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**THE FEMINIST DEBATE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY IN CANADA**

by

**Alison Mary Virginia Hearn**

B.A. McGill University 1983

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS (COMMUNICATION)

in the Department

of

Communication

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April 15, 1987

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years pornography has not only become a major 'cause' championed by the women's movement but a divisive issue within it. The debate among feminists about pornography and censorship has become polarized around such issues as the nature of sexually explicit representation, the nature of female sexuality, and the role of the state in the regulation of sexual imagery and practices.

This thesis applies approaches drawn from discourse theory and feminist theory to deconstruct the debate and analyze the levels of meaning within it. The thesis is based on an examination of articles from the Canadian feminist press and feminist academia concerned specifically with pornography over the past two years, selected articles published earlier in Canada and the United States, and Canadian, American and British feminist books on the issues of sexuality and pornography. Six in-depth interviews with prominent Canadian feminist activists also provide material for analysis and interpretation. Emphasis is given to the Canadian debate.

The thesis locates the major events in the development of the debate about pornography. The positions in the debate are explored as are their underlying assumptions about the nature of sexuality, power, and the role of the state. The criticisms and accusations which characterize the debate are examined; they reveal that those upholding particular positions are arguing from different areas of emphasis, about different phenomena, and with different definitions of patriarchy, ideology, and feminist praxis.

The thesis concludes that the debate between anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists has been directed and coopted by a longer-standing debate between radical feminists and socialist feminists. The debate is seen to be a definitional struggle over who will have the power to name the reality 'feminism'. The debate is seen to have fallen prey to more traditional, patriarchal methods and structures of political debate. The structure of the debate often supercedes the more substantive issues. Reasons for the debate are attributed to feminists' inability to look beyond dominant modes of political debate, to problems with feminist praxis, and to feminists' inability to adequately address the issue of feminist ethics.

accept their limitations and open themselves to change.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Elizabeth Stimpson who gave me my first real lessons in writing and thinking and introduced me to the phenomenon of feminism.



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years pornography has not only become a major 'cause' championed by the women's movement but a divisive issue within it. The feminist movement in Canada and the United States has been engaged in an intense and often vitriolic debate about the issue of pornography since the early 1980s. The debate among feminists about pornography has become increasingly polarized around such questions as the nature and role of sexually explicit imagery, the nature of female sexuality, and the role of the state in the regulation of sexual imagery and practices.

This thesis will examine the significance of the feminist debate about pornography in Canada. I will attempt to 'unpack' the debate, to explore the various feminist discourses around pornography, in order to reveal the many levels of meaning within it. In this thesis, I will pose and attempt to answer the following questions: How did the feminist debate about pornography develop in Canada? What were the events that led to and helped to perpetuate the debate? What major positions have emerged within the debate? How do these positions define pornography and censorship? What are their underlying assumptions about sexuality, power, and the role of the state? What is the nature of the criticisms that characterize the debate? What does the debate about pornography reveal about the state of the feminist enterprise? What are some of the causes of the debate? How has the debate about pornography impacted upon Canadian feminism? By exploring the feminist debate about pornography and attempting to answer these questions I hope to provide a more thorough understanding of trends within Canadian feminism today.

This thesis is based on an examination of articles from the Canadian feminist press and feminist academia concerned specifically with pornography over the past two years, selected articles published earlier in Canada and the United States, and Canadian, American, and British books on the issues of sexuality and pornography. Six in-depth interviews with prominent Canadian feminist activists as well as experience gathered as a participant observer at several feminist conferences concerned with the issues of pornography and sexuality also provide material for analysis and interpretation.

In the first chapter, entitled 'On Unpacking the Debate: Theory and Methodology', I will discuss the theoretical tools and specific research methods that have guided me in this study. These tools are drawn from the areas of discourse analysis and feminist methodology. Both of these areas are briefly reviewed. This chapter also includes a discussion of the material that has provided a basis for this study. I will also present a 'methodological confession' in which I plan to discuss my reasons for undertaking this study and the goals of the study.

In the second chapter, 'The Canadian Debate: A Contextualization', I will chronicle the development of the feminist debate about pornography in Canada from 1977-1986. In order to better orient the reader I will also provide a very brief historical review of feminism. In this chapter I will focus primarily on the events as they have occurred in Canada; events within the feminist debate in the United States are included only when they have had direct impact upon the debate in Canada. It is hoped that this chapter will provide an historical context and grounding for the analysis of the debate that follows.

The third chapter 'The Arguments' will explore the major positions which have emerged in the debate about pornography. In each case I will look at how pornography is being defined, what its harm is seen to be, what its function is, what kinds of proposals are made to deal with pornography, and how these proposals are meant to be implemented. I will also review each position's underlying assumptions about the nature of power, sexuality, and the role of the state. This exposition will provide a basis upon which further examination of the debate might be undertaken.

In the fourth chapter, entitled 'The Debate: An Interpretation', I will review the criticisms and accusations that have been exchanged between the positions in the debate about pornography. I will also analyze the similar structures of the criticisms. This examination will help to reveal and will lead to a discussion of the fundamental differences between the positions in the debate. In the second part of this chapter I will discuss these differences which concern the definitions of patriarchy, ideology, feminist praxis and feminism itself.

In the fifth and final chapter 'Thoughts on the Debate' I will refer back to questions posed in the first chapter and will attempt to answer them. I will speculate as to the nature of the debate and the reasons for its specific development. I will also discuss the limitations of each position's argument and will review some ways in which they might be improved. Some of the causes of the debate will also be explored. Finally, I will examine and speculate as to the impact of the feminist debate about pornography on Canadian feminism.

Through the course of these chapters it is hoped that the questions posed above might be answered. By 'unpacking' the debate and exploring the levels of meaning within it the nature of and reasons for the debate might also become clear. It is also hoped that the significance and implications of the debate for the present and future of the Canadian feminist movement might be better understood.

## CHAPTER 1

### ON UNPACKING THE DEBATE: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

There are two specific types of theory and methodology that have influenced this work. The first area involves the concepts of 'discourse', 'language' and 'power' as they are currently defined and employed in the fields of communication theory and socio-linguistics. These concepts form the theoretical basis of a methodology known as 'discourse analysis'. The second area concerns feminist methodology and is based on the work of such feminist theorists as Jill McCalla Vickers, Barbara DuBois and Renate Duelli Klein.

In the first section of this chapter I will present a brief discussion of the concepts of 'discourse', 'language', and 'power'. I will also pose some questions based upon these concepts that will help to facilitate the exploration of the feminist debate about pornography and censorship. I will briefly discuss the methodology of discourse analysis and evaluate its contribution to this study and its limitations. Discourse analysis provides some useful theoretical principles but is limited in its use as an applied methodology. This evaluation will lead naturally to the second section of the chapter: an exploration of feminist methodology and its influence on this thesis.

#### Discourse Analysis - Theory and Method

##### *Some notes on discourse, language and power*

The concepts of discourse, language and power have been developed and applied to the social world by many theorists from different disciplines. I have drawn from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, socio-linguist Gunter Kress, and social theorist John Thompson. By providing a summary of these concepts I hope to introduce some useful vocabulary for this study and to pose some questions that might guide the exploration of the debate in the chapters to come.

The concept of discourse is not a static one, but rather one implying relationship and exchange.

The Oxford Dictionary defines discourse as both a verb: "to talk of, converse about; to tell narrate, relate", and a noun: "a spoken or written treatment of a subject". In either sense the concept 'discourse' is rooted in language, in the acts of speaking and writing and implies a communication process.

French philosopher Michel Foucault has expanded the traditional aspects of 'discourse' in his work and has provided a more intricate and, indeed, more political rendering of the concept. For Foucault discourse is the process behind any act of communication in which meaning is created. Karlis Racevskis defines it as "the praxis of thinking".<sup>1</sup>

Central to the concept of discourse and fundamental to its existence is language. According to Foucault, language is a purely arbitrary process of signification, a "pure invention" that fills up the "absolute vacancy of being".<sup>2</sup> It cannot represent anything outside of itself; therefore language 'speaks' us, is constitutive. Foucault states that the separation of words from things – this confusion of logical types – produces a gap, or false relation, within which discourse can grow and upon which it can play and therefore present its form as reality. Discourse occurs at the same time as language becomes formalized and normative; they shape each other.

'Truth' seems possible only because of the fundamental error implicit in an understanding of language as resembling or being the same as reality. The formulation of this 'truth' and the forms of questing for it characterize the discourse of an age. Dominant ways of thinking are both structured by and articulated through discursive practices. Books, statements, speeches, documents, any "residual materiality"<sup>3</sup> – things traditionally called discourse – that exist to record and be read are reflective of the dominant discourse and constitutive of discursive practices. Discursive practices are, more generally, any form of human negotiation of and for meaning. According to Foucault, no meaning exists before discourse.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, no concrete reality exists before language occurs to name it.

Sociolinguist Gunter Kress elaborates Foucault's definition of discourse and makes it more specific. He attaches the concept of discourse as defined by Foucault to social institutions and claims that, as



members of a particular society, there are many different kinds of discourses at play in our lives: "discourses are systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution".<sup>5</sup> Specific discourses, such as the discourse of capitalism, the discourse of christianity, the discourse of sexism or the discourse of racism, define, delimit, and describe what it is possible to see and not see, say and not say in all areas of life.

A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about, in that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions, and prohibitions of social and individual actions.<sup>6</sup>

Kress also points out that different kinds of discourse compete for dominance within the social world; each discourse attempts to bring its 'truth' to prominence by colonizing larger and larger areas of social life. These competitions "ensure continuous shifts and movements" in the public attitude and consciousness. The specific discourses of an age attempt to bring their truth to the foreground by purporting to "reconcile all of the contradictions, mismatches, disjunctions, and discontinuities" in their explanations of the world. They "strive towards total and encompassing accounts in which contradictions are resolved or at least suppressed"; "that which is social" is made to "seem natural and the problematic" is made to "seem obvious"<sup>10</sup>. If a particular discourse is understood as common sense, as being the way of the world, then it has been successful in its attempt to colonize the social mind. The deployment of discourse, then, must be seen to be a political activity.

