into such a frustratingly narrow and incredibly limited picture? It is the result of the same process which has so diminished all of human activity under capitalism—the marketing of human activity as lifeless commodities. By reducing the whole spectrum of human sensuality—into genital orgasm (male ejaculation being the indispensable focal point of every skin flick), pornography contracts a liberating human activity into a controllable and marketable jerk-off. The eventual effects of substituting a supervised, manipulated pseudo-sexual experience for the real enjoyment of sex are to reduce to near-nothing the porn consumer’s capacity to be genuinely gratified by real people, and to convince most women that their bodies are inadequate.

With real women posed as lifeless commodities, the message for the male consumer which is interspersed between the images is almost redundant. Like prepackaged food and entertainment, women, according to the magazine copy or film dialogue, are to be consumed and thrown away. Women are nothing but tits and ass to be fucked and flogged. What life they have is consumed in pleasing men: in providing palpitating vaginas for men to masturbate in, breasts for men to suck on, mouths for men to come into, and assholes for men to penetrate. Since, like all commodities, their purpose is to be used, women enjoy being treated by men any way men desire. Women’s liberation is portrayed as the “freeing” of women from those puritanical inhibitions which made them less interesting and less willing victims in bed. Women, we are told, want not only to be fucked, but beaten, tortured and enslaved: this is what their “real” liberation consists of. Their punishment for wanting freedom is to be enslaved anew in the name of sexual liberation. The message for men is simple: reassert your mastery over women by means of sexual violence. Even if the consumer grows tired of the “wide-open beavers,” the leering at the “pink”, the public exposure of what was once forbidden, almost magical territory, he may still keep consuming porn for the message that men should be on top.

## Liberal Myths

The most enduring justification for violence against women is that women like it. According to the neo-Freudian psychology of Helene Deutsch, women’s sexuality is essentially passive and masochistic, and intercourse is hardly distinguishable from rape.\* (Unfortunately, for many generations of women, the latter has been too close to the truth.) Our culture is saturated with the male myth that women like to be raped, but nowhere is this idea so baldly expressed in so many different forms as in pornography. Most pornography directed at heterosexual men amounts to nothing less than an invitation to rape. Every magazine, every book, every film urges: take your pleasure as you will, its your right, and women are your willing, even begging, victims.

Yet, a cherished liberal rationalization for pornography is that it is an antidote to rape. Based on the classical liberal hypothesis that, beneath their veneer of civilized pretension, men are ravenous beasts intent only on

immediate gratification, the argument runs that pornography is a harmless way for men to release their sexual frustrations which would otherwise explode into acts of sexual violence. Much of this kind of reasoning is based on the familiar conception of male libidinal energy as a barely-corked bottle demanding safety valves of release. The threat posed by pent-up semen looms large in a culture which imagines that sex is a matter of releasing the frustrations of civilized males, with women as the tools for this prophylaxis. But there does not seem to be much biological basis for believing only men, but not women, to be in frequent, periodic need of release.

Even were the notion that men require frequent release true, does it follow that pornography provides that release? Looking at provocative photographs of unattainable women may heighten the male's frustrations. Those men without lovers may feel their lack all the more, and even men who have regular sexual partners may come to feel she is inadequate because she doesn't measure up to the *Playboy* or *Penthouse* standards. Pornography may build up more frustrations than it releases.

It is not such a large leap from imagining women as victims of suppressed desire to casting them as victims of suppressed rage. Rape is primarily an act of aggression, rather than a sexual encounter. How have rapists learned that women are beautiful as victims? In hundreds of ways, pornography one of them. It's hard to imagine a would-be rapist being dissuaded from his act by a look at the women-objects arranged in various victim poses.

Liberals, however, hoping to preserve the status quo, refuse to see it that way. For them, pornography is at worst a necessary evil. What can be more harmless, they ask, than looking at a few admittedly ridiculous pictures in some magazines? It doesn't hurt anyone—why not let those men jack off in peace? What business is it of anyone's what someone does in private? Ironic questions coming from the same liberals who so readily accept the harmful effects of television violence on children or the danger posed by dissemination of Nazi pamphlets. The truth is that pornography does not defuse potential male sexual violence, but encourages it; does not diffuse fantasies harmlessly, but actually creates destructive ones (how many men, left to their own devices, would conjure up sexual fantasies involving women beaten and in chains?); does not deter rape, but promotes it.

What does pornography actually do to its male consumer? For one, it completely divorces feelings of affection (or any emotion, for that matter) from sexuality. Sex, as portrayed in porn, is a field of combat and conquest that demands a technically polished performance from the male gladiator, and emotions get in the way of performance. How can anyone generate any feeling except contempt for the empty-headed, toy-like dolls that pornography substitutes for real women? Men become convinced that they don't need affection from another human being, but a blow job from a *Playboy* bunny.

The argument that the use of women in pornography as objects of sexual violence is a private matter and that any kind of opposition to it is as repugnant as laws regulating what goes on in the bedroom is perhaps the most insidious liberal rationalization of all. Pornography, for one thing, is not private but public. If whole blocks of a city were given over to the sale of material directly advocating the enslavement of blacks or Jews, such merchants would be run out of town with little thought given by liberals to those merchants' legal rights—exactly what is happening to that Nazi on West Vernor. The Nazi's insistence that anyone should be able to read whatever material he wants in private would be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. Constitutional rights are only enforced when convenient.

The uproar over the Nazi bookstore is ridiculously disproportionate to its threat, whereas the lack of protest over bookstores, movie houses and other entertainment facilities which promote violence against women is appalling in view of the fact that such violence is daily perpetrated all over the city. No Jews are being exterminated in this city, but plenty of women are being raped.

Why doesn't the "letting off steam" argument apply to the Nazi literature—why doesn't anyone insist that reading anti-Semitic material is a harmless way to defuse the potential violence against Jews that is inherent in people? Is it because we no longer think that it is natural and permissible to hate and torture Jews but that hating women and wanting to do violence to them is a natural part of man's make-up?

## Separating the Issues

Because the violence against women that is at the core of so-called pornography is nestled so snugly within the framework of "sexual liberation" and within the centuries-old myths that surround sexuality and the centuries-old

oppression of women that has come to be accepted as “normal,” to dislodge this propaganda from its secure resting place means separating completely the idea of sexual violence from the uninhibited enjoyment of eroticism. This is no easy task in an era of such tremendous mystification about sexuality, especially because the alliances drawn around pornography pit people who hate women and sex against people who pretend to like both.

First of all, at the same time that sexual violence against women is being exposed and denounced, it must be made abundantly clear that there is nothing wrong with nudity or any kind of sexual activity that is mutually consented to. Of course, the women who pose for porno pictures “consent” to this treatment; like prostitutes, they are making a living, exploiting a possible alternative; like everyone, they are selling themselves for a wage. The economic basis of this transaction is apparent: the women’s consent is bought, not freely obtained. By contrast, in real erotic pictures or literature, both men and women would be portrayed, and as real people. The question has often been heard, “When is anyone going to make a really erotic film about real people?” The answer is that no one will until the commodity relations that are the basis of pornography are destroyed.

Most pornography has nothing to do with sex; there is little about it that is genuinely erotic. Eroticism is not so constrained, so distorted, so one-sided. Most of the appeal of pornography rests on exploiting the old taboos, on emphasizing the sinfulness and lowness of sexual activity, on promoting guilt and shame as the primary turn-ons. The one central fact about sex is that it is a profoundly human activity, playful, cooperative, energetic, passionate and powerful in nature; but what we see on the newsstands is inhuman -violence, helplessness, objectification and distress.

It is no accident that pornography promotes Puritanical opposition, since pornography is itself opposed to sexuality. Dried-up, lifeless creatures who rail against the evils of nudity and the sinfulness of sex are not much different from the dried-up, lifeless people who market and consume commercial sex: the latter are merely more “hip.” Both are convinced that the range of human sexual activity should be sharply limited, and both fear the complexities of real eroticism. These two groups are waging a dreary battle within capitalism over the issue of whether artificial, pre-packaged sex should be included on the FDA’s list of acceptable commodities or excluded as dangerous to society. On the outside are those of us who are opposed to sex being made into a commodity under anyone’s rules, to sex being linked to violence against women, and to anti-women propaganda being disseminated under the guise of “sexual liberation.” The lines must be redrawn.

If we think we are incapable of redrawing the lines, we end up cowering on the side of the liberals, forced there by the threat of returning to the Victorian Dark Ages—represented by the apparent victory of the Puritans—but in fact, the Puritans never really lost, and the whole “sexual liberation” diversion was a sham. Would we really rather have sex as a commodity than sex in secrecy? Neither Puritanical repression nor the modern commercialization of sexual activity is gratifying. There are other alternatives—like defining your own sexual activity and openly practicing mutual love.

Just as false lines have been drawn around the problem, so too has there been a lack of creative thinking about solutions. The Susan Brownmillers of the world, having arrived at a limited feminist critique of pornography, end up embracing the remedies of reactionaries. Advocating more laws, more police and more repression to stem the tide of sexual violence against women is giving up more power to authorities so they...can protect us from ourselves. Besides being repugnant, legal remedies against anti-women-propaganda would be ineffective. Like prohibition, such reforms would only shove the commodities onto the black market and increase their appeal and the false appearance that they are liberating because illicit. Once again, if we do not re-draw lines, we end up in the liberals’ camp, frightened by the spectre of censorship and thought-police, of morals-enforcers and purity committees. The solution is not a stricter regulation of sexual commodities, but an end to such commodities. The violence against women would find other outlets even if pornography was outlawed. Instead, violence against women, as an important aspect of government and commercial violence against everyone, must be ended.

Porno establishments flourish because there are customers for them. Liberals and leftists picket Nazi bookstores because they are appalled at the fact that there are a few customers for such bookstores and that new customers might be recruited. One necessary step in ending consumption of commodities is to eliminate the psychic basis for that consumption by convincing the consumer that he or she can live without that commodity. Porno bookstores would have no customers only in a society where women and men were human beings fulfilling their own and one another’s desires.

It is possible to dream up many ingenious ways of educating porno customers, but first the issue of sexual violence must be clearly raised and clearly separated from the hysterical cries of the Puritans. I cannot suggest any easy solutions to a problem that is so deeply ingrained within our society. To speak only of “revolution,” and end on what many would consider a hopelessly utopian note, is obviously not satisfying. I know only that, in terms of the actual threat to people in our city, the wrong bookstore is being picketed. I am also afraid that if the “right” bookstores were to be picketed, the wrong slogans would be used. I’m not sure what the right slogans would be, and I’m also unconvinced sloganeering is the most effective approach. Others can help me in finding the right approach, perhaps even in inventing the right language. All I’m sure of is that there is no liberation inside a “Penthouse” or “Behind the Green Door,” and that ignoring the materials that promote sexual violence against women is no way to end such violence.

\* Cf. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, Ch. 10

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