

Introduction

LIFE AND THEORY ARE BOTH NOTORIOUSLY SLIPPERY AND, SINCE the author doesn't live her life according to feminist theory, but draws her feminist theory from her life (among other things), there's much about the following essays I'd now like to change.

I have been haunted throughout the writing of these diverse pieces (especially the ones about pornography and the one entitled "Not for Years but for Decades") by a feeling of not coming to grips with the rock-bottom of the subject. I think I now know why.

Contemporary feminist writing is fragmented and multifarious partly because there are so many questions and issues to be addressed and partly because our own feminist past *has been in every case hidden from us*, either through deliberate distortion, sheer re-invention, or total obliteration. Some earlier feminist movements like the suffrage movement in England were larger, more influential, and

more productive of radical theory than our own. Dale Spender's wonderful, crucial new book, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*¹ documents case after case of deliberate obliteration and reinvention—all women of achievement have received this treatment, not just feminists—and accumulates and articulates a comprehensive theory of feminism formed by the statement of its eighty-odd subjects (in her introductory chapters Spender says she had to stop her research arbitrarily when she began to run out of time and space, but that she never ran out of subjects).

Spender's formulation of feminist theory isn't final either, of course, but I'm going to propose as the primary demand of patriarchy what she chooses from Matilda Joselyn Gage (1873):² *that women's resources be available, non-reciprocally and without pay, to men.* If men have an unreasonable and unjust double amount of authority (intellectual and other), self-esteem, time, energy, leisure, cultural importance, wealth, freedom, and so on, this is precisely because they have stolen our time, our energy, our leisure, our authority, our labor and the wealth it produces, our self-esteem, our claims to knowledge and achievement, and our possibilities for autonomy and freedom. We are not merely excluded from male activities and institutions; our resources have been appropriated by men as their own in a massive theft lasting for centuries.

I think questions of sexuality and pornography which are of so much concern to feminists today can be clarified and demystified. If what matters is men's non-reciprocal access to women's resources, then male lust and even male violence are not the basic issues; they are merely particular examples of the fundamental issue (though one could argue, accurately I think, that it is exactly non-reciprocal access to women's resources, *i.e.*, male dominance, that results in male violence and male coercion).

I want to use "pornography" throughout not as a value

judgment about particular material but merely to indicate commercial sexual fantasy sold largely to heterosexual men, of which some is violent and some is not and of which some is obviously contemptuous and hostile and some is not.

First, if and when pornography becomes a single-issue fight, that alone will be self-destructive. All single-issue fights are. The sheer length and frustration of the battle against any one manifestation of patriarchy will drive those women who focus on it alone to the point of accepting help from "allies" who subvert and undermine their activities, as Susan Anthony (according to Spender) became conservative in her later years and courted such "friends" as the racist and reactionary head of the W.C.T.U. Single-issue crusades inevitably "succeed" (like suffrage) at the cost of their radicalism, not because their proponents want this to happen but because public "success" demands the cutting off of any issue from its radical content and its wider radical context.

Second, I'd like to suggest that many of our current assumptions about pornography are not nearly radical enough. Some examples:

1. Pornography is bad *because* it's violent and encourages violence against women.
2. Pornography is bad *because* it tells lies about women.
3. Pornography is bad *because* it's caused by and encourages male lust, which (at least as constructed by the patriarchy) is violent and insatiable.
4. Pornography is bad *because* it presents women as degraded and humiliated.

I'd like to make here what I think is an important point: that the above statements lead to confusions in logic. For example, what about material that isn't violent (it certainly exists)? What about the evidence that violent male youngsters and adults don't read what we commonly see as violent pornography, but a small, specialized group of maga-

zines like *True Detective*? (My authority for this is Rae Larson of *SISTER*—the Seattle Institute for Sex Therapy, Education, and Research.) What about the evidence that much of our mass literature, television, and movies encourages violence against women even more subtly and pervasively than pornography?

If pornography is bad *because* it tells lies about women, is it any worse—or even any different—from the rest of the culture? Patriarchal ideology and culture are nothing but lies about women. I think we often forget this simply because it's so absolutely pervasive in everything from clothing to the design of houses to the structure of cities (anti-children and anti-women). And if pornography could be re-designed by main force so that it did tell some anatomical and emotional truths, would that make it acceptable? It would still represent the total availability of women's resources (not only women's bodies, but women's energy and time) to men.

And that's what's wrong with it and would be wrong with it even if we could re-design it so that it avoided the obvious feminist objections of violence, contempt, and untruth. In this male-dominant culture, men who can't or don't want to buy women's resources (including women's bodies) *via* marriage or some kind of commitment, or rent women's bodies, energies, and time *via* prostitution, can nonetheless buy fantasies of having access to women's resources, *i.e.* pornography.

