

# Politics Without Pleasure

Catharine A. MacKinnon. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Pp. 315. \$25.00 hardcover, \$9.95 paperback.

## Andrew Ross

Judith Becker and Ellen Levine, the two women who wrote a dissenting statement on the Report of the 1986 Meese Commission on Pornography, pointed out that it was almost impossible, under the conditions of the Commission's public forum, to find people willing to acknowledge their pleasurable consumption and use of pornographic materials. In the light of the "millions of apparently satisfied customers," they added, "it seems obvious that the data gathered [by the Commission] is not well balanced."<sup>1</sup> Even if such favorable testimony had been easier to elicit, it is unlikely to have been welcome, given the Commission's heavily ideological mandate. But such a scenario, with such testimony, gives pause, and raises some wild thoughts. What would the Commission have done with a chorus of diverse confessions and ratifications of pleasure? Would this testimony have compromised or reinforced its conclusions? Does the business of such commissions involve bypassing or overlooking this kind of testimony?

Given the restricted purview of liberal law, which addresses considerations of harm, acts in the name of protection and appeals to the concept of negative liberty, the answer to these questions is likely to remain moot. In the case of pornography, however, I think that we ought to imagine what might be learned from a critical inquiry into consumer pleasures. For a start, it would help to address one of the 1986 Commission's own recorded complaints; in a rare enlightened moment born of frustration, the Report notes with regret that virtually all of the historical study of pornography has not been about "the social practice of pornography," but rather about the "control of that social practice by government," and recommends that if the use of pornography is "to be understood fully," then "the scope of thinking about the issue should be broadened substantially."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the knowledge that would come from a fuller understanding might simply be used to extend or fortify the structures of regulation,

---

1. The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, *Final Report*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1986), p. 196.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

thereby adding to the long history of control and containment. On the other hand, a broadened inquiry would also tell us a good deal about how people, male and female, straight and gay, use pornographic materials to respond, imaginatively or otherwise, to the vicissitudes of power in their daily lives. It would tell us a good deal about how capitalism's production of marketed pleasure is variously rearticulated through people's own imaginary relations to the daily round of work and leisure. It would tell us how people variously respond to the invitation to think of their bodies as a potential source of achieved freedom, rather than a prison-house of troublesome bodily functions or a pliant tool for the profitable use of others, whether patriarchs or capitalists. It would tell us how and why people are attracted by, or feel they are entitled to, a different morality than that laid down by the appointed or self-styled intellectual protectors of the public interest. It would tell us what people say they do and think about a world of represented pleasure, marked in some way as illegitimate or unrealizable, and imagined on their behalf by a far from monolithic culture industry. In short, it would tell us how and why pornography is not always what it says it is.

No commission exists to hear such testimony, and virtually no cultural study that has listened hard to an audience of popular consumers has ever been conducted to make sense of such testimony. It is not the sort of knowledge, moreover, that a revised Kinsey report (currently being prepared) is likely to provide. The lack of audience-oriented cultural study (as opposed to spectator-oriented theory) of what was, until recently, a predominantly "men's genre" is quite surprising, especially since many important studies of "women's" cultural genres have been written recently. Male silence, of course, is largely to blame. But the scarcity can also be attributed to the fact that the intellectual debate about pornography over the last decade has been governed almost entirely by the terms of the feminist antiporn movement, in particular those of the WAP group (Women Against Pornography), and thus it has been waged on uncompromisingly Manichean ground—agreement or disagreement? critique or defense? resistance or collaboration? It has not been easy, under these circumstances, for men and women alike to "broaden the scope of inquiry," to use the Commission's terms, beyond questions of proscription and protection to include considerations of audience use that are not governed by a discourse of harms, on the one hand, or a discourse of constitutional freedoms on the other. That this initiative has been undertaken in recent years by anti-antiporn feminists, especially those in the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), was inevitable, not to mention courageous. But evidence of a correspondingly specific male response, whether straight or gay, to pornography's business of representing sexual pleasure has been a long time coming, and is most likely to be directed now (with

good reason and with political urgency) at the deadly triangle of State, bodies and representations which circumscribes the AIDS crisis.

To understand the defining terms and premises of the WAP agenda, nothing is more handy or evocative than Catharine MacKinnon's volume of collected essays, addresses, and speeches of the last six years, published now under the title *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. From MacKinnon's point of view, the kind of "commission" that I earlier imagined already exists. We do not need an Attorney General, who, the experts agree, was a pig, to appoint it or to organize it along official legislative lines. Such a forum is already so perfectly and systematically organized in reality that it need never be instituted in the specious name of public morality or the common good. For MacKinnon, such a forum already exists in pornography itself. Pornography is the public speech of men (and women) talking about the pleasure they derive from sexual aggression and passive victimage. Pornography is our most fully articulated expression of patriarchal domination. And if this is what pornography says, then pornography is always what it says it is (and to her all other theories are fantasy, literally).

All of MacKinnon's superb discursive skills as a legal activist and organic feminist intellectual are directed towards this reductionist premise. It is a premise, I should add, which is not at all afraid or ashamed of being called reductionist. It is a premise that *intends* to be reductionist, and WAP has built a popular movement, arguably the most popular movement within the women's movement, around it. Which orthodox socialist, for example, does not acknowledge the rhetorical power of being able to reduce the most abstract theoretical analysis of social antagonisms and overdeterminations to the concrete principle of class struggle—that's all that it boils down to, that's what counts, so listen up and bear it in mind? Thus, MacKinnon can offer us, in a "real five-dollar sentence," as she puts it, her conclusions about the close fit between socially available definitions of knowledge about sexuality and patriarchal power itself: "pornography is a set of hermeneutical equivalences that work on the epistemological level" (p. 190). The support for this proposition lies in an analysis of how knowledge and power are officially and seamlessly aligned, especially in the realm of what she usefully calls the "hegemony of legalism" (p. 129). But her analytic proposition, she says, is best reduced to the slogan: "what pornography means is what it does." Whether or not this slogan appears to say the same thing as the vexed five-dollar sentence, it cogently reaffirms her view that if pornography is an intentional act of power, then its intentions, despite what the "interpretation people" say, are always realized—pornography means what it does (to passive people), rather than what (non-passive) people do with it, which would be a different proposition altogether.

Regardless of whether one agrees with the particular reductions, flawed

or not, at stake in her arguments about pornography (I do not), MacKinnon's capacity to *reduce* complex five-dollar analyses to bite-sized propositions should not be distrusted in itself. On the contrary, this ability is an indispensable skill for the intellectual who wants to mediate theoretical labor with the need to make active interventions in the realm of "common sense." Such a strategy is part and parcel of the contest over popular *consent*. But consent is not a fixed contract; it operates on a shifting terrain of ideas and values, redefined from moment to moment. One need only look at how pornography's generic contents have shifted over the last decade to incorporate, assimilate and rearticulate the anxieties, desires, and critiques that have arisen from the various sexual liberation and women's movements to find an a propos example of this constant process of incorporation and redefinition. (Linda Williams' *Hard-Core: The Frenzy of the Visible* analyzes this particular history of pornography's generic responses to shifts in thinking about female sexuality).<sup>3</sup> Reading through MacKinnon's collection, which covers the five years from the moment of solidarity of WAP consciousness in 1982 through the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision about the unconstitutionality of the Indianapolis antiporn ordinance<sup>4</sup> to the Meese Commission Report itself, one is struck by how alien to her position is this process of redefinition, from year to year, from moment to moment, from context to context, in theory or in practice.

There is a pejorative way of describing this unyielding fixity—obdurate, intractable, recalcitrant, and, in its conventional political meaning, reductionist. There is also a vocabulary for praising it—staunch, resolute, steadfast, and unwavering. But one could say the same of any radical critique which holds to its high ground. What makes the WAP position on pornography different is not simply that it will not budge. What makes it different is that it rejects what we have come to accept, at least since Gramsci, as a fundamental division of power in a modern, hegemonic, capitalist society: the modern ascendancy of consent over coercion, whereby power, to put it bluntly, is exercised by negotiation through everyday cultural relations rather than imposed by force or by threat of compulsion. In the case of pornography, says the WAP position, this distinction cannot be maintained because the representations it offers are those of a coercive reality (of male domination) which not only reinforces or acts out, but also *overrides* the function of consent normally allotted to a cultural medium which trades in words and/or images. One could say, then, that the basic premise of the WAP position is that pornography is the singular exception to this "rule" of modern power which otherwise explains how mass populations are "managed" in a hegemonic democracy.