Foucault's concept of discourse and discursive practices as embodied negotiations of and for meaning, and Kress' contention that several discourses compete for dominance within society, pave the way for a consideration of relationships of power as they exist through discourse and language. In his book Studies in the Theory of Ideology theoretician John Thompson proposes some helpful insights into the relationship between power and language.<sup>11</sup>

Thompson stipulates that in order to conduct an analysis of any text, to discover its meaning, it is necessary to understand first that "meaning is not a fixed and invariant given, but...a fluctuating phenomenon".<sup>12</sup> The meaning of a text is determined not only by its internal makeup but by the

contextual conditions of its production, dissemination, and consumption. The determination of what a text means, therefore, is often an area of struggle and conflict: "different groups or individuals have a different capacity to make a meaning stick".<sup>13</sup> In all likelihood, in our society, agents of dominant social institutions will have more power to make a meaning stick than any other individuals.

According to Thompson, the struggle for meaning is the most important and fundamental struggle in human life; to determine the meaning of a thing is to claim power over that thing, and its reality, and, by the same token, relations of power are sustained by different battles over meaning. As any struggle implies domination and subordination, it is necessary "to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination."<sup>14</sup> Thompson labels this process the study of ideology. Foucault and others call it discourse analysis.

Language, according to Thompson, is the principal vehicle for signification, the primary medium through which meaning is negotiated. Since discourse and/or ideology, as we have noted above, is inextricably bound to language, we must come to understand language – the particular ways in which we name our world – as "an instrument of power"<sup>15</sup>. Language is deployed by certain social institutions in order to perpetuate their discourse or ideology. In light of this it becomes clear why much of discourse analysis is concerned with linguistic analysis.

Language, power, and discourse are, for these theorists, three interconnected concepts. Since meaning is indeterminate and constantly in flux, control over the meaning of something is a fundamental form of power in our world. Relations of power are embodied and maintained in the struggle for the determination of meaning. This struggle is most often articulated through language and it is most often concerned with language, with the naming of reality. In this way language is power. The struggle then is primarily ideological and political, a battle over discourse, over which framing of experience will prevail.

These concepts of language, discourse and power provide a way in which we might come to understand public debates. How do the concepts of discourse and discursive practices apply to the debate about pornography and censorship? What does John Thompson's discussion of power and language

reveal about the fundamental nature of the debate?

It will be useful to consider each position in the debate as a distinct discourse competing for dominance. We might also see the debate as a struggle for meaning, for the power to name reality. In this case we must closely examine each argument. What does each discourse include and exclude in their definition of the world? If we agree that dominant institutional discourses constrain and limit what is visible, what is considered problematic and what we are able to discuss, then we must consider how the debate about pornography and censorship reflects these constraints and limitations. Simply, if we are to conceptualize the debate as a definitional struggle, a struggle over whose discourse or ideology will prevail, then it is necessary to employ a method of analysis based upon these concepts of 'discourse', 'power' and 'language'. This method will be explored in the next segment.

#### *Some thoughts on discourse analysis*

Discourse analysis as a method of research is becoming more vast and complex with each passing day. John Thompson, however, provides a useful approach to the study of discourse that is based upon the theoretical principles outlined above. Thompson makes the point, and I agree, that any kind of discursive practice is "*already an interpretation*".<sup>16</sup> To attempt to analyze discourse is, therefore, "to re-interpret a pre-interpreted domain".<sup>17</sup> Thompson emphasizes the fact that any interpretive process is, fundamentally, creative. Any analysis of discourse is simply another discursive production, a creative re-production, if you will, of the object of analysis.

Thompson objects to the more traditional and formal types of discourse analysis, such as semiotics, which are based solely on 'texts' and focus primarily on the way language is used within them. He feels these methods assume that meaning is implicit in the text, and ignore the fact that meaning "is determined as much by the contextual conditions of its production and reception as by the syntactic features of its construction".<sup>18</sup> Thompson states that these methods of textual analysis "could never be more than a limited and preliminary stage of a more comprehensive interpretive theory".<sup>19</sup> Thompson then provides an outline of an interpretive methodology he claims will render a broader and more in-depth understanding

of the power-plays of discourses.

This interpretive methodology has three stages. The first stage Thompson calls 'social analysis'. In order to be adequately understood, discourses must be situated or contextualized in the socio-economic and historical conditions in which they were produced. In this part of the interpretive process Thompson feels it is necessary to examine the interactions of individual agents of discourse and other agents and the interplay between these agents and dominant institutions. These questions must be asked and answered; what social conditions gave rise to the discourse being studied? How do these social conditions impact upon or help to determine its meaning?

The second stage in the interpretive process is called 'discursive analysis'. This stage is concerned with the texts or discursive practices through which the discourse 'speaks' or makes itself manifest. During this stage of interpretation an analysis of the language used in these texts is conducted. The narrative structure of the texts and the forms of argumentation used must also be examined. According to Thompson the third stage is interpretive; the point at which the results of the analysis conducted are collected and constructed into a creative "projection of meaning"<sup>20</sup> by the analyst.

This very brief and simplified summary of Thompson's interpretive methodology, based on the concepts of language, discourse and power outlined above, provides an interesting and useful framework for the study of political debates. Thompson's points about the need to contextualize discourses, and the undeniably interpretive nature of discourse analysis are well taken. The first and third stages of his methodology will be employed in this thesis. The second stage of his methodology involving the analysis of argumentation will also be employed. The analysis of narrative structure and of language proper, however, cannot be undertaken here. The bulk of the literature reviewed for this study is simply too great to attempt a thorough linguistic analysis of every text that deals with the debate. More to the point, however, it is necessary to bear in mind that this debate has not occurred solely in print, as a 'text'. This debate is a negotiation of and for meaning, for the power of naming that has taken place at feminist meetings, conferences, and discussion groups, in the feminist press and art community, and in the hearts

and minds of thousands of feminist women throughout the country. In order to successfully 'unpack' this debate and come to terms with its significance the methodology used must reflect this fact. I have chosen not to pursue a textual analysis of the debate in this thesis as I feel that the analysis of texts alone is not an appropriate way to reach an adequate understanding of so complex a social phenomenon.

#### *Some limitations of discourse analysis*

The method of discourse analysis outlined above is useful but limited. Thompson does not discuss how the analyst might situate herself in relation to the discourse being studied, or how she might intervene, through her work, to change the power relationships she is studying. Thompson recognizes the highly interpretive nature of this kind of analysis, but does not make it clear that the analyst is inextricably linked to the object of study. The analyst has "no transcendental ground from which to contemplate the process of which he is irretrievably a part".<sup>21</sup>

As theory, then, Foucault's, Kress', and Thompson's work on the interplay of language, power and discourse is highly suggestive, as method, however, it is extremely difficult to operationalize. In order to 'get at' the dominant discourse or relations of power, discursive practices must be analyzed in their 'residual materiality'. Any document being analyzed must be seen as a negotiation for relations of power set in motion by individuals who are constituted by the dominant discourse and who are destined to reconstitute it in their negotiation. The individuals come to the negotiation with a set of resources and conventions which are themselves reflective of the power relations in society.

The extreme relativism of this conception of 'discourse' does not allow for a place within which a social analyst may make a judgement. At best her assertions are highly limited, themselves indicative of the relations of power which are, according to Foucault, not causal but ubiquitous. This relativism in theory seems to translate into self-reflexivity in method. The analyst is thrown back on herself, forced to make an analysis of her own discursive practices. While this may be helpful, it may also be contended that the actual thing - paper, document, novel - that is being analyzed will reveal a similar tendency toward self-consciousness. Foucault's unwillingness to posit a reality before language is reflected in the

results of analysis based on his conceptualization of discourse. There can be no true assessment of a physical reality 'out there', only an acute consciousness of the limits of language and a distrust of the systems of knowledge that underlie them.

Stated simply, then, these concepts are very helpful as tools of analysis of a given reality, but they cannot serve to help to change the reality being described because they do not adequately consider the role of the social analyst herself. I maintain that if we understand all claims to 'truth' to be socially constructed through the power-plays of discourses, as Foucault does, and if we understand the analysis of discourse to be a creative, interpretive project and not a 'value-free' or 'objective' one, as Thompson does, then we must also agree that the role of the analyst is vital. Her interests, preconceptions, and thoughts on the object of study most definitely help to determine the results of the study and, consequently must be made explicit. I contend that the choices an analyst makes in her methodology and the questions she poses to the object of study are necessarily political choices insofar as they reflect her position, experiences, and interests in the social world. It seems obvious that the interests of social analysis would be better served if these political choices are made clear at the beginning of a study.

If we accept the relativism of Foucault et. al's formulations then our roles as social analysts are doomed to be highly self-reflexive and limited. Social analysts have an obligation to enter this hermeneutic, or interpretive circle with a methodology in hand that will reflect political concerns and help to bring about change.

I will now discuss the specific political and personal interests that have influenced this study. To begin I will discuss some of the tenets of feminist methodology which have guided this work. I will then make a "methodological confession"<sup>22</sup> in which I will make my political choices clear and will discuss the goals of this thesis.

## Notes on Method

### *Feminist methodology*

The development of feminist theory has been ongoing since the early years of the second wave of the feminist movement. As a part of the struggle toward liberation feminists have attempted to determine the ways in which patriarchal biases have been written into dominant modes of perception and understanding. Feminist theory has attempted to assess the ways in which these biases are manifested across disciplines. Most importantly, however, feminist theory has presented explanations of patriarchy, and has tried to come to terms with the implications of women's widespread oppression.

An important part of the feminist project has involved the critical and careful examination of the history of knowledge. Although this archaeology is by no means complete, it is now very clear that most knowledge and scientific 'fact' has been determined by and oriented around the male subject. Feminist theorist Jill McCalla Vickers calls it 'the rationalist tradition'<sup>23</sup>, Evelyn Fox Keller has named it 'objectivist ideology'<sup>24</sup> both names refer to

the presumption that the liberated man can transcend his passions, his prejudices, and even his death, through an elevation of his reason and a suppression of his non-reason.<sup>25</sup>

Many feminist theorists would agree with Foucault's concept of discourse and the social construction of 'truth', as well as with Thompson's point about the validity and necessity of the interpretive process in social research. There has been a large amount of feminist criticism written that deals with the 'truths' of traditional scientific method and its claims to be 'value-free' and 'objective'.<sup>26</sup> Many feminist theorists would also agree with Gunter Kress' contention that discourses compete for dominance in the individual and public mind. Feminist theorists, however, would add one important qualification to these descriptions of discourse; they would insist that patriarchal or sexist discourse is the most prevalent and dominant discourse in society.