Perhaps the worst result of isolating discussions of pornography from basic feminist theory is what happens when we try to decide if a particular piece of material is or is not acceptable. Much material is perfectly clear—women being cut up by chainsaws, for example—but what about the recent feminist-authored code which listed under women being degraded or humiliated, “women inviting penetration”? This is the sort of detail that can keep us going for months; I

myself can't see "inviting penetration" as in any way degrading or humiliating *per se*—except of course that we still live in a culture that believes coitus to be symbolic of male dominance and that talks about penetration rather than "the capture of the penis."³ The bitter debates of the last few years seem to be worst when there is argument of this sort. I believe that such questions, like the anti-feminist question about abortion, "When does life begin?", are basically *unanswerable*—and that's why they are asked. There is no such thing in a male-dominant culture as "acceptable pornography," no matter what rules it follows, and forgetting that can only lead us into endless snarls—as in my own essays that follow!⁴

Moreover, I now believe that male sexuality *per se* has very little to do with any of these questions. The few talks friends of mine have had with men who were willing to drop macho pretensions, at least temporarily, Phyllis Chesler's *About Men*,⁵ as well as thirty-seven years of listening to male sexual bragging, have made me absolutely certain that men's insistence on women's "attractiveness" and sexual availability has nothing to do with either carnality or aesthetics. For one thing, "attractiveness" in women changes too fast and too often (this decade's fashion is next decade's hilarity) to have any deep connection with male instinct. Moreover, men make it clear that the way unadorned women actually smell, feel, and look (which surely arouses lust in conditions of actual copulation) is *exactly what is not acceptable otherwise*. What is demanded is that you "make something of yourself." Sometimes this means being artificially thin or girdled and sometimes it means being artificially fat and padded, but it always means being unnatural and uncomfortable. What it also always means is giving off signals of the availability of your energies, time, emotions, and resources to men, that is, your loyalty to the patriarchal order.

In short, the demand for "attractiveness," like the existence of pornography, is sexual harassment, nothing more and nothing less.

There is a confusion that bedevils all women, from the youngsters who think they can avoid sexism by finding "the right man" to the political theorists (like myself in the past) who assume that women's oppression consists always of personal contacts with individually villainous men. Something like that seems to be haunting sexual issues now. It is simply not true, for example, that *all* women in the sex industry were forced into it and *all* are exploited. Similarly the image of *all* prostitutes as victims forced into the trade by violence or destitution (or kidnapped) will not withstand the evidence. If we object *only* to personal victimization and exploitation, or *only* to violence and humiliation, we won't always find them—and what then? Do we withdraw our objections? I hope not! Looking for personal confrontations and extreme cases of violence or coercion leaves us without theory and therefore helpless in the face of male-dominated institutions, some of which look relatively benign and most of which are run not by open violence or coercion, but by "normal," even "polite" ordinary behavior practiced by "nice," "polite," "tactful," even "pleasant," men.

There are many subtle ways of giving one's time and energy to the patriarchy, and one (it seems to me) is to become over-occupied with male psychology, *i.e.* male violence, male sexuality, and the causes of male attitudes and male behavior. Even those of us who detest the patriarchy still find it difficult to become morally free of male power, of the massive and constant pull of men's centrality, men's importance, and the supposed "profound" causes of men's behavior. (Men themselves are awfully fond of analyzing the deep psychology of their own, male misbehavior, especially to feminists!)

What about my earlier self, with her statement that

"Sometimes I'm attracted to men I humanly like"? Was this real carnal arousal or was it merely a compound of guilt at not doing my job, the adoration of male normativeness and primacy and the uneasy, minimal arousal I finally understood and described in the first part of "Pornography and the Doubleness of Sex for Women"?

The "old dykes" who boast of their friendships with gay men, the women who cluster round pro-feminist men (real or otherwise) radiating gratitude and praise, the Lesbians who talk endlessly about their attraction to men and their "bisexuality," when the psychology of genuinely bisexual women is quite different, all who allow fear to impress them morally or make them lie to themselves, who keep in their hearts not affection, not even concern, but *adulation* of the heroic, normative, central sex—all these are betraying themselves and other women.

To lose the connection to fundamental theory and to evaluate discrete bits of personal behavior as feminist or non-feminist (whether they're male or female), is self-destructive and dreadfully confusing. Feminism isn't a grab bag of all the good and nice things in the world (as some, albeit a very few, feminists sometimes seem to think) and patriarchy isn't a collection of personally nasty behavior and all the bad things in the world. Nor is feminism a set of rules for virtuous living. To believe the former leads to helplessness in the face of institutionalized patriarchy and believing the latter leads to otherwise intelligent women boggling about absurdities, *e.g.* whether round Tarot cards are anti-authoritarian (I saw this statement seriously received, though I think—I *hope*—it was a gentle joke) or that vaginal stimulation is "male-identified" rather than being a matter of *female* desire and *female* anatomy.

We've been right to mistrust patriarchal theory (especially about ourselves) but feminist theory, just as broad and just as analytically sharp and accurate as we can get it, is a

crucial necessity. It's fatally easy in the heat of the moment to forget what feminist theory is—after all, the patriarchy gives us plenty of help on this point! Please don't think I offer you the following essays as illustrations of accurate theory; most of them (except for "Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement") now seem to me more warnings—go thou and do otherwise!—than examples.

But I may be too hard on my past self. You decide.

—November, 1984

NOTES

1. Spender, Dale. *Women of Ideas and what Men Have Done to Them* (London/Boston: 1982), Routledge & Kegan Paul [Ark].
2. Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Women, Church, and State* (Chicago: 1873), Charles Kerr. Reprinted by Persephone Press, 1980, Watertown, MA.
3. Jennifer Macleod, *The Village Voice*, February 11, 1971.
4. For example, it can be argued that commercial pornography for women exists. The feminist point of view would examine the cultural myths in such pornography (e.g. Rosemary Rogers' novels) and find whether the *same* myth of male hegemony were being sold to both sexes.
5. Chesler, Phyllis. *About Men* (N.Y.: 1978) Simon & Schuster.