---

3. Forthcoming, University of California Press, 1989.

4. *Hudnut v. American Booksellers Ass'n*, 475 U.S. 1001 (1986), *aff'g mem.* 771 F.2d 323 (7th Cir. 1985).

On that premise rests the claim that whatever it is, pornography is not like anything else in our cultural or social life. And because of the logic of that premise, pornography must be seen as a perishable realm of violent action (rather than a realm of expressive discourse) about which there can be no arguing, no redefining, no wars of persuasion, and no changing the rules of consent.

Wherever possible, MacKinnon is indeed quick to insist that pornography is not like any other political issue: "Speaking about pornography is not like speaking about anything else. It is crazier. It has logic by Escher. Things fall up. It makes grown men cry and smart people stupid" (p. 221). The direct intimation of infantilism and stupidity I will return to. For the present, because this is a review of her book, I will point to the logic, Escheresque or not, which generates MacKinnon's polemical construction of those who have taken issue with her antiporn position and arguments. While the bulk or polemical weight of her collected papers and addresses is aimed against male agents of patriarchal authority, the volume is more decisively framed by and shot through with powerful attacks on feminist dissenters. MacKinnon's attacks are themselves a striking demonstration of how force—the violence that is objectively isolated at the core of the antiporn critique—engenders force; and thus how the paranoid logic of aggressivity here engenders aggressivity. This pattern harks back to the sectarian violence and virility wars of the late sixties from which crucible the women's movement was first forged as a corrective counter-example. Writing her introduction and afterword in the aftermath of the legal defeat of the antiporn ordinances which she co-wrote with Andrea Dworkin, MacKinnon makes it quite clear that she holds other women, especially feminists, responsible for the defeats and decline of women's legal reform in the last decade. The opposition of "liberal" feminists to the antiporn ordinances is no different in her eyes from the opposition of conservative women to ERA. As for successes like *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>5</sup> the legalization of abortion, in MacKinnon's view, only freed women for male sexual aggression—nothing more, nothing less. If feminism is simply wanting access to what men have, then, she says, quoting Dworkin, feminism "deserves to die" (p. 5). "Liberal" feminism, which deserves to die, is everywhere aligned with the constitutional liberalism of the law which protects the distinction between public and private life that is so antagonistic to the feminist principle that "the personal is the political." It is no surprise, then, that MacKinnon reserves her highest contempt for female lawyers, especially those who "defend" pornography, thereby acting as procurers for men, or else lawyers who, acting on women's behalf, merely "look at cases the way surfers look at waves" (p. 13). (Later, by contrast and on a frustrated note, MacKinnon compares her own activist struggle

---

5. 410 U.S. 179 (1973).

to feeling at times as if she were just "spitting in the ocean.") What law school does, after all, is to tell you "that to become a lawyer is to forget your feelings, forget your community, most of all, if you are a woman, forget your experience. Become a maze-bright rat. Women lawyers . . . go dead in the eyes like ghetto children, unlike the men, who come out of law school glowing in the dark." (p. 205)

Leaving aside the wildly mixed, radioactive metaphors, one is tempted to say that it is something of an American luxury to speak thus of the legal system. Like many fellow Britons, I am often astonished at the leeway (I will not say "opportunities") that exists in America for all kinds of legal activism; activism pursued in courts and avenues of possible contestation that can vanish into thin air at the flourish of a parliamentary wand in the country where I grew up. I would not be willing to push that reservation much further, but it does help to lend some perspective to the national specificity of the comments with which MacKinnon ended that same speech about the "maze-bright rats":

I really want you to stop your lies and misrepresentations of our position. I want you to do something about your thundering ignorance about the way women are treated. I want you to remember your own lives. I also really want you on our side. But, failing that, I want you to stop claiming that your liberalism, with its elitism, and your Freudianism, with its sexualized misogyny, has anything in common with feminism (p. 205).

The address is to an audience of feminists, at the National Conference on Women and the Law in 1985, and MacKinnon prefaces her speech, as she often does, with the revivalist ritual of bearing witness to her own credentials of redemption: "the struggle against pornography . . . has freed me to say this." It is difficult, at least for me, to imagine this scenario taking place anywhere else in the world, where the credentials of "freedom" in the name of political action are everywhere likely to mean something quite different from the American inflection derived by MacKinnonite feminism from the opposition between pornography's "free speech" and her own "freed speech." "Only in America," with its cult of citizenship and constitutional freedoms, does the ritual of being *born again* lend itself so readily and with such a privileged subjective cast to the assumption of a freely chosen secular identity. "Only in America" can the ideological inflections of "freedom" be so awesomely reinforced by the act of faith that results in joining a secular elect. This peculiarly local rhetoric of redemption has its appropriate place in the context of the history of national attempts at moral regulation and social purification. But it also has to be seen against the perspective of the more global claims of WAP about the ahistorical and universal condition of patriarchal domination, of which pornography is seen as the consummate symptom, seam-

lessly and intertextually woven into the monolithic system of multinational capitalism, whose international division of labor is everywhere underpinned by an international trade in sexual slavery. From a non-American point of view, the missionary rhetoric of freedom is going to sound even more voluntarist and redemptionary, and the particular shape of MacKinnon's attack on those feminists she calls "collaborators" because she says that they feminize Freud is going to appear bizarrely provincial.

MacKinnon's low opinion of Freud, or the feminized Freud, even if it is barely developed beyond a caricature, is strategically used in the first strike against what she calls liberal feminism. For her, Freud simply means "derepression theory." This is the theory which she believes that liberal feminism has taken as the cornerstone of women's sexual liberation, as an idea of freedom and emancipated consciousness that is in reality nothing more than a ruse of patriarchy. By contrast, the Freud who has figured most significantly in the anti-antiporn arguments does not exist at all in her book. Those insights which are most useful to an understanding of pornography's mechanisms of desire—insights about fantasy, narcissism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, psychic resistance and, most of all, aggressivity—can all be dismissively accounted for, in MacKinnon's view, by Freud's refusal to believe women's stories about sexual abuse. True feminism, she maintains, "is built on believing women's accounts of sexual use and abuse by men" (p. 5). That is historically undeniable, but in equating Freud's refusal with the antithesis of true feminism she invites a much larger refusal on behalf of her readers and herself—the unconscious simply disappears. All of the difficult lessons that psychoanalysis has to offer about the psycho-sexual construction of identity are passed off as patriarchal history lessons. All of the troublesome evidence about fantasies of aggression and patterns of self-destruction are rejected as instruments of submission to domination. Even if MacKinnon were to take psychoanalysis more seriously than she does, she would quickly see that it has little in the way of positivity to lend to her model of power, raising epistemological obstacles and inconveniences at every turn. Instead of being seen as simply imposed—"the velvet glove on the iron fist of domination" (p. 8)—and thus dismissable by voluntarist acts of social faith, sexual difference would have to be viewed as the socialized result of certain pre-social fantasies of identity. Consequently, sexual difference would have to be seen as a long-term construction to be accounted for in estimations of social action and philosophy, and not just as a temporary effect of power that conceals the work of patriarchal force and violence.

On a more speculative note, with Gothic overtones (which would need more space than I have to develop here), it might be necessary to show how the repression of psychoanalytic knowledge returns in MacKinnon's paranoiac construction of her own position, underpinned everywhere by WAP's unremitting theoretical focus on women's victimage. Aggressivity

is played out (the Lacanian lesson) through mirror-images where reversible and accumulated reflections suggest a self-identical presence that is larger than life, and where imagined threats to this presence often take the form of paranoia answering paranoia. To pursue such a line of reasoning might help to explain the defensive aggressivity with which MacKinnon characterizes the arguments of her chief targets, whether collaborationist feminists or liberal lawyers. Perhaps it is no surprise that, for her and others, pornography, defined by WAP as an exclusive arena of violence, has come to be seen as a “final” battlefield in appropriately religious terms, and that a feminism which “deserves to die” is lined up on the side of the infidels, non-believers, lapsarians, and assorted satanists.

To be fair to MacKinnon, however, demonizing is not really her style. While her position, and her defense of it, are locked into the circuit of aggression which, I think, the antiporn definition of pornography generates, her preferred philosophical medium is through analyses of epistemology and power, as opposed to theology and faith. The result is arguably more demeaning, however, when it comes to explaining the reluctance of her critics to see the light. One is left, again and again, with the impression that she thinks not simply that the non-believers are wrong or evil, but rather that they are *stupid*. Stupid in the mind, because, by charging that they are helping to crucify others on pornography’s cross, MacKinnon can challenge a whole tradition of neo-Platonic epistemology by refusing to forgive them because “they know not what they do.” And stupid in the flesh, because everybody, as MacKinnon points out, has the capacity to be fooled into complicity “through the stirring between their legs” (p. 15), that is, unless they come to see that “a good fuck is [no] compensation for getting fucked” (p. 61). Here, then, are the seeds of a full-blown epistemology of stupidity, or is it just stupid epistemology? Is it bad faith when MacKinnon sets out, as she invariably does, to invoke epistemology only to impatiently brush it aside when the polemical going gets tough? Or is stupidity an integral aspect of what MacKinnon means to expose when she investigates the overlap between epistemology and power?

It seems to me that these are important questions. On the one hand, one could say there is just another story about reductionism to tell here, and that it is a story of impatience and frustration with the slow, messy medium of contestation—things are quite clear, why can’t you see them? I have argued, however, that MacKinnon’s reductionism is partly intentional, and I have no real problem with that. Politics would not move us otherwise, and, as Cornel West is fond of saying, there are many activists who, when it comes to getting the job done, don’t have much interest in epistemology. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that MacKinnon does have a professed interest in epistemology. First, because she says that she wants to show what the “epistemology of the powerless”

might look like, in life *and* in law; and second, because, as an intellectual, raised on what she views, with admirable ambivalence, as the privileges of knowledge itself, she must know and regret that it is the function of most intellectuals simply to legitimize ideas, values and beliefs that tend to serve the interests of the powerful. Knowledge, for her, must be seen as the ground of power, but it is often too stupid to see this for itself.

Actually, I think that there are two kinds of stupidity at issue here in what MacKinnon is saying. The first is the stupidity of intellectuals, in this case, anti-antiporn intellectuals, liberal lawyers, and all those with high positions and privileges within the system to secure and defend. That stupidity is not gender-specific. The second kind of stupidity, which appears to be gender-specific, and which does not exempt female intellectuals, covers the realm of consent, complicity, collusion and even what MacKinnon calls collaboration. For the most part, this second kind of stupidity is the lived effect of a hegemonic system whose primary agent of power, the institution of heterosexuality, works to organize women's pleasure in such a way as to give them a stake in their own subordination. The important question here is whether pleasure, the "women's pleasure" that MacKinnon believes is a ruse or cause of stupidity, can be thought of as something other than a manipulative tool or an attractive token of servitude, something other than a Pavlovian reward for obedience or a glittering bribe. MacKinnon's recruitist posture assumes that pleasure is only skin deep, that it is a quantitative reserve of experience, emotion and action that is inauthentically organized in its present form and which can therefore be channelled elsewhere and reformed towards politically progressive ends. Pleasure has no relative autonomy for those who experience it, and offers no potential ground from which to contest "official" definitions of gendered conduct in everyday life. In short, pleasure makes women stupid where they ought to be militant.

This is the epistemology of Leninism, because it says that people do not really *know* what's good for them. The politics it supports involve learning to speak another language, rather than contesting the vocabulary with which people are familiar. It is a politics that does not meet people where they are, but tells them where they should be. It sees cultural forms like pornography as always successfully dictating cultural responses, and it argues that there is only one (confiscatory) thing to be done about that. Last but not least, it presents a conspiratorial view of pleasure as a swindle, as a mindless, diversionary side-show along the path of pure action. A politics without pleasure—who on earth would want it?