Feminist critics contend that "the male perspective throughout (the)...disciplines is overriding...unquestioned, axiomatic".<sup>27</sup> Critic Barbara Du Bois describes what she calls "the androcentric

fallacy" which sees the 'person' to be male only and, consequently, defines the female in relation to the male; she is appreciated only by virtue of what she is not.<sup>28</sup> In the world of the academy and indeed in all other worlds men alone have the power to 'name' reality, and to determine how the rest of us are to name it. Therefore, "the androcentric perspective has rendered women not only unknown but unknowable".<sup>29</sup>

According to feminists such as Barbara Du Bois, Kathyne Pyne Addelson and Renate Duelli Klein, values and moral assumptions about the world are deeply embedded in the determination of what constitutes a research question and in the development of research plans. Klein simply states "the questions we ask determine the answers we get".<sup>30</sup> And, those questions do not emerge from some distilled, neutral and 'objective' mind, but from a mind that lives in the social world and has been constructed by it. They argue that most research projects and their accompanying methodology only serve to reinforce the dominant discourse and social conceptions of reality.<sup>31</sup> Science critic and feminist Brian Easlea claims, in his book Liberation and The Aims of Science, that the determination of 'problems' and the problem-solving activity are inherently political acts. A refusal to admit this fact on the part of the researcher is also a political act; it gives tacit approval to the dominant discourse and the prevailing systems of knowledge and "prevents awareness of the possibility of radical change".<sup>32</sup> The researcher who does not acknowledge the necessity for social responsibility and political commitment in his work is not defending 'truth' and 'objectivity' but is simply performing "an ideological service in favour of the *status quo*".<sup>33</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre, connected intimately for many years with the outstanding feminist scholar, critic and novelist Simone de Beauvoir and a philosopher in his own right, makes a similar distinction between a researcher who serves the status quo and one who questions it in his essay "A Plea for Intellectuals". 'Technicians of practical knowledge' are members of society usually situated in the academy and educational institutions. They are people who are "implicitly entrusted with the task of transmitting received values...and if necessary combatting the ideas and values of all other classes, by deploying their specialized knowledge".<sup>34</sup> They are agents of the dominant discourse.



According to Sartre, technicians of practical knowledge are usually drawn from the ranks of the middle class but are required to represent the values of the upper class. The technician is "a middle man, a middling man, a middle class man. The general ends toward which his activities lead are not *his* ends".<sup>35</sup> The technician is forbidden to question the ends which he serves even though he must, being from the middle class, realize that they are foreign and false for most members of society. The technician performs the task of resolving the contradictions and holes in the dominant discourse he is serving and works to give it the appearance of unity and cohesiveness. It is in this way that "science...becomes ideology"<sup>36</sup>, "the technician who creates inventions for all men (becomes)... simply an agent of the pauperization of the working class".<sup>37</sup> Sartre contends that the technician has two options. He can accept the dominant ideology and renounce his ability to question the world. Or, he can refuse "to be a subaltern agent of bourgeois hegemony"<sup>38</sup> and become an 'intellectual'.

The function of an intellectual is to question the world, herself, and her place in the world. The intellectual "attends to what concerns him (in exteriority – the principles which guide the conduct of his life; and in interiority – his lived experience in society)".<sup>39</sup> The work of the intellectual means nothing, according to Sartre, without self-examination:

True intellectual investigation, if it is to be free from the myths which obscure it, implies a traversal of research through the singularity of the researcher. The latter needs to situate *himself* in the social universe in order to be able to grasp and destroy within and without himself the limits that ideology imposes on knowledge...the intellectual's thought must ceaselessly turn back on itself in order always to apprehend itself as a *singular universality*.<sup>40</sup>

This definition of intellectual investigation bears a striking resemblance to the desires and goals of those feminist theorists concerned with methodology. As is the case with Sartre's 'intellectual', feminist methodology is born out of a realization of the ideological constraints of traditional academic practices.<sup>41</sup>

Barbara Du Bois writes:

Our work requires that we see things in context, that we understand and explain our eventful, complex reality within and as a part of its matrix. It is only within its matrix that experience, reality can be known.

And this matrix *includes the knower*.<sup>42</sup>

Feminist researchers and Sartre's intellectual are concerned with more than just this realization, however;

they also seek to destroy the constraints they have come to identify.

The goal of feminist research is not only to describe the world but to change it. Jill McCalla Vickers states that the feminist research, theory and methodology should strive toward "the complete restructuring of human knowledge and human existence".<sup>43</sup> Renate Duelli Klein makes the distinction, as Sartre does, between knowledge produced for the sake of knowledge and knowledge produced for the sake of change. She feels that "the goal of all feminist scholarship should be to contribute to ending the oppression of women".<sup>44</sup>

Feminist theorists also distinguish between research on women, research that has women as its object of study but employs a methodology based on androcentric values, and research for women, research in which the plight of women informs both the object of study and the methodology chosen. Research for women "aims at being instrumental in improving women's lives".<sup>45</sup> Simply, it is not sufficient to shift the focus of research to women, our entire way of looking must be changed as well: informed with an understanding of the limits of patriarchy.<sup>46</sup>

As stated above, these feminists believe that the questions a researcher asks determines the kinds of results found:

If the starting point in science-making is the posing of a meaningful problem or question, then what is scientific in method is to address that question in the manner and terms most consonant with its substance, and most likely to lead to relevant answers.<sup>47</sup>

If the goals of feminist research are women's liberation from oppression and societal change then the methods chosen should reflect these goals.

Feminist theorists Jill McCalla Vickers, Renate Duelli Klein and Barbara Du Bois make suggestions about the ways in which feminist research might further the cause of women. The most common of these suggestions involves the consideration of the role of the researcher, an assessment of her interests and reasons for undertaking the study. In this way feminists attempt to redefine the concept of 'objectivity'. Objectivity is seen as a dialectical process involving the perpetual interrelations of self-knowledge, critical self-reflection and empirical inquiry.<sup>48</sup> As McCalla Vickers states:

the usual scholarly principles of reliability, consistency, logical inference and honesty are maintained with the additional principle of the investigator continually testing the plausibility of the work against her own experiences as well as the experience of other women.<sup>49</sup>

Feminist theorists also suggest that the relationship between the researcher and those subjects involved in her study is of primary importance. The researcher must not exclude the subject of research from a full understanding of the research and its goals. Duelli Klein describes the dialectical process she feels should occur between researcher and subject. She calls this process 'intersubjectivity':

...the researcher (should) constantly compare her work with her own experiences as a woman and a scientist and to share it with the researched who then will add their opinions to the research, which in turn might change again.<sup>50</sup>

The inclusion of the subject of study in the process of research, by describing the purposes of the study and sharing the results of it, seriously challenges traditional methods of androcentric social science research. These feminists feel that doing this is more honest; not only will it produce more sound results, but it reflects and acknowledges the dynamics that are always involved in any human relationship, no matter how 'controlled'.

Some feminist researchers feel that it is important to use "such resources as intuition, emotions and feelings both in ourselves and in those we want to investigate".<sup>51</sup> Feminist theorists also insist on validating the authenticity of the experiences of those being studied, and on the need to understand them in context. Feminist researchers in the social sciences argue against the simulation of experience in laboratories and experiments and suggest that their subjects be viewed in "the complex, rich and varied world of human experience".<sup>52</sup>

Feminist researchers, in other words, recognize the importance of context and the need to make explicit the way in which their interests and experiences might come to affect the study. They provide the reasons for the study undertaken. The role of the subject of the study is recognized as integral, as is the relationship between researcher and subject: "feminist scholarship reveals (an)...assumption that the knower and the known are of the same universe... they are not separable".<sup>53</sup> Feminist research is also guided by the principle of 'honesty'. Feminist researchers strive to produce work that might further

feminist ideals and goals. In order to do this, the methodology used cannot betray, subvert or in any way invalidate the experiences of those people being researched or the integrity of the researcher herself.

#### *A Methodological Confession*

This work is written from a feminist perspective. This study emerged from a personal desire to come to terms with the implications of the debate about pornography and censorship within Canadian feminism.

I watched the debate take shape and followed its development. But, as I did this I became aware of the fact that I did not feel comfortable with either side of the debate. Neither the anti-pornography movement nor the anti-censorship position completely represented my perception of the issues. I felt both positions had severe shortcomings. I was also concerned about the vitriolic tone of the debate and I sensed there were many other feminists who shared these sentiments. As a result of these feelings and experiences I attempted to 'unpack' the debate, to reveal the limitations of each position, and to explore some of the causes of what I perceived to be a crisis of understanding within the movement.

The goal of this study is, simply, to facilitate an understanding of the debate itself. By conducting this analysis, I would like to point out problems within the feminist movement. I would also like to suggest some ways in which the two sides of the debate might better understand each other and reconcile, if not resolve, some of their differences.

I am a feminist studying the feminist movement with a desire to help the movement evolve by throwing it into question. I situate myself within the feminist debate about pornography and censorship that I am attempting to elucidate. I have a personal stake in understanding it and criticizing it because I have a stake in the continuing evolution of the feminist movement, and in my own liberation as a woman within the system of patriarchy. I am also a student with a large interest in producing work that will be respected as academically sound, thoughtful, and provocative. I do not see that these roles conflict. Rather, I feel they are complimentary, combined they present an ideal opportunity to conduct the study being undertaken here.

I employed many different research methods in my attempt to understand this debate. To begin I conducted a literature review of all of the articles about pornography in the Canadian feminist press over the past two years. I included in this review articles from earlier years, and both Canadian, American and British books by feminists on the subjects of pornography, sexuality and censorship. From this review I extracted information about the events through which the debate coalesced, and about the nature of the positions in the debate. I also attended five conferences about the issues of sexuality, pornography and censorship in both Toronto and Vancouver over the past two years. By doing this I was given a chance to meet and talk with other feminists about the debate and the movement. I was able to watch the interactions between those feminist activists who claimed to represent feminist interests and their audiences, the feminist community. Through this form of participant observation I saw the debate in action, in context and was able to interact and develop relationships with the subjects of my study.

I conducted four, two to three hour interviews with feminist representatives of the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions. I interviewed anti-pornography activists Susan G. Cole and Jillian Ridington and anti-censorship feminists Varda Burstyn and Sara Diamond. I questioned them about the issues of pornography and censorship, and their views on the nature of power, sexuality and the role of the state. I also spoke with them about their history in the women's movement, their goals and desires for the movement, and their opinions about the nature of the debate, what they perceived their role in it to be, and how they felt the debate might have impacted upon the movement. Each participant was informed as to the nature of my study and their suggestions for the study were most definitely taken into account. Although each participant was asked the same set of questions each had different areas of interest and emphasis. And, since I viewed them as not only subjects of study but as sources of information, I encouraged dialogue and digression during the interviews. I also drew from interviews with anti-pornography activists Megan Ellis and Kate Andrew that I had conducted two years previously for a study of The Fraser Committee. The interview process was very elucidating; its fruits provided a wealth of information and experience which greatly facilitated this study.

To summarize, then, I drew from my personal confusion and uncertainty about the issues of pornography and censorship and from my concern for the state of feminism and developed a plan for a study that might address these concerns. With the desire to both facilitate an understanding of the debate and present potential ways in which the debate might be resolved I set out to present an analysis of it. The analysis of this complex social phenomenon required different methods of research. In order to reflect the fact that this debate took shape and perpetuated itself not only through 'texts' but through the dialogue of feminist women at conferences, meetings and discussion groups across the country, I conducted a literature review, engaged in participant observation at some of these events, and interviewed prominent feminist activists through which the debate was given voice.

My research was guided by the concepts of 'discourse', 'power', and 'language' as well as by the suggestions of feminist writers on methodology. 'Unpacking' this debate represented a challenge to me as a student and as a feminist just as I feel the debate itself has presented a challenge to those in the feminist movement: a challenge to look beyond the more superficial concerns of pornography and censorship to the deeper issues that underlie them: a chance to assess the 'present' of feminism and, by doing so, make plans for its future.

## Notes

1. Karlis Racevskis, Michel Foucault and The Subversion of the Intellect, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 17.
2. Michel Foucault cited in Hayden White's "Michel Foucault" in Structuralism and Since, John Sturrock (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 87.
3. Robert D'Amico, "What is Discourse", Humanities in Society, Volume 5, numbers 3 and 4, Summer/Fall 1982, p. 204.
4. Edith Kurzweil, The Age of Structuralism, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 195.
5. Gunter Kress, "Discourses, texts, readers and the pro-nuclear arguments", Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate: Nukespeak Today, Paul Chilton (ed.), London and Dover, N.H.: Frances Pinter, 1985, p. 68.
6. Ibid., p. 68.
7. Ibid., p. 68.
8. Ibid., p. 72.
9. Ibid., p. 73.
10. Ibid., p. 72.
11. John Thompson is not, of course, the only theoretician to postulate a relationship between language, power and discourse. Foucault also writes on this, as do many linguists, philosophers of language, and feminist theorists, such as Dale Spender, in their analyses of patriarchal language and its use.
12. John Thompson, Studies in the Theory of Ideology, California: University of California Press, 1984, p. 125.
13. Ibid., p. 132.
14. Ibid., p. 131.
15. Ibid., p. 131.
16. Ibid., p. 133.
17. Ibid., p. 133.
18. Ibid., p. 125.
19. Ibid., p. 133.
20. Ibid., p. 137.
21. Zygmunt Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, London: Hutchinson, 1978, p.17.
22. This concept is drawn from Paul Willis' concept of a 'theoretical confession'. See his article

"Notes on Method" in Culture, Media, Language, (Hall, Hobson, Lowe and Willis eds.), London: Hutchinson, 1980, pgs. 88-95.

23. Jill McCalla Vickers, "Memoirs of an Ontological Exile: The Methodological Rebellions of Feminist Research", Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics, (Finn and Miles eds.), Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982, p.30.
24. Evelyn Fox Keller, "Feminism and Science", The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship, (Abel and Abel eds.), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.114.
25. McCalla Vickers, op.cit., p. 30.
26. See Fox Keller, op.cit., Kathryn Pyne Addelson's article "The Man of Professional Wisdom" in Discovering Reality, (Harding and Hintikka eds.), Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983, and Brian Easlea, Chapter 6 "Objectivity and Commitment in the Social Sciences" in his book Liberation and The Aims of Science, Totawa, N.J.: Roman and Littlefield, 1973.
27. Barbara Du Bois, "Passionate Scholarship: notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science", Theories of Women's Studies, (Bowles and Duelli Klein eds.), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 106.
28. Ibid., p. 107.
29. Ibid., p. 107.
30. Renate Duelli Klein, "How to do what we want to do: Thoughts about Feminist Methodology", Theories of Women's Studies, (Bowles and Duelli Klein eds.), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p.92.
31. DuBois, op.cit., p. 106.
32. Brian Easlea, Liberation and the Aims of Science, Totawa, N.J.: Roman and Littlefield, 1973, p.174.
33. Ibid., p. 174.
34. Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals", in his book Between Marxism and Existentialism, (John Mathews Trans.), New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976, p. 239.
35. Ibid., p. 239.
36. Ibid., p. 242.
37. Ibid., p. 242.
38. Ibid., p. 244.
39. Ibid., p. 244.
40. Ibid., p. 249.
41. Although, of course, Sartre's dominant ideology would differ from these feminists'. Sartre's enemy is bourgeois capitalism, for these women the enemy is patriarchy.



42. Du Bois, op.cit., p. 111.
43. McCalla Vickers, op.cit., p. 28.
44. Duelli Klein, op.cit., p. 92.
45. Ibid., p. 90.
46. Du Bois, op.cit., p. 108.
47. Ibid., p. 109.
48. Fox Keller, op.cit., p. 114.
49. McCalla Vickers, op.cit., p. 36.
50. Duelli Klein, op.cit., p. 94-95
51. Ibid., p. 95.
52. McCalla Vickers, op.cit., p. 35.
53. DuBois, op.cit., p. 111.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CANADIAN DEBATE: A CONTEXTUALIZATION

#### Introduction

Some brief historical notes on feminism will be useful to orient the reader toward a better understanding of the feminist debate about pornography and censorship in Canada. In this chapter I will attempt to 'tell the story' of the feminist debate about pornography in Canada; to chronicle the emergence and development of the debate. Events are presented in chronological order and in a narrative structure. This chapter is based upon a review of material in the feminist press and the mainstream media as well as private interviews and personal experience.

#### Some Brief Historical Notes on Feminism

The first wave of feminism took root during the rise and proliferation of industrialization in the latter half of the nineteenth century in England, France and North America. With massive changes occurring in organization of the workplace, the role of the family as the primary social unit was changing. As a part of this change women began organizing on a large scale. Perhaps the most notable feminist issues during the repressive reign of Queen Victoria were those concerning reproductive freedom and sexual practice:

The terrain of women's bodies, both in terms of childbearing and erotic pleasure became intensely politicized by all sides in the growing social upheaval and conflict over gender relations in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

It was apparent that these issues were not only personal, but economic as well; as long as women did not have control over their reproductive functions, they would be unable to support themselves outside the patriarchal institutions of marriage and the family.

It is interesting to note that in England at the turn of the century, two distinct strands of feminism emerged signalling major divergence of feminist positions on such fundamental questions as the nature of gender relations, social responsibility, and the nature and role of the state.<sup>2</sup> The most divisive issue within

feminism in the early part of the twentieth century was "the problem of sex; how to define it, how it was experienced by women and what to demand sexually from the state and from men."<sup>3</sup>

The first strand of feminism was known as 'social purity'. This movement was made up of a coalition of radical feminists, such as Josephine Butler, and more conservative and fundamentalist religious forces.<sup>4</sup> These feminists believed that motherhood was sacred only when it was voluntary, but they endorsed only natural forms of birth control. They extolled the virtues of celibacy and did not believe in sex before marriage. Christabel Pankhurst, an active social purity feminist gave voice to their position on sex: "...sex powers are given...as a trust to be used, not for... immorality or debauchery, but...reverently and in a union based on love, for the purposes of carrying on the race".<sup>5</sup> Social purity feminists made a clear distinction between love and lust. Men propagated lust, and had 'unnatural' sexual drives. VD was seen as the punishment for male promiscuity and, consequently, wives were innocent victims of the abnormal male urge. As Juliette Heale pointed out: "What male creature below humanity ever infects or abuses his mate?"<sup>6</sup> The social purity feminists gained a large amount of public support for their positions on venereal disease, and often worked with non and anti-feminist forces when proposing legislation regarding sexual practices.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the feminist element of this movement began increasingly to give way to the moralist proponents.

The second strand of feminism that arose during the early twentieth century was called 'new moralist'. This form of feminism was influenced by libertarianism, the emerging ideas of the 'sexologists', and the "ethical socialism of figures such as Edward Carpenter".<sup>8</sup> These feminists opposed the institution of marriage, but believed in "free unions: monogamous relations that could be freely entered and freely left".<sup>9</sup> They believed in the separation of sex from reproduction through the use of both natural and artificial forms of contraception. They also argued for the importance of women's sexual pleasure: "sex was a natural function needing exercise like all natural functions".<sup>10</sup> Rebecca West, author and spokesperson for the new moralists, contended that the repression of sexual practices was dangerous:

Many of the evils of our social system spring from the perversions that arose when all education...was in the hands of monks and nuns...And in the same way the lady—who is simply the well-repressed woman—may be a source of danger to the state.<sup>11</sup>

The new moralist feminists were very critical of celibacy or spinsterhood and were often vitriolic in their accusations against women who made those choices in their lives.<sup>12</sup> As the new moralists were usually associated with bohemianism, the art world, and left wing political groups, they were not able to garner as much support or popularity as the social purity forces.

It should be noted that at the same time in Canada and the United States similar trends were occurring within feminism; social purity feminists were predominant. According to Carol Lee Bachi, in Canada: "...only a tiny fraction of women's suffrage leaders were feminist first and foremost; most saw votes for women more as a tactic to hasten the implementation of temperance and social purity...than as a means to hasten equality for women".<sup>13</sup>

These two divergent strands of feminism during the first wave were fundamentally opposed to each other. Although both groups were striving towards the betterment of women's situation in society, they seemed to disagree, not only on ways of achieving this goal, but on what the nature of 'better' might be. Their differences seemed to lie in their perceptions about female sexuality, male power and the role of the state.

Feminism's first wave provides a strange foreshadowing of the debate about pornography and censorship taking place at this time within North American feminism. In fact, the two strands from the first wave 'social purity' and 'new moralist' bear a striking resemblance to the current anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions. The second wave debate is also concerned with the same issues as the older debate: sex and the state. In any case, it will be useful to keep this small part of first wave feminist history in mind as we go on to explore the modern debate in more detail.

The second wave of feminism was born out of the social struggles that characterized the 1960s. The civil rights movement, student rebellion, and the rise of the New Left were among the events that set the context for the resurgence of the women's movement. Several crucial texts emerged during this time that remain, to this day, 'classics' of the second wave of feminism: Betty Friedan's The Feminist Mystique, Kate Millet's Sexual Politics, Robin Morgan's Going Too Far, Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch, and

Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's book, The Second Sex, published ahead of its time in the 1950s. Gloria Steinem founded Ms magazine, and fictitious bra burnings and women's marches were frequent stories on the nightly news:

There were amazing things happening. The dynamic toward radical sisterly unity was very strong in those days...the dynamic was of excitement...there was an incredible sense of a huge coming to consciousness and with that came a sense of the possibility of something different...the utopian moment was inscribed right into the moment of discovery of oppression.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis of the movement was on liberation from oppression through personal exploration, analysis and explanation of patriarchy, and political action. This was summarized in the popular adage 'The personal is political':

I had a sense that feminism was...an important set of ideas and we were living them out...it was very difficult at that time to be doing coherent theory because we felt like we were talking about everything ...We just knew that something was exploding in a very, very big way... I felt as if I was a part of an explosion...I had a sense that women could do amazing things together.<sup>15</sup>

### The Rise of the Issue of Pornography within Feminism 1977-1983

#### *The anti-pornography movement begins*

By the mid to the late 1970s, in a charged political and economic climate, it seemed that feminism was beginning to lose the momentum it had gathered in the early 1970s. It was during this time that pornography came to the fore as a central issue within both Canadian and American feminist movements.<sup>16</sup> In Canada and the United States the issue of pornography grew directly out of work that had been done on the issue of rape and other forms of violence toward women. In an effort to come to terms with the perceived unresponsiveness of the state to women's demands, feminists began to develop an increasingly in-depth analysis of male power in all its forms.

Susan Brownmiller's book Against Our Will was published in 1975. This work analyzed the nature of rape from a feminist perspective. Brownmiller was among the first feminists to suggest that rape was an issue of power and domination, rather than one of sexual frustration. Feminist theorists, Brownmiller among them, suggested that in a patriarchal society any form of sexual expression informed and

influenced by masculine aggressiveness was oppressive to women. These feminist theorists were attempting to politicize the concept of sexuality in order to emphasize the extent to which women felt brutalized and abused by men:

Sexual violence against women is not about sex, it is about power and control. Our culture's equation of sexuality with dominance and submission obscures this. Obscures the political content of male hostility towards women.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of women's consciousness raising, it seemed as though the naming of men's brutality became of form of power for women.

In 1976 a protest occurred against a billboard that stated "I'm black and blue from the Rolling Stones and I love it". The billboard provided the protesters with a perfect example of the linkage of sex and violence. In 1977, attention was drawn to another example of this linkage: the film Snuff. In this film a woman was apparently tortured and murdered for the sexual satisfaction of the male characters. Women demonstrated against the film across the continent. In San Francisco when a conference entitled "Feminist Perspectives on Pornography" was held, thousands of women participated in the first annual 'Take Back the Night' march through the city's red light district. The march, which is still carried on today, was seen to symbolize women's desire to reclaim their safety and their sexuality from the threat of male violence. By 1978 groups such as Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media and Women Against Pornography in the United States and Women Against Violence Against Women, in Canada were established to bring public attention to the issue of pornography.<sup>18</sup>

The intensive interest in sexual violence against women and pornography revived the flagging spirits of feminism. The emerging feminist analysis of sexual violence and pornography at that time was documented in books such as Take Back the Night, Andrea Dworkin's Pornography: Men Possessing Women and Susan Griffin's Pornography and Silence. Pornography was seen as misogynist propaganda: women-hating linked in a direct way to other forms of sexual violence toward women. Regulation and censorship were assessed as strategies for dealing with the issue of pornography. These contentious issues set off heated debate, both inside and outside of the feminist movement, in Canada and the United States.

Feminist analysis of pornography and violence against women took place in Canada as well as the United States in the late 1970s and gave rise to a strong anti-pornography movement. Debra Lewis' and Lorene Clark's book Rape: The Price of Coercive Sexuality and articles by Susan Cole, Jillian Ridington and Myrna Kostash reflected the development of this specifically feminist analysis of pornography. Rape crisis centres and homes for battered women were established across the country. Organizations such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and MediaWatch, a group founded by feminists to combat sex-role stereotyping in the media, became more involved with the issue of pornography. In Toronto, Vancouver and other large urban centres in Canada demonstrations were held at pornographic movie theatres and red light districts, and newstands carrying pornography were picketed. Requests to boycott stores that carried sexually explicit and violent material were also made. Spokeswomen for the feminist perspective on pornography began to get coverage in the mainstream media. Pornography had not only become the central issue within the feminist movement, but was rapidly becoming one of the major social issues of the 1980s.

In Canada, in 1978, the federal government established a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs. A large part of its mandate was to consider revision of the obscenity section of the Criminal Code. Lorene Clark and Debra Lewis went before the committee to offer their feminist perspective on pornography and the traditional role of the state: "...porn has institutionalized the repression of female sexuality and made acceptable the use of coercion and violence towards women and children in the name of individual male rights."<sup>19</sup> Lewis' and Clark's appearance before the Committee and their demands for a rewriting of the obscenity law gave rise to a debate between members of the gay community and the feminist community. Gay liberationists felt sure that any form of censorship would be used against gay literature and imagery. In their view liberation meant the freedom to read about sex and to have sex in any way a person desired. This incident, which began as a debate between feminists and gay liberationists around the issue of censorship and pornography, subsequently caused a major rift in the ideological partnership between factions of the two movements which is still present today. It also foreshadowed the upcoming debate among members of the feminist movement. The results of the

Standing Committee from a feminist perspective were negligible, and the issue of amending the obscenity law was temporarily dropped.

*Not a Love Story - the seeds of debate are sown*

One of the major reasons for the widespread public attention to the issue of pornography was the release in 1981 of the National Film Board production Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography. This film was made at Studio D, the women's production unit of the Film Board by Bonnie Sher Klein. The film follows Klein as she meets sex trade worker Linda Lee Tracy at a Montreal strip club. Klein convinces Tracy to join her in an exploration of the pornography industry. The film documents their journey, and Tracy's transformation from a liberal stripper into a radicalized feminist. The film takes place in the red light districts of Montreal, New York City and San Francisco. Interspersed with the graphic display of all types of sexually explicit and violent material were interviews with American feminist theorists Susan Griffin, Robin Morgan and Kate Millet. Not A Love Story was banned from public distribution in Ontario and limited to private screenings only. Klein and Tracy travelled with the film across the country and held question and answer periods after the screenings. I contend that Not A Love Story focused public attention onto the feminist perspective on pornography as violence against women more than any other single event in Canada.

Not A Love Story may have successfully drawn attention to a feminist perspective of pornography, but its release and reception served another function as well. Within sectors of the feminist community as well as the artistic and gay communities, especially in Ontario, there was growing concern about the corollaries of the feminist analysis of pornography as embodied in Not A Love Story.<sup>20</sup> Some women were calling for legislation that would protect them from these images. At this time in Ontario, there was widespread concern about the politics and actions of the Ontario Censor Board. In 1980 and 1981 the Ontario Censor Board had seized artworks from ASpace and The Funnel Gallery in Toronto. The Censor Board had also forced Fuse magazine to cancel an exhibition of video documentaries critical of the advertising industry two days before they were scheduled to be screened. The Board deemed the



proposed screenings to be public events and therefore subject to review by the Board at a fee of eight hundred dollars. Fuse did not have the time or the funds to submit the videos for review. Also, in the spring of 1981, the Board of Directors of the Canadian Images Film Festival in Peterborough Ontario were charged with violating the Ontario Theatres Act. The festival had decided to present a short film by B.C. experimental filmmaker Al Razutis And Now a Message from Our Sponsors... that presented an anti-capitalist view of advertising. The three minute piece had been banned by the Censor Board because it contained scenes of explicit nudity: "It looked like what was happening was that there was being a selective use of censorship to attack progressive cultural outlets or venues or events in Ontario."<sup>21</sup>

The Ontario Censor Board's subsequent banning of Not A Love Story seemed to further illustrate the point that state boards of regulation did not support work by feminist, gay, or artistic communities. These events prompted some feminists to question the wisdom of calling on the state for protection from pornography. It was in this environment that the seeds of a feminist anti-censorship position were sown.

#### *Red Hot Video*

In the meantime, outrage was growing within women's communities throughout the country about the apparently state sanctioned sale of violence against women in the form of pornography. Pickets and boycotts continued to be held, as well as intensive feminist lobbying for the amendment of the rape laws in Canada. In Vancouver during the summer and fall of 1982 some women protested against the proliferation of Red Hot Video outlets in British Columbia. Women's groups monitored the pornographic video tapes that were in the stores and brought tapes that they felt were in clear contravention of the Criminal Code to the police and asked that the Crown prosecute. The local Crown prosecutor indicated why prosecution was considered to be impossible: "When asked to give his reasons he said, among other things, that the acting in the films was so mediocre that they could not be taken seriously."<sup>22</sup> Repeated attempts to persuade Attorney General Alan Williams to act brought no results. The government would not lay charges.

On November 22, 1982, near midnight, firebombs exploded at outlets of Red Hot Video in Surrey, North Vancouver and Port Coquitlam. Responsibility for the firebombings was claimed by a group who called themselves The Wimmin's Fire Brigade. They issued a statement to the media after the bombings:

This action is another step towards the destruction of a business that promotes and profits from violence against wimmin and children... We are not the property of men to be used and abused... all lawful attempts to shut down Red Hot Video have failed because the justice system was created and is controlled by rich men to protect their profits and property... we are left no alternative but to change the situation ourselves through illegal means. This is an act of self-defense.<sup>13</sup>

On January 7, 1983 police raided seven Red Hot Video outlets around the province and brought in ten video tapes to be prosecuted. Attorney General Alan Williams established a special Crown Counsel to look into what had, quite suddenly, become for him, the 'problem' of pornography. Three of the ten video tapes were found to violate the obscenity section of the Criminal Code. Red Hot Video was fined one hundred dollars per videotape.

Within the feminist community reactions to the bombings were mixed: "Many feminists were beset with the conflict between means and ends, the uses of violence against property versus the uses of violence causing physical injury, while others wondered who those 'wimmin' were anyway."<sup>14</sup> Anti-pornography feminists felt that the bombings had focused more attention on the issue by the media and the state than any number of demonstrations; they had served a symbolic function, conveying to the world at large that pornography enraged women to a point well beyond conventional female 'uppityness'. Other feminists, however, felt uncomfortable with the bombings and with the vitriolic tone of anti-pornography activists. The bombings only increased these women's doubts about the strategies of the anti-pornography movement.<sup>15</sup> In mid-January police arrested five people, three men and two women, for the bombings of the Cheekye-Dunsmuir hydro sub-station in July and the firebombings of Red Hot Video.

*Bill C-127*

During this time, in the summer and fall of 1982, in Ottawa, feminist lobby groups were attempting to influence amendments to a proposed new law regarding rape. The extensive feminist analysis that had taken place around the issue of rape had revealed that male attitudes toward rape and women's sexuality were firmly entrenched in the law.<sup>26</sup> Women were consistently being subjected to humiliation on the witness stand at rape trials. Often it seemed that the female victim was considered the criminal. Despite a 1978 report from the Law Reform Commission advising otherwise, in 1982 it was still legally defensible for a husband to rape his wife. As well, according to legal definitions, a rape was only conceded to have occurred when proof of actual penetration could be presented in court.<sup>27</sup>

As passage of Bill C-127 became imminent feminists worked hard to make sure their interests were heard. However, at the final hour, and in a final push to get the bill passed, representatives of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and the National Association of Women and the Law were forced to concede a very crucial issue for women: the defense of honest belief. The new law would still allow consideration of this form of defense in which the alleged rapist could claim that he honestly believed the woman wanted to engage in sexual activities with him<sup>28</sup>. This issue was a linchpin in the feminist argument about rape and sexual violence against women. According to this argument, in patriarchal society a man is taught to believe that when a woman says 'no', she really means 'yes' and, therefore, he is often unable and unwilling to discern otherwise.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the government did not concede to feminist interests on this issue seemed to indicate a lack of real concern with the feminist lobby in general.

The disappointment following the experience of feminist lobby groups around the rape law led to a deeper concern with pornography and to an intensification of the anti-pornography movement. Women were being raped by men who believed that 'no' meant 'yes', what put such ideas in their heads? Robin Morgan's statement that 'Porn is the theory, rape is the practice' must have been resonating loudly in the minds of feminist activists in the field of violence against women. Concern was also generated by this experience regarding a recurring strategic problem: the role of feminists within the state. How could

feminists remain uncompromised and resist the continuous pressure to play by the government's rules and still be able to bring about effective legislative changes for women?"<sup>30</sup>

*The Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society*

Meanwhile in Toronto, feminist and other alternative artists took the Censor Board to court. The Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society, a coalition of video artists and art administrators, succeeded in having the Censor Board's criteria for judging films declared unconstitutional. Previously the Censor Board's guidelines had not been established in law. The members of the Board were appointed by the Ontario government and were given a mandate to review material and judge it by 'community standards' which were in part determined by a yearly "Survey of Attitudes in Ontario" conducted by the provincial government. The films that were part of OFAVAS' case included Not A Love Story and a film by experimental filmmaker Michael Snow entitled Rameau's Nephew. The Film Board required cuts in these films where there were depictions of sex and masturbation. OFAVAS claimed that the Board was unable to appreciate the artistic and educational content of the films. The Censor Board appealed the judge's decision to the Supreme Court of Canada where it is still awaiting judgement. The Board's name was changed, however, to The Ontario Film Review Board, and the Ontario government did establish in law, in the Ontario Theatres Act, guidelines for reviewing films. The guidelines remain the same today as they were previous to the OFAVAS case.

Many feminists in Ontario were growing increasingly concerned about the seemingly random powers of the Censor Board to prohibit viewing of alternative gay and feminist materials. Although at this point in the struggle against pornography feminists had not collectively come out in favour of censorship, it appeared that most feminists were in favour of some form of legal approach to the issue. Usually this meant the rewriting of the obscenity law to include the connection of sex with violence.<sup>31</sup> Feminists such as Susan Cole were introducing the notion of 'regulation' as being "very Canadian".<sup>32</sup> At this time support for amending the Criminal Code and opposition to prior censorship were not yet contradictory positions:

...the Ontario Censor Board has contributed to ensuring that there may be inadequacies in the Criminal Code of Canada. The Board's practice of prior censorship intervenes between the alleged offending depiction and the law, thus preventing the Criminal Code from being used and, as is necessary, appropriately amended and strengthened.<sup>33</sup>

The contradiction was soon to surface, however, as an anti-censorship position grew in opposition to the anti-pornography movement.

At this time other Canadian feminists were not advocating any kind of legal approach. They were attempting to direct energy and attention to organizing grassroots boycotts, street actions, and sex education.<sup>34</sup> The debate between anti-pornography women and feminists opposed to censorship had not yet become full blown.

### The Debate Heats Up: 1983-1986

#### *The establishment of the Fraser Committee*

In June 1983 all of the feminist lobbying around the issue of pornography and sexual violence, as well as large amounts of public interest in and concern for the issue, seemed to have resulted in the appointment of a Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution by Justice Minister Mark MacGuigan. The Fraser Committee, as it became known, was chaired by Queen's Consul John Fraser from Vancouver, and was made up of three men and four women. The Committee published its Issues Paper in November of 1983 in which it outlined its terms of reference and its mandate. The Committee was appointed "to study the problems associated with pornography and prostitution and to carry out a programme of socio-legal research" as well as "to consider the problems of access to pornography, its effects and what is considered to be pornographic in Canada".<sup>35</sup> The Committee held public hearings where any representative from a community group or any member of the public at large could present a brief. Feminist groups actively participated in the hearings throughout the country. They presented a feminist definition of pornography, the equation of sex with violence, and endorsed several types of legal action to control the problem.

### *The Barnard Conference*

In the United States during 1982 and 1983 anti-pornography feminists had been hard at work to stop the proliferation of, what they saw to be, degrading images of women. Splits in the feminist movement with regards to pornography and the accompanying feminist analysis began to surface, however, in the early 1980s. The debate within feminism intensified at the Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College in 1982. The Conference was entitled 'Toward a Politics of Sexuality' and was meant to explore the changing nature of "women's sexual reality".<sup>36</sup> A variety of speakers had been scheduled to speak at the conference, including proponents of alternative sexual practices, most notably lesbian sado-masochism. Anti-pornography feminists felt that the conference organizers had failed to include speakers from their perspective, and also accused many of the scheduled speakers of advocating patriarchal forms of sexuality and of being anti-feminist. Anti-pornography feminists proceeded to picket and protest outside the conference. So much controversy was generated that the college administrators seized the conference program and reprinted it with "all references to the college and funding sources deleted".<sup>37</sup> It became clear at this time that the feminist movement in the United States was experiencing a deep and fundamental division over the nature of female sexuality and the role of the state. These issues had come to the foreground as a result of the intensive work and analysis that had been conducted around the issue of pornography.

The Barnard Conference provided a catalyst for the debate between radical, anti-pornography activists and other factions of the women's movement in the United States. It may be suggested that the conference itself formally signalled the beginning of the debate. Although most Canadian feminists struggled to remain unaffected by the American turmoil, the theoretical questions and conundrums about sexual expression, ethics and the role of the state which were posed by the conference and articulated through the collection of papers presented there entitled Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, simply could not be ignored by feminists of any nationality. Both the issues addressed at the conference about female sexuality and sexual expression and the implications of the controversy surrounding them were far reaching and profound.

### *The Minneapolis ordinance*

In the fall of 1983 Andrea Dworkin, whose book Pornography: Men Possessing Women had served as a reference text for women working on the issue, and Catharine MacKinnon a noted constitutional lawyer and feminist activist were hired by the city of Minneapolis to develop a civil rights ordinance working from the feminist conception of pornography as a form of sex discrimination. They drafted what has since become known as the Minneapolis ordinance.

In the ordinance pornography is defined as "the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following...." The ordinance goes on to list nine instances that would be considered pornographic including: "women as presented as dehumanized, as sexual objects, things or commodities", "women are presented as whores by nature", "women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, tortured, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual". According to the ordinance, women would have recourse through the law to sue for damages against traffickers, distributors and producers of pornography. As well, women who participated in the making of pornography could also claim damages if they could prove that they had been coerced into the actions. Any woman, man or child who is physically assaulted in a way directly caused by pornography could also make a claim for damages in court. The trafficking clause of the ordinance does not require that any specific harm to the individual be proven, also, no exemption for materials with any claim to literary, educational or artistic merit is provided.<sup>38</sup>

The ordinance was passed by the Minneapolis City Council but was vetoed by the mayor on constitutional grounds. Other city councils however soon became interested in it. In Indianapolis Republican City Councillor Beulah Coughenor was appointed to start an initiative around the ordinance. Coughenor, known for her anti-abortion and anti-ERA positions, hired Catharine MacKinnon to work on its implementation. As it turned out, the major supporters of the ordinance in Indianapolis were all members of the Right wing, "Christian fundamentalists, Eagle Forum members, the Moral Majority..."<sup>39</sup> The ordinance was passed in the city; twenty-five Republicans voted in favour and five Democrats voted

against. It was soon taken to court, however, by a coalition of artists, authors and booksellers in the area and deemed unconstitutional. In the meantime, it appeared as though MacKinnon and anti-pornography feminists had found some strange bedfellows in the members of the radical right.

Various versions of the ordinance were introduced in Wisconsin, Los Angeles County and Cambridge, Massachusetts during 1984 and 1985. Intensive anti-pornography lobbying for the ordinance had given birth to an opposition group within the women's movement: Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce. Chapters of FACT were established everywhere the ordinance was introduced. FACT succeeded in their efforts to prevent the ordinance from being adopted, but, at the same time, debate within the women's movement about the ordinance grew more intense and more vitriolic.

Anti-censorship and anti-pornography feminists remained heavily stalemated over its use. In February of 1986, however, the United States Supreme Court upheld the original ruling that the ordinance was unconstitutional because it violated the right to free speech, laying to rest, at least temporarily, feminist debate about the ordinance itself.

The development of the Minneapolis ordinance had repercussions for feminist activists in Canada. Many feminists came out in strong support of the ordinance and worked to determine ways in which it could be adapted to a Canadian context. Feminists such as Susan Cole and the members of The Working Group on Sexual Violence in Vancouver endorsed amendments to the provincial and federal Human Rights Codes to include pornography as a form of sex discrimination. In this way, they argued, women could take their grievances before a Human Rights Commission. The financial burden would be carried by the Commission as it would be up to the Commission to decide whether or not to pursue the case. Anti-pornography feminists felt that by endorsing this type of action the goals of the Minneapolis ordinance could be reached. Women would be empowered to take action against pornography without the intervention of police, Crown attorneys, and government officials.<sup>40</sup>

Another legal approach to pornography supported by Canadian anti-pornography activists took the form of an amendment to Section 281.2 of the Criminal Code concerning Hate Literature. Feminists



suggested that sex and gender be included under the list of 'identifiable groups' against which it is illegal to circulate literature promoting hatred. Pornography would then be defined as Hate Literature against women. Feminists suggested that this section of the Criminal Code, rather than Section 159 concerning obscenity, be the focus of any Crown prosecution of pornography. These suggestions were endorsed by anti-pornography feminist groups across the country and appeared consistently in briefs submitted to the Fraser Committee.

The proposed adaptations of the Minneapolis ordinance frightened those feminists who did not trust the state; those women who had been witness to the actions of the Ontario Censor Board. Increased amounts of legislation in the form of more systems of prior restraint and stiffer obscenity laws seemed to increase harassment for gay, feminist and other alternative communities. As a result of the proposed adaptations of the Minneapolis ordinance, these women argued against further state involvement in the areas of sexual expression and sexually explicit representation.

#### *The Symposium on Media Violence and Pornography*

In February of 1984, a symposium on media violence and pornography was held in Toronto. The conference was organized by David Scott, and sponsored by the Action Group on Media Pornography, the Canadian Coalition Against Violent Entertainment, and the National Coalition on TV Violence. The conference organizers had invited a number of experts on the impact of pornography, as well as legal advisors on the state of existing laws pertaining to pornography to speak. Among the guests were social science researchers Neil Malamuth, Ed Donnerstein and Dolf Zillman, and Crown prosecutor Peter de Julio. Dr. Everet Koop, Surgeon General of the United States, was the keynote speaker. Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon and researcher Pauline Bart were the only female speakers at the conference. The majority of the conference speakers were American. At the beginning of the conference, Scott admonished the participants not to raise "potentially divisive issues such as homosexuality and abortion".<sup>41</sup>

Several feminist and gay groups had decided to boycott the conference beforehand, objecting to the right-wing, moralistic tendencies of many of the speakers, and the failure to include in a substantial way feminist interests in the issue, both pro and anti-censorship. Those boycotting handed out pamphlets at the beginning of the conference explaining their objections. Half way through the conference however, feminists in attendance realized that their presence there was a token gesture. Recognizing that "the conference agenda looked like a paradigm of sex stereotypes",<sup>42</sup> the feminists, lead by Dworkin and MacKinnon, decided to take action. During Koop's keynote address women marched down the aisles of the auditorium carrying a banner that stated 'Women's bodies, Women's lives, We decide'. MacKinnon read out a statement objecting to the biases of the conference, and Dworkin spoke to the members of the audience stating: "If you love male supremacy and you abhor pornography then you don't abhor pornography enough to do anything about it".<sup>43</sup> The remaining female speaker Pauline Bart refused to talk about her research and spoke instead of her past personal experience with abortion and its link to her present work on violence against women.

After the demonstration the remaining speakers exhorted the women not to revert to violence in their actions but to try alternative methods instead, like starvation protests.<sup>44</sup> David Scott said that he had asked the women he had invited to speak to 'leave ~~their guns~~ at home'. Many members of the audience walked out during the feminists' protest, including the chairperson of the Ontario Censor Board.<sup>45</sup>

The Symposium on Media Violence and Pornography elicited varied responses from the feminist community in Toronto. For the women who had been engaged in fighting the Ontario Censor Board and who had participated in the original boycott of the conference the feminist demonstration during the proceedings had come too late to avoid the "larger dynamic of feminist cooptation (which was) now in full swing in the political culture as a whole".<sup>46</sup> In Toronto at this time many articles appeared in alternative magazines such as The Body Politic, Fuse and Borderlines blatantly opposing the apparent cooptation of the radical anti-pornography feminists by the right wing. These feminists objected to the complicity which seemed to exist between these camps regarding the Minneapolis ordinance, as well as to the way in which anti-pornography feminists in Canada were advocating the use of legal mechanisms to deal with

pornography without also specifying the potential dangers to the movement should the proposed actions be taken. Many feminist theorists were also developing critiques of the analysis of patriarchy that accompanied the radical feminist stance and objected to the fact that there appeared to be no ongoing debate about these issues. They also objected to the fact that the public face of feminism was increasingly being associated with the anti-pornography movement: "Chances are when a woman goes to look for the feminism she's heard about, that's called her, she is particularly likely to encounter the anti-pornography movement in some form or another".<sup>47</sup>

### *Feminists Against Censorship*

Although debate about these issues had been ongoing in the United States for a few years previous to this time, in Canada no organized opposition to anti-pornography feminism had yet been formed. Many feminists working in the arts, as well as in left organizations had been objecting for some time to what they called the censorship actions of anti-pornography workers in various publications and at public events around the country. It may be contended that the Symposium on Media Violence served as a catalyst for the organization of a definite opposition to anti-porn activities in the form of Feminists Against Censorship. Toronto arts critic and film teacher Varda Burstyn, along with several feminist artists and activists, organized meetings and spoke at conferences. At these meetings they attempted to point out the dangers of censorship and state involvement in feminist pursuits and to present alternative actions that could be taken against pornography. The debate between anti-pornography activists and Feminists Against Censorship eventually proved to concern more than just the issue of censorship. This will be explored in the following chapter.

### *The Periodical Review Board*

In June 1984, during the Fraser Committee Hearings in Vancouver, it became apparent that Jimmy Pattison, a wealthy businessman who had recently been appointed chairperson of Expo '86, was the owner of Mainland Magazines, the largest distributor of pornographic magazines in the province. Pattison, who was increasingly in the public eye because of Expo, went before the Vancouver City Council to propose the establishment of a body to review all incoming magazines that might be deemed pornographic and to

make reports on the suitability of the magazines for distribution. Vancouver's Mayor Michael Harcourt approved the plan and a meeting was held between the distributors, church groups and women's groups to determine the nature of what was subsequently called the Periodical Review Board.

The Periodical Review Board consists of three members from the community appointed by community groups. The Board is responsible to a community based steering committee and is paid from a trust fund set up by the distributors but administered by the steering committee. The board's duties involve reviewing all the magazines that enter the province under the title of 'Adult Sophisticat'. The magazines are reviewed for violations of community standards and violations of Section 159 of the Criminal Code. The board meets weekly to compare notes. If two out of the three members agree that a page or number of pages in a magazine meets the violation criteria, then it is noted down in the board's report. The final report of the board listing all of its findings is sent to the Attorney General's Office and to Mainland Magazine. Mainland then sends copies to other distributors around the province. Canada Customs and the vice squad are also sent copies, as are concerned citizens groups throughout the province. Once the distributors have a copy of the report it is up to them to decide whether or not to follow the board's suggestions. Community groups who have copies of the reports can monitor the distributors' actions, as can the vice squad, and if the distributors have not heeded the board's recommendations they may be subject to prosecution by the Crown.

The Periodical Review Board works in a much more indirect way than, for example, the British Columbia Film Classification Board. They have succeeded, however, in bringing about a form of self-regulation for some of the magazine distributors in the province, as well as successfully bringing errant distributors to court on obscenity charges. Jillian Ridington, who is still chairperson of the board believes that "the amount of really violent pornography that's out on the stands in magazine form has decreased quite considerably throughout the province".<sup>41</sup>

Anti-pornography activists and anti-censorship feminists alike objected to the establishment of the Periodical Review Board. WAVAW, Rape Relief and the Vancouver Status of Women were concerned

that the board might be a political tool for Jimmy Pattison, as well as a way of enabling the Attorney General to avoid taking responsibility for the prosecution of pornography under Section 159.

Anti-pornography women felt that feminist participation on the Board would be misconstrued as tacit approval by feminists of most pornographic material. It was felt that the Periodical Review Board functioned "entirely in the interests of profit"<sup>49</sup>, and that the pornographers would agree to the removal of the most blatantly violent material because it was "a small sacrifice ...in order to appear concerned and to silence the pornography debate."<sup>50</sup> Anti-censorship women felt that the Board was simply a political gesture, designed to assuage guilty liberal consciences with the guise of feminist approval. Ultimately it was felt that the Board would serve little purpose.

### *Realwomen*

Meanwhile, the ascendancy of the right was confirmed in Canada with the landslide election of Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservative Party in the fall of 1984. Women's organizations, on both the national and provincial level, were concerned about the imminent budget cuts. There was growing concern as well about the new government's commitment to feminist organizations and its apparent susceptibility to a newly formed women's coalition entitled "Realwomen; realistic, equal, and active for life", established by two Toronto women in February 1984.

Realwomen state that their needs are not being addressed or validated by the existing women's movement. Their organization espouses basic Christian beliefs and sees secular humanism to be the enemy of society. They support the criminalization of prostitution, increased family allowance, homemakers benefits and government funded parenting courses. They are opposed to choice on abortion, to homosexuality, affirmative action, universal daycare, no-fault divorce and equal pay for work of equal value. They offer no in depth critique of patriarchy, but rather wish to validate and gain endorsement for more traditional conditions of womanhood. Realwomen claims to have a membership of 20,000 women across Canada. Although Realwomen has applied for federal funding, it has been turned down by the Secretary of State's Women's Program. At the moment they are hard at work lobbying in Ottawa, criticizing government funding of what they claim to be 'radical' feminist organizations, and attempting to

increase their membership across the country. Realwomen are opposed to all feminists and form a part of the strong right-wing lobby in Ottawa for stricter obscenity laws. They appear to have found support for their work in Jake Epp, Minister of Health and Welfare.<sup>31</sup>

### *More Legislation*

The spring of 1985 was a very active time for feminists as Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect, but it was especially hectic for those women working around the issues of pornography and censorship. At this time Brian Mulroney and his government tabled an amendment to the Customs Tariff Act. The amendment was a clarification of the guidelines by which customs officials were meant to judge pornographic materials entering the country. The amendments were the result of a federal Court of Appeal ruling stating that the old guidelines were vague and out-dated, based on notions of indecency and immorality. The new guidelines were very specific and appeared to comply with what had then come to be recognized as feminist definitions of pornography. The amendment forbade the importation of material that 'dehumanizes and degrades', that advocates the genocide of an 'identifiable group', portrays children in a sexual context, or sexually explicit violence. Feminist reaction to the amendment was skeptical. Jillian Ridington of the Periodical Review Board stated that if the act was carried out sufficiently there would be no need for any prior censorship boards in Canada.

In the spring of 1985 in British Columbia Attorney General Brian Smith announced plans to bring about new legislation which would require that all videotapes coming into the province would have to be screened and classified before distribution by the Film Classification Board. The proposed Bill 30 would also allow the Attorney General to acquire funds from general provincial revenues to support public education about pornography. Anti-pornography feminists were pleased with the proposed legislation scheduled for tabling in the fall of 1986. Anti-censorship feminists and other activists, however, strongly opposed the proposals and formed an opposition group, The Coalition for the Right to View, to fight the bill. This coalition objected to what they saw to be censorship of an individual's choice of private entertainment, as well as to the lack of regard for the necessity of artistic freedom of expression. There

was no exemption made for artists and educators in Bill 30.

### *Women Against Censorship*

Within the feminist movement at this time anti-pornography feminists and anti-censorship feminists continued to debate each other and struggle for more support for their positions. In Toronto, in April, members of the gay and feminist communities held a festival called Six Days of Resistance. During this festival films and videos that had been cut and banned by the Ontario Film Board and work that artists had refused to send to the board were shown in their original forms at many different venues around the city. The idea was to provide an opportunity for the public to see what the Film Board felt they should not see. These acts of civil disobedience occurred at such an alarming rate that police had trouble intervening and, in effect, allowed the event to proceed uninterrupted.<sup>52</sup>

But anti-censorship forces were not limiting themselves to street actions alone. Early in 1985 an anthology entitled Women Against Censorship, edited by activist Varda Burstyn, was published. In the volume several feminist critics and activists presented a variety of critiques of the anti-pornography analysis. They presented alternative ways of conceptualizing pornography, female sexuality, and the state. Several of the articles spoke of the limitations and dangers of the Minneapolis ordinance, others explored the recent history of prior censorship in Ontario, and others concentrated on providing criticisms of the rise and proliferation of the anti-pornography movement in the United States. The book added to the growing controversy within the feminist community. Some anti-pornography activists were quick to present criticisms of the book,<sup>53</sup> while others, specifically the Women Against Pornography group in Victoria, accepted many of its suggestions.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Fraser Committee Reports*

In June 1985 the Fraser Committee released its report on pornography and prostitution to the public. It appeared that many of the feminist suggestions had been taken to heart in the committee's description of the problems and its proposals for legislative action. The committee identified three points of view that might be taken toward pornography: liberal, conservative, and feminist. According to the committee

"feminists see sexual freedom as essential to female liberation but oppose a form of male sexual license which prevents the full expression of female sexuality and threatens the physical and psychic welfare of women".<sup>33</sup>

The committee's recommendations included the development of a three tier system under which to classify and prosecute pornography. The first tier would include child pornography and pornography which was made "in such away that actual physical harm was caused to the person or persons depicted".<sup>34</sup> The second tier would include violent pornography that depicted only simulated harm to the participants. This tier would allow defenses of artistic or educational merit. Both these tiers would carry maximum sentences of ten years in jail. The third tier outlined by the committee's report would include non-violent but sexually explicit material. This material would not be subject to prosecution, but would have to have its display regulated.<sup>35</sup> The committee seemed to fall short of an anti-pornography feminist analysis on its discussion of the harm caused by pornography. It was not prepared to accept pornography as a primary causal agent in violence against women. The committee suggested that pornography did offend members of the public who were forced to see it, and did generate a general atmosphere in society which prevented equality among all people.

The committee's recommendations as to legal action were extensive, and included amendments to the Customs Tariff Act, stricter control on the importation of pornography, and priority within the postal service to control distribution of pornography through the mail. Feminist suggestions around legislating pornography were also included in the committee's suggestions. It was recommended that existing Human Rights Legislation should be applied to pornography, that the possibility of creating legislation to provide a civil cause of action through the courts with respect to the promotion of hatred by pornography be explored, that the Hate literature section of the Criminal Code be amended to include sex as part of the 'identifiable group' category, and finally, that Section 159 of the Criminal Code not be used.

Reaction within the feminist community appeared to be mixed. Although national feminist associations such as the National Action Committee and NAWL came out in support of the report,



members of both the anti-pornography campaigns and anti-censorship groups were not pleased by the committee's report. Anti-pornography feminists criticized the report for its attempt to "provide something for everyone".<sup>38</sup> They felt that the committee's refusal to define pornography 'once and for all', and its inability to accept pornography as a causal factor in violence against women severely limited its use to women:

In defining these two kinds of harms the Fraser Committee has accepted that there are materials which are all right for 'private consumption'. This can be interpreted either as a suggestion that misogyny is o.k. at home (the liberal view) or that explicit sexuality belongs behind closed doors (the conservative view). Neither interpretation serves women.<sup>39</sup>

Anti-censorship feminists criticized the entire process of the state-mandated committee of inquiry. These women believed that even the most radical suggestions made by feminists were reduced to liberal concerns in the context of the committee. Feminists were viewed in the report as being "just another competing interest group in a democratic pluralistic society",<sup>40</sup> and as a result could only have their concerns addressed in a superficial manner. Anti-censorship feminists also pointed out that the Fraser committee report represented a "further disguise of the moral base of the law".<sup>41</sup>

### *Burstyn in Forum*

Anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists soon had their attention focused on an important event within the movement, one which appears to have greatly intensified the debate between these two camps. In September of 1985 Varda Burstyn, spokesperson for Feminists Against Censorship, gave an interview in Forum magazine. Forum, published by the same publishers as Penthouse, caters to an upwardly mobile, 'liberated', modern man and woman. It features written pornography and more serious columns mostly pertaining to current political and social issues. Burstyn's interview dealt with the ongoing debate within feminism about pornography, the politics of anti-pornography activists, the insidious nature of misogynist images of women, as well as explanations for her anti-censorship stance. Burstyn also submitted an article to Broadside, a Toronto feminist newspaper, explaining her reasons for her appearance in Forum; to render transparent the sexist biases of Forum and to reach a more mainstream audience with a feminist message.<sup>42</sup> The following month Broadside published a vitriolic response to Burstyn's position by American anti-pornography activist Catharine MacKinnon. MacKinnon accused Burstyn of collaborating

with pornographers, of being 'unsisterly', and of political complicity.

In the following months debate about the political correctness of Burstyn's appearance in Forum and MacKinnon's subsequent berating of her raged in the 'Letters' section of Broadside. It appeared that the feminist community was genuinely divided. More to the point, however, it appeared that many feminists were deeply disturbed by the acrimonious tone of the exchanges between anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists and were equally disturbed about the impact of the debate on the movement. The disunity within the movement had reached a peak and the struggle around pornography and sexual representation had become largely unproductive.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Sexuality Debate*

In the fall of 1985 and in 1986 the focus of the debate seemed to shift somewhat, following the pattern of the discussions within American feminism, to a concern about the nature of female sexuality. Although the issue of sexual practice and its subsequent questions about morality and ethics had been on the fringes of the Canadian feminist debate since the early 1980s, it had recently come into stronger focus as a result of the intensive analysis of pornography and sexual representation. It seemed that these issues could no longer be avoided by women. Across the country several conferences about sexuality and sexual representation were held.<sup>44</sup> Discussions arose around the question of sexual practice. Radical feminists and anti-pornography activists claimed that some forms of sexual expression, specifically sado-masochism and role-playing were replications of patriarchal power dynamics and were blind to women's position of oppression within that dynamic. The alternative position, known as 'pro-sex' was put forward by lesbian feminists who were involved in butch/femme-relationships, or engaged in s/m practices. These women believed any attempt by women to explore sexual expression and to break the codes of male defined sexuality to be inherently subversive and radical. They also claimed that anti-pornography feminists were attempting to limit women's freedom by prescribing politically correct sex.

These divisions around the nature of female sexuality revealed, as had the debate about pornography and censorship, very fundamental differences within feminism about the nature, strategies

and goals of the movement. At the time of writing no resolutions had been reached, although calls for attempts to move beyond the polarizations were becoming more frequent in the feminist press.

### *The Crosbie Legislation*

Meanwhile, then Justice Minister John Crosbie introduced new obscenity legislation to Parliament in the spring of 1986. In the bill obscenity was defined as "any visual material showing vaginal, anal or oral intercourse, ejaculation, sexually violent behaviour, bestiality, incest, necrophilia, masturbation or other sexual activity". The legislation raised the ire of anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists alike. It was clear that Crosbie had bowed to the right-wing lobby in Ottawa, rather than acting on the Fraser committee's recommendations or listening to the feminist lobby groups. Anti-censorship feminists felt their predictions had been realized: the state simply could not be trusted to act on women's interests. Anti-pornography feminists felt the legislation was a slap in the face to the women's movement and women in general. Both groups prepared to unite to fight the proposed bill. This proved unnecessary, however, as Crosbie was 'shuffled' out of his post as Justice Minister shortly after the introduction of the legislation. Feminists are now waiting for Justice Minister Ray Hnatysjyn to present a new, revised, obscenity bill.

### *Some last words*

It is hoped that this brief history of the issue of pornography has clearly revealed the evolution of the distinctive positions, anti-pornography and anti-censorship, within the movement. It is also hoped that this chapter has provided a context within which the debate might be situated, explored, and better understood.

In the next chapter the positions' arguments about pