

# Introduction

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Most of the essays in this volume began as speeches and panel presentations at a conference that, although all but ignored by the mainstream media, reverberated throughout the women's movement. On April 6, 1987, eight hundred people packed an auditorium at New York University Law School, while hundreds more sat riveted to television monitors outside. They came to hear many of the major feminist writers, thinkers, and leaders address an ideology and a program that, they asserted, was undermining feminism in the guise of being its best friend.

The subject of the conference was liberalism or, to use British feminist historian Sheila Jeffreys' more precise terminology, "sexual liberalism": a set of political beliefs and practices rooted in the assumption that sexual expression is inherently liberating and must be permitted to flourish unchecked, even when it entails the exploitation or brutalization of others.<sup>1</sup> To sexual liberals, sexuality is not a construct of culture that reflects and reinforces a culture's values including its devaluation of women, as feminists contend, but an icon of nature, so fragile that any analysis, criticism, or attempt at change threatens not only the existence of human sexuality but everyone's freedom.

Conflict between feminists and sexual liberals is nothing new. Indeed, the two groups have been at odds from the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, if not before. The early consciousness-raising groups and the activism and publications they generated squarely confronted the sexual attitudes and mores of liberal and left-wing men. In *Notes from the First Year*, for example, a collection of essays published by New York Radical Women in 1968, Shulamith Firestone identified and then dissected what she called "the seeming freedoms" for women championed by so-called progressive men. At the top of her list was sexuality:

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<sup>1</sup>The title of the conference and this volume—"The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism"—is the inspiration of Sheila Jeffreys.

As for sex itself, I would argue that any changes were as a result of male interests and not female. . . . A relaxing of mores concerning female sexual behavior was to his advantage; there was a greater sexual supply at a lower or nonexistent cost. But his attitudes haven't changed much.<sup>2</sup>

One participant in a late sixties consciousness-raising group anticipated the analysis that antipornography feminists would make two decades later: "A man's sense of personal worth comes through his cocksman-ship, in the Playboy mystique. It's the old business of raising your self-image by lowering someone else."<sup>3</sup>

By 1970, Dana Densmore and others in a Boston-based radical feminist group called Cell 16 made male supremacist sexual values the focus of their theorizing. Densmore argued that the image of the sexually liberated woman extolled by sexually liberal men was nothing more than a repackaged version of the oldest and most dehumanized conception of women:

People seem to believe that sexual freedom (even when it is only the freedom to actively offer oneself as a willing object) is freedom. When men say to us, "But aren't you already liberated?" what they mean is, "We said it was okay to let us fuck you . . . What more could you want?" The unarticulated assumption behind this misunderstanding is that women are purely sexual beings, bodies and sensuality, fucking machines. Therefore freedom for women can only mean sexual freedom.<sup>4</sup>

As the 1970s progressed, activism often loomed larger than theorizing, as feminists organized against rape, battery, sexual harassment, and child sexual abuse, and protested beauty pageants and sexist ads. Each new phase of feminist work was greeted with fierce and unrelenting opposition by sexually liberal men. Male academicians and social commentators reacted to speakouts by women who had survived rape with disdain and hostility. Although professing to be against rape, these men defined it in the narrowest terms possible, as forced penetration of a sexually inexperienced woman by a stranger, and they defended the mindset underlying rape—that sex is conquest—as natural and inevitable. Sexual liberals argued that "sexual harassment" was a misnomer; that what feminists were misguidedly calling sexual abuse in the workplace or on the street was merely the natural expression of males' sexual attraction to females. With growing vehemence, sexual

<sup>2</sup>Shulamith Firestone, "The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.," in *New York Radical Women* (ed.), *Notes from the First Year*, June 1968, p. 6 (published privately).

<sup>3</sup>"Women Rap About Sex," *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Dana Densmore, "Independence from the Sexual Revolution," in *New York Radical Women* (ed.), *Notes from the Third Year: Women's Liberation*, 1971 (published privately).

liberals insisted that feminists were mistaking attraction and affection for hostility and violence and grossly exaggerating the incidence of sexual violence against women and children. This in spite of the growing body of testimony of women who had survived this violence and the consensus among social scientists that sexual violence is far more pervasive than anyone had realized—that one out of four girls is sexually molested and a third of all adult females are raped.<sup>5</sup>

