

# More Debate on Pornography, Sexism & Fascism

Various Authors

1978

The following series of letters have joined the debate regarding the connection between pornography and violence against women that began in our January 24, 1978 issue [#289] with an article by Michael Betzold and was answered the following issue [#290, March 2, 1978] by Sonny Tufts. The two authors respond again to one another and several readers also offer their opinions. We invite further comment from readers.

## To The FE:

Now that “Sonny Tufts,” in his response to my article on pornography (see FE, January 24 & March 2, 1978), has revealed that I am “actually a liberal,” that I sound “disturbingly like a born-again Christian,” and that my argument is “flabby,” “moralistic, simplistic and presumptuous,” “windy,” and “void of content,” I can breathe easily, having been properly, if somewhat inconsistently, pigeonholed. Tufts, characteristically, confuses criticism with ridicule and analysis with name-calling and line-drawing.

In this regard, I would like to focus on Tuft’s assertions that “Bad criticism is harmful to a project such as ours...We must remain within the perspectives of revolt with which we began, and not be misled by the distortions generated by moribund ideologies which tend to creep into an anti-capitalist outlook...Silence is preferable to bad criticism.” This sounds like the voice of authority, but whose? Who is/are “we” and who shall impose the silence Tufts prefers to bad (i.e., unwelcome) criticism of his outlook? Are readers to seriously consider the suggestion that anyone who disagrees with Tufts’ outlook should remain silent?

Leaving aside the shotgun style of S.T.’s criticism, I want to question his main assumption, which is that we must not veer from “our” original perspectives into the trap of “rabid feminism.” I assume others are as tired as I am of hearing the doctrinaire male leftist shibboleth that the liberation of women must be subordinate to the larger struggle.

This response is hardly distinguishable from party-line Marxists’ denigration of “the women question” (read Lenin on it, don’t bother us), except that the nature of S.T.’s larger struggle is even vaguer—“against domestication.” What is his original perspective? Presumably it is that capitalism—or maybe fascism, or both, it’s not clear—is the enemy—and that the liberation of women is a secondary matter of less importance.

Just because feminism has become parochial for many does not denude the questions it raises of all importance. The complete liberation of women would have to entail the liberation of everyone, but no liberation at all is possible without exploding sex roles and undermining sexism, which has been a fundamental fact of oppression for as long as capitalism has existed, if not longer. The outlook that focuses solely on Capital as enemy is narrow, and the accompanying condemnation is purely defensive.

I cannot argue with Tufts’ insistence that pornography is only one aspect of societal violence against everyone, but to say as he does that “most every aspect of our culture incites violence against women and against everyone

else” is to broaden the analysis to the point of absurdity. Does going bowling or eating Corn Chex incite violence against women to the same extent as does reading pornography? I don’t think it’s very helpful to smother all attempts at understanding of specific modes and vehicles of oppression with the position that “everything is bad and everything must go.”

Tufts fears the Nazis, who will be more dangerous than pornographers, surely, if they come to power (an unlikely prospect), yet he tolerates the violence perpetrated by the present holders of power. Perhaps he is able to simply because he, by virtue of being male, can escape it. The truth is that the violence in our present culture does not fall equally on everyone. Rape is a fact of life for women, but men can almost ignore it.

Whether or not you call it fascism is hardly crucial, but violence against women is pervasive in our culture and apparently on the rise. I think fascism is much more likely to overtake us by inculcating violent attitudes within us than it is to march in wearing Nazi stormtrooper uniforms.

It is true I did not prove that pornography causes rape, but I never contended that it did. Certainly, the causes of rape are rooted deeply in class relations, the family, etc., as Tufts points out. I wanted to raise the question of the connection between pornography and rape, and lambaste the liberal view that pornography diffuses male rape fantasies.

In this argument, I should have made it clearer that I based my points on my own experience as a male consumer of pornography. What I said may be true for most males is true for myself and some other men I know, but others’ subjective responses may differ. This is one facet of the discussion that needs to be amplified with the viewpoints of others.

Because my response was largely subjective and because few people have yet taken any action on this issue, my conclusions were tentative. For this I am blasted, quite unfairly, for embracing conclusions I explicitly deny: I guess that S.T. is so enamored with drawing lines that he feels compelled to place me in the enemy camp:

“...the type of argument which centers on pornography at this time must be basically authoritarian and traditionalist in its conclusion...”

I fail to see the inescapability of this logic. I resent and am dismayed by the fact that I am accused of desiring Brownmuller’s solutions just because my critic is unable to do much more than lump opinions which differ from his in one giant bag of “horseshit.”

When will we stop attacking the credentials of other contributors to this project, labeling them ignorant and hopelessly liberal/reformist/Leninist (fill in the blank with proper condemnatory word)? If our project is to “struggle to become more human,” as Tufts concludes and I agree, why not start by abandoning dogmatism and denigration of other members of the project? I think a more fruitful discussion would occur if, rather than drawing lines and engaging in rhetorical castigation of one another, readers would respond subjectively with their own opinions on eroticism, their own experiences with and feelings about pornography, and their own ideas about how to combat violence against women.

Michael J. Betzold

*Tufts responds:* Judging from the pathetic and dishonest fulminations of Betzold’s reply, it is apparent that no dialogue has taken place whatsoever. Let me say that far from confusing ridicule with criticism, my response to his article reflected great restraint. I have clenched my teeth and suppressed my ire with his idiotic raving with a reasonable amount of success up to now, but I no longer see any point in holding back my “characteristic” venom.

Despite his self-righteous outrage, and his own brand of name-calling and character assassination, Betzold has failed utterly to address himself to my objections to his article. He repeats his wild claim to have “lambasted the liberal view that pornography diffuses potential male rape fantasies,” as if he can convince the reader by repetition of a statement which remains undemonstrated. His is a formulaic puritanism which assumes that sexual fantasies promote identical behavior, which is psychoanalytical rubbish. Hence, pornography “promotes” (a shade different from “causes”) rape. Strike one, “Mike.”

But it is important to his argument that he repeats this personal, idiosyncratic prejudice of his, since he is going to base his next claim upon it. He evades my objection that the phenomenon of pornography has to be understood more thoroughly than simply by its (obvious) anti-female attributes, by throwing up a smokescreen: the “leftist male shibboleth that the liberation of women must be subordinated to the larger struggle.”

Nowhere did I minimize the importance of the liberation of women—I simply questioned his analysis of pornography on that basis and that basis alone, and also by the way, his arbitrary and opinionated definitions of “genuine” versus (presumably) “false” eroticism.

As for the solecism of attacking feminism which I have committed, I stand by it. I will never deny that feminism, as well as Marxism, anarchism and other moments in the development of revolutionary critique, added to our own struggle to criticize and overthrow the existing conditions of life, but all of these movements have clearly revealed their historic limitations by now and must be discarded for a fuller, more human critique which best reflects the movement into the future. If Betzold and others insist on hanging onto their old illusions and their old definitions, then they should be prepared to be both criticized and ridiculed. Strike two.

Finally, Betzold makes the revealing statement that “Whether or not you call it fascism is hardly crucial...” This kind of sloppiness permeates both his letter and his article, and is precisely that which prompted me to make my original contribution. The fact is that such definitions are crucial. Perhaps to Betzold fascism signifies any kind of authoritarianism, violence, unpleasantry, or who-knows-what, but for me it is a complex problem demanding as much rigorous attention as the problem of pornography and eroticism. And because I see armed fascist ac-

[note: content missing from original]

of supporting “the present holder of power!” A neat trick! Name-calling and enemy-line-drawing, if you ask me. Strike three, yer out.

When I wrote that silence is preferable to bad criticism, I wasn’t defending criticism for its own sake. Nor was I advocating (as the liberal “civil libertarian” Betzold smugly insinuates) the suppression of viewpoints other than my own. I meant quite simply that when the Fifth Estate ceases to function as an incisive, advanced critique of the present malaise, and starts chasing after ideology, it may as well stop printing, since it will signify that we have nothing left to say.

## Pro-Rabies

Dear Fifth Estate:

I was happy to see the rabid feminist article linking pornography and rape in the pages of the *Fifth Estate* (See FE, Jan. 24, 1978).

Mr. Tufts is correct in observing that the FE rarely prints such articles (See FE March 2, 1978). He is also astute enough to repeat the current formulation of the revolutionary project: “humanity’s struggle against domestication is the necessary point of departure.” I suspect that he also accommodated you by furnishing the pornographics to illustrate his article (as if readers needed additional visual documentation).

There’s something suspicious about which article Mr. Tufts chose to attack. After all Kim Il Sung isn’t an influential figure in the lives of most FE readers. Does an FE spoof of Kim [FE #289, January 24, 1978] suggest a better starting point in humanity’s struggle against domestication than does an article on pornography/rape?

Mr. T. doesn’t commit himself on the pros and cons of rape but he does, admittedly, have some criticisms of pornography. He disapproves for several reasons: 1) it symbolizes human alienation; 2) Hustler magazine recently has been printing racist jokes; and 3) it trivializes psychic research (into eroticism). He correctly points out that Mr. Betzold offered no “data” for his assertion that there’s a cause: relationship between pornography and rape, but does no better himself when he glibly writes: “Porn and advertising, movies, TV as well as most popular literature (H. Robbins et al) contribute to a generalized philistinism and mistreatment of women but as factors in the creation of a rapist are negligible.”

Is it just men’s inherent misogyny that causes rape? But even if we’re not permitted to look for non-abstract causes of rape, it seems legitimate to ask, accepting the assumptions in his sentence, why he illustrates his article with these contributions to a generalized philistinism and mistreatment of women.

Mr. T., in fact, has a certain nostalgia for the *Evergreen Review* and the good period of *Playboy*. Not only men benefited from these publications: “Women became more assertive about their own needs.”

And if the reader isn't convinced by this defense, Mr. T. would discourage any action against pornography on the grounds that "Pornography has existed since the birth of civilization." You may not be a liberal, Mr. T., but there are other applicable labels. I suggest you stay home and chew your cud.

It may be part of a "narrow feminist outlook" and a "false theory of male oppressor vs. female victim" to link pornography and rape but "humanity's domestication" is too much for me to tackle all at once. The pornography Mr. Tufts defends is somewhat more accessible. And I'm not thinking of picketing any bookstores.

Stridently,  
Helen of Troy

## Red Fascism

To The Fifth Estate:

Sonny Tufts' "Fascism & Pornography: A Response" in the March 2, 1978 FE was on the whole an excellent contribution to the discussion of the nature of sexuality. However, his section on the phenomenon of fascism is about as wrongheaded as he accuses Michael Betzold of being on the subject of pornography.

In charging Betzold with misunderstanding fascism (undoubtedly the case), Tufts resurrects the old leftist rallying cry of anti-fascism and begins a passionate description of it as if this were 1933 and not almost half a century later, where an entirely new set of political definitions is in operation.

Fascism arose in the '20s and '30s as a defense mechanism for capital (as Tufts indicates), but only in those areas where the normal repressive apparatus of the State appeared to be unable to adequately handle the challenge to it from the traditional workers movement, which at that time had launched numerous assaults on the rule of capital. (In the U.S. the New Deal of Roosevelt and union organizing served the purpose that fascism did in Europe.) Since that period fascist mobilizations of "crazed hordes of the petty bourgeoisie"—led by a charismatic leader espousing racism and mystical patriotism—has receded as the challenge from an organized workers movement has similarly declined.

However, with the decline of an organized, combative workers movement, combined with the recognition by international capital of the unreliability of fascism in power, the desirability of mass-based fascist movements has declined almost entirely. Instead, almost all emphasis is placed on the strengthening of the State machinery. In no nation does a modern ruling class consider allowing the assumption of fascism to power, but rather they rest their hopes on a technologically-advanced police and army. Even the alternative of giving full power to the generals at certain crucial points (such as in Chile) appears to be increasingly dysfunctional to the international managers of capital. (The "Bonapartist" rule of the traditional military should not be confused with the mass based movement of fascism if we want to remain precise.)

The left today, (and apparently Tufts) continue to cling to outdated concepts, which at this point, serve only the interests of the left itself. The left has always posed itself as the most formidable and courageous opponent of fascism and to the extent that they define the conflict—that is, the contest for political control of the State apparatus—they deserve the credit they seek. As rivals for the same state power, the fascists and leftists have come into striking conflict on several historic occasions leaving a mystified legacy which continues to this day.

If the left is assigned a special role in combating fascism in the modern epoch, it ignores the basic and crucial fact that the two ideologies are but different variants of the rule of capital. To support the left over fascism is simply to enslave oneself in one form of counter-revolution over another.

Leftism continues the 10,000 year old project of the State and its vertical bureaucracy which has divided the world into the ruled and rulers. Leftism has adopted the language of liberation and revolution, but everywhere it has triumphed it operates exactly as do its fascist opponents.

In Nazi Germany as well as in the Soviet Union and China today all activity independent of the State and Party are forbidden, workers' organizations are smashed, trade unions become instruments of state productive norms, and the opponents of the regime are quickly jailed and executed.

In liberal & leftist mythology (almost) identical) the great battle which occurred between the opposing forces of Communism and Nazism in Germany during the early '30's configures the battle lines that continue into today.

Actually, in real terms, the German working class had no real alternative between the two. On one hand were the Nazis and on the other the German Communist Party with an allegiance so strong to Stalin that there is no reason not to suspect that the same sort of police state would have been erected in Germany by the CP there that Lenin and Stalin had created in the Soviet Union.

In Spain four years later, Stalinism acted as a counter-revolutionary force abroad for the first time. The Spanish CP not only acted like a fascist movement, i.e. directly destroying working class gains and organizations, as well as assassinating working class militants, but it even had the class base of a classic fascist movement with its ranks being staffed with police and army officials, white collar employees, small industrialists and small landowners.

So, to say as Tufts does, that the only reason the Nazis are not killing Jews today is that they are “not in power” applies equally well to the left. The left have not begun to exterminate their opponents and smash independent revolutionary formations because they do not control the police. However, their plans are clear: two members of a trotskyst group tell two FE staffers, “You people are dangerous and must be dealt with;” the Revolutionary Union paper of a few years ago states: “Stalin knew how to deal with Trotskyists and other counter-revolutionaries;” the Communist Labor Party begins to reprint articles by Beria, head of the dreaded Soviet secret police and Stalin’s chief executioner; or a leftist tells us that in the Bolshevik massacre of the Kronstadt revolutionaries, “The Bolsheviks didn’t drown Kronstadt in enough blood.”

These epigones of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Mao drool at the thought of controlling the police so the blood of their enemies can commence to flow. One can debate endlessly the differences between fascism and leftism (their class base, social role, etc.), but their effect in the real world is identical—mass murder and counter-revolution.

Today the Communist parties of Europe are preparing to step into a new role: shearing up of unstable Western capital in exchange for political control of a given country which essentially means support of the Soviet Union’s domestic and foreign policy. When the *San Francisco Chronicle* states that the Italian C.P. “stands between anarchy and the army” during the crisis over the Moro kidnapping or when the former head of the Italian Central Bank declared that the CP is “a force for stability,” one knows that it certainly is not fascism that is on the agenda in Italy. Also, international capital and its Italian stooges have no desire to turn political rule of the country over to a bungling military. It is the CP with its mechanisms of mass control over a restless working class which makes an increasingly attractive alternative to rule Italian capital.

When Nazis or other militant fascists do pose a concrete threat such as in Boston and Chicago where they organized mobs of racists they should be met by extending the revolutionary project, not abandoning it through participation in coalitions with liberals and religionists, marching in pacifist parades or seeking the assistance of the State and a landlord as was done in Detroit. To the extent that Tufts is correct that the Nazis are an action group, they should be met by concerted action whenever the occasion should arise. This seems to be only common sense.

Death to Fascism (Red or Black)

Tomega Therion

## **Feminism Defended**

Dear Friends/Comrades:

I am extremely uncomfortable with the way in which much of the criticism comes down in the FE, and it is one important factor that has stopped myself and others from contributing. There is an important and valid need for a criticism that helps people to see and move with new and different perspectives, that attempts to clarify ideas and activities that are hidden and perverted by bourgeois society and its mouthpieces.

What I often see happening instead is an ugly macho competitiveness that: 1) discounts and decimates any ideas contrary to a particular person’s perspective, and 2) attacks unmercifully those with the audacity to sport such thoughts.

Thus, not only are Hillbillie and Jones scoffed at for “searching for new forms to destroy the old order,” but let ‘em buy armored plated brassieres if they fear getting “their soft tits bruised.”

Another instance: Michael Betzold is seen as nothing more than a liberal (dilettante?) (See FE, March 2, 1978) whose attitude is so much “strident feminism” which calls for a woman pig on every corner even though he explicitly denies this.

And directly from the FE staff come the trashiest sort of “instant reply” smearing numerous contributors, written with unmatched vigor as though our vilest and most personal condemnation must go against other “erring” comrades (lest we be led astray?) instead of towards those whose power manipulates us and beats us down daily, or more directly to the structure that perpetuates our oppression. Hopefully these sorts of replies are disappearing from the FE.

I strongly disagree with what is being pushed by some as the FE correct response to feminism. Feminist thought/practice is not in its potential a “parochial and two-dimensional ideology which mutilates the fabric of the social whole, and thus proves incapable of providing a revolutionary critique” as Tufts asserts. Certainly it has been used (I would say perverted) by people into a narrow critique by some into a “man as enemy” conclusion; others-into legal reform, by the bourgeois press into an ideology from bra-burners, and on & on. And what radical departure from the deadness of bourgeois culture has escaped this perversion?

It should be clear to us all what immense power this culture—capital—has of usurping its agitators; yet are we to conclude that the wealth of ideas and activity raised by feminism and other such movements are therefore valueless?

As I and others view it, feminism in its critique of oppressiveness of stifling sex roles, of the distortion of and possibilities for a natural sexuality, of the ways in which patriarchy has undone our humanity as women or men, and of the difficult ways in which we are all its victims—offers a crucial understanding to revolution, in theory and in practice.

Where does this revolutionary purity: “we won’t be able to redesign anything until after we have destroyed existing capital” lead us? If to a total bewilderment and fogginess, if to an overriding fear that anything done under the reign of capital is meaningless—if to inaction—then surely we have allowed and, in fact, reinforced capital’s domination and our own inevitable annihilation.

A Friend/Comrade,  
Robert Rope

*Staff Reply:* Your squeamishness about rigorous criticism is one we’ve often heard before and one we’ve never been much in sympathy with. We don’t believe all sides of the question have equal validity and are prepared to defend our views with vigor. Some of what you have complained about occurs in our readers letters and is nothing we should be held accountable for as the staff. Besides, those “trashed” are usually more than able to hold their own, as evidenced by Amelia Jones’ reply to her critics in this issue.

Regarding the larger question of feminism: As you define feminism we have absolutely no quarrel with it. Further, we indulge in no belief that any struggle should be subordinated to another—the revolutionary project is a totality and impossible without all elements of our lives being renewed. As you indicate, feminism has been almost totally recuperated into an affirmation and extension of capital no matter what its rebellious roots were. For whatever it may have meant (and that is not totally clear to us), it now denotes legal reform, the extension of women into the male categories of this society and exotic theories of female superiority and separatism.

We can do nothing other than to cite the continuing attention given on these pages to the question of sexual oppression of women and the damaging effect stereotyped sex roles inflict on us all to try to demonstrate our desire to participate in a complete revolution, but to call that feminism seems to-us to hopelessly confuse the issue.

# fifth Estate

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