The backlash became even more vociferous when feminists began actively organizing against pornography in the late 1970s. Although feminists had criticized pornography from the start of the contemporary women's movement,<sup>6</sup> now they began to mobilize against it, organizing meetings, marches, picket lines, and press conferences. This new phase of activism reflected the effort of feminists, who had spent a decade fighting to better the lot of victims of sexual violence, to stop the violence at its source. Whereas liberals and conservatives both believed that male sexual violence was innate and thus inevitable, feminists argued that it was learned and that pornographic materials, which eroticize sexual violence and inequality, were a central component of that education. The feminists' targets were not confined to the so-called hardcore materials that at least putatively were prohibited under obscenity laws but also included the "softcore" pornography that sexual liberals like Hugh Hefner had made socially acceptable. For feminists, the issue was not morals, taste, or aesthetics but the attitudes about women that pornography inculcated, the acts of sexual brutality engendered by those attitudes, and the exploitation of real women in the manufacture of pornographic materials.

Pornographers and civil libertarians immediately banded together to defend pornography. Well aware that it would be hard to enter the arena of public debate making a case for pornography, they adopted another, safer strategy: attacking the feminist critics of pornography by evoking long-standing and antiwoman stereotypes. While the pornographers conducted a no-holds-barred character assassination campaign, smearing their feminist opponents as castrating man haters and prudes,

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<sup>5</sup>Diana E. H. Russell, *Sexual Exploitation*. New York: Macmillan, 1984.

<sup>6</sup>To radical feminists at the beginning of the Second Wave, pornography was nothing more or less than the codification of a male supremacist value system and the reification of male sexual power over women:

Pornography rests on the accurate assumption that sexual "pleasure" is equal to power and dominance for the man. It expresses a masculine ideology of male power over females, and it cuts across class lines. (Roxanne Dunbar, "Sexual Liberation: More of the Same Thing," in *More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation*, Issue 3, November 1969 [published privately].)

civil libertarians waged a more gentlemanly attack, denouncing anti-pornography feminists as repressive and censorious.<sup>7</sup>

It was not inevitable that civil libertarians would embrace sexual liberalism and do everything in their power to stamp out the feminist movement against pornography; some civil libertarians refused to join the ranks of the sexual liberals. There were several factors, however, that propelled many, if not most, civil libertarians into sexual liberalism.

To start, there was the civil libertarians' philosophy, which considers the state the principal and often the sole threat to human freedom—a good that flourishes as long as the power of the state over the individual is kept in check. In this analysis, freedom is distinct from social and political equality. Although this philosophy accurately describes the situation of white men in this country, it has never been applicable to the situation of minorities and women. For members of these groups, social and political equality is a precondition of freedom. Moreover, for minorities and women, the state is no greater an obstacle to equality than many nongovernmental institutions and organizations.

In addition, there was the history of the civil liberties movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, civil libertarians joined pornographers to fight anti-obscenity laws. The pornographers who started out as the clients of civil liberties lawyers soon became their funders and friends. By the end of the 1970s, a symbiotic relationship existed between civil libertarians and pornographers that could not be ignored: the San Diego chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) showed pornographic films as fundraisers in a theater loaned by a local pornographer; the Minnesota chapter (the MCLU) was donated free office space by midwest pornography kingpins; the ACLU's reproductive rights project received substantial funding from the Playboy Foundation; and each year the ACLU's national office helped arrange and judge the Hugh M. Hefner First Amendment Awards, a Playboy public relations effort. (Not surprisingly, recipients of the awards were frequently ACLU officials.)

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<sup>7</sup>The "anti-sex" label was also foisted on early radical feminists. In "Who Claims Men Are the Enemy," Dana Densmore analyzed this reaction:

Another ploy, a little more subtle, is "Why do you want to get rid of sex?" Again, this may be a smear, a bid for attention, or an honest fear.

When it is an honestly felt fear, what he means is: "I cannot conceive of sex, cannot be sexually interested in a woman, unless I am in a superior-to-inferior, active-to-passive, aggressor-to-victim relationship with her. If you are going to insist that we must approach each other as equals you will have destroyed sex and you might as well demand celibacy." (From *Females and Liberation: A Collection of Articles by Dana Densmore*, 1970 [published privately].)

The contradictions embedded in the philosophy and history of civil libertarians are evident in their reaction to a law, passed by the New York State legislature in the late 1970s, that criminalized the production, distribution, and sale of child pornography. Never even considering the harm of child pornography to the civil liberties of children—in particular, the right of children to live in society free from the threat of sexual exploitation and abuse—the ACLU adopted unquestioningly the domino theory offered as a defense by the child pornographers prosecuted under the statute: prohibition of child pornography would trigger a process that would end in the censorship of masterpieces of literature. The ACLU, along with two other civil libertarian groups (the Media Coalition and American Booksellers Association), fought the child pornography statute all the way to the Supreme Court. Although the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the New York law, which became the model for a federal statute, the domino theory did not become reality. *Huckleberry Finn* and *Ulysses* remained on the bookshelves. This fact, however, did not stop the ACLU from evoking this specious argument against subsequent feminist legal efforts.

Also underlying the alliance of civil libertarians with pornographers and with sexual liberalism is the fact that these organizations were established and have always been controlled by white men. As a consequence, the philosophy and political agenda of civil libertarians have always reflected and furthered white male interests. Although civil libertarian leaders are not necessarily sex industry consumers, it is clear that they do not experience the reduction of women to sexual commodities as demeaning or exploitative. Their domino theory is never applied to the other side of the question: whether the legitimization and proliferation of pornography and prostitution destroy the civil liberties of women. The few women who have risen to positions of importance within the ACLU have shared the values of their male colleagues—indeed, it was the female director of the ACLU's San Diego chapter who arranged to have an X-rated "classic" that featured a coerced and brutalized pornography "model" shown to its members to educate them about the innocuousness of pornography.

The most inescapable evidence of the embracing of sexual liberalism by civil libertarians is the fact that civil libertarians began to mobilize against antipornography feminists almost a decade before feminists began to support any legislative remedies holding the pornographers accountable for pornography's harm. At one of the first feminist conferences on pornography, held in New York City in 1978, prominent civil libertarian men shouted down feminists attempting to discuss the relationship between pornography and sexual violence. One noted New York University law professor, who sat on a panel with Andrea Dwor-

kin, Phyllis Chesler, Florence Rush, and other feminist writers, became so enraged at the feminist presentations that he began stamping his feet and waving his arms in what could only be described as a temper tantrum. Clearly it was not state sanctions against pornography that incurred his wrath but mere feminist speech against pornography. The inescapable conclusion was that continued access to pornography was a cherished privilege of many civil libertarian men.

In the mid-1980s there were two developments that prompted sexual liberals to step up their attacks against feminists. The first was an amendment to a municipal human rights ordinance that defined pornography as a practice of sex discrimination and gave women injured in its production and dissemination a cause of action to sue pornographers. The ordinance, authored by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, represented a significant break with legal tradition. Unlike antiobscenity laws that frame the harm of pornography in moralistic and aesthetic terms, as the offense that pictures and words that arouse some people's prurient interests do to other people's sensibilities, the ordinance identified pornography's harm in feminist political terms, as its damage to the status and safety of women. Unlike antiobscenity laws, which empower the state's prosecutors to bring criminal charges against alleged purveyors of obscene materials, the feminist ordinance empowered individual women to file civil suits against traffickers in pornography.

The civil rights antipornography ordinance was twice passed by the Minneapolis City Council, only to be vetoed each time by its civil libertarian mayor. A slightly altered version was approved by the Indianapolis City Council and signed into law by that city's mayor. Before a single suit could be brought under the ordinance, it was challenged on overbreadth grounds by the Media Coalition in conjunction with American Booksellers Association and the ACLU. Playboy lent the services of its legal counsel and flooded local legislators with letters denouncing the feminist law.

The ordinance was eventually held to be unconstitutional by a conservative district court judge, a decision affirmed by a conservative circuit court panel. The truth of the matter was that the feminist law flew in the face of both liberal and conservative legal traditions and so was attacked by forces on both ends of the male-dominated political spectrum. Moreover, many conservatives are sexual liberals. Fundamentalist Marabel Morgan's best-selling *The Total Woman*, which attempted to indoctrinate women into sexual submission, pornography-style, was no aberration of conservatism, and two of the three most popular pornography magazines—*Hustler* and *Penthouse*—are published by arch-conservatives and aimed at politically reactionary audiences.

Political reality notwithstanding, sexual liberals floated the rumor that

feminists had formed an alliance with conservatives to fight pornography. It didn't matter that the sexual liberals were unable to muster any evidence to support their allegations. This fantasy was reported as fact in the press, and the actual alliance that had long existed between pornographers and civil libertarians was ignored by the media.

The second development that intensified the opposition of the sexual liberals to feminists fighting pornography was not a feminist effort at all but the appointment by Attorney General Edwin Meese of a commission to study the effects of pornography. The commission held a series of hearings around the country, and a broad array of people testified—social scientists, pornographers, pornography performers, feminists, civil libertarians, and ordinary citizens. Although the commission's conclusion—that pornography encourages attitudes and behaviors of sexual aggression—reflected the consensus among leading social scientists and the overwhelming testimony of women seeking refuge and redress from battering, sexual abuse and harassment, and prostitution, it was attacked by sexual liberals as engineered by the conservative Reagan administration. To prevent the report from doing damage to its business interests, the Media Coalition, an alliance of book, magazine, and newspaper publishers and distributors that included publishers and distributors of pornography, hired a major public relations firm, Gray and Company, at a cost of a million dollars. The firm's assignment was to conduct a media blitz that portrayed opponents of pornography, particularly feminists, as book burners. Ironically, and not incidentally, the result of the Media Coalition's so-called anticensorship efforts was the inability of the commission to find a publisher for its controversial report. (The previous commission's report, which had exonerated pornography, had been published by Random House.) Feminists writing about pornography and related issues encountered greater obstacles to publication than ever before, and feminist protests and press conferences that targeted pornography, once heavily covered, were now shrouded in silence.

The onslaught that the sexual liberals waged against feminists divided the women's movement. Liberal feminists, who had long benefited from alliances with sexually liberal men on the issue of abortion, were frightened by the attacks, and many tried to distance themselves from their more radical feminist sisters.<sup>8</sup> Socialist feminists, who have historically remained distant from the feminist campaigns against pros-

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<sup>8</sup>Sexually liberal men support abortion for women not because they want women to be able to control their bodies but because they know that unrestricted abortions heighten women's availability to men for sex. And the sex sexually liberal men have in mind is not the kind that emerges from women's authentic desire for physical intimacy and pleasure. Instead, it is the male-controlled, male-defined sex of pornography, in which men are subjects and women are objects.

titution, rape, sexual abuse, and pornography, now turned liberal in theory as well. Radical feminists continued their work against pornography and watched financial and political support evaporate.

Then there was the small group of women who went even further: collaboration with antifeminists. Some of these women held prestigious positions with the ACLU. Most were sexual liberals who considered pornography and even sadomasochism to be sexual liberation for women. They banded together in a group they named FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force), debated feminists against pornography, and produced their own pornographic publication entitled "Caught Looking." FACT existed for one purpose alone—to defeat the feminist civil rights antipornography ordinance. When the Supreme Court summarily affirmed the circuit court's decision against the law, FACT's *raison d'être* disappeared and the group disbanded.

Pornography was not the only issue to mobilize sexual liberals against feminists. Sexual liberals in Canada fought evidentiary rules that prevented defense attorneys from savaging the character of rape victims on the witness stand and fought the feminists who supported the rules. Back in the United States, sexual liberals defended prostitution as an economic and sexual choice for women and advocated its legalization. Feminists in groups like WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), many of whom had survived sexual exploitation and abuse as prostitutes, challenged the claims and agenda of the sexual liberals, arguing that they legitimized and perpetuated female sexual slavery. WHISPER pointed to studies showing that instead of entering prostitution voluntarily, as the sexual liberals claimed, most women and girls who became prostitutes had been coerced into that condition by a complex of factors that included sexual abuse in childhood, poverty, and pimps.

Most recently, the sexual liberals have led the pro-surrogacy forces. The debate over legalizing surrogate contracts has revived the conflict between civil libertarians and feminists in a battle that mirrors the fight around pornography. The ACLU contested, as unconstitutional, one of the first state laws prohibiting contractual surrogacy in Michigan *after* it had been passed by the state legislature and been signed into law by the governor. To all appearances, the ACLU made a deal with the state's attorney general who agreed to a different interpretation of the bill—one that permits surrogacy as long as the woman does not give up her rights to the child until after birth. Elsewhere, feminists who organized support for Mary Beth Whitehead and other women deceived and exploited by the reproductive pimps and baby brokers, found themselves confronting many of the same characters from the cast that had rallied to the defense of the pornographers, using the same rhetoric of individual freedom, this time phrased as "procreative liberty."

This was the political backdrop of the conference, although battleground may be the more accurate term. The feelings of excitement and exhilaration that swept the audience no doubt stemmed from the realization that feminists had weathered the attacks leveled by far more powerful opponents, that they were still fighting sexual exploitation, and that they at long last had an opportunity to tell the truth about who they were and what they were up against, in their own language and on their own terms. The speakers were angry and witty and inspiring. They had survived pimps and Mormon patriarchs, censorship in the name of freedom of speech, and coercion in the guise of freedom of choice. Their characters had been vilified and their words distorted, but they were still there—with more clarity, commitment, and courage than ever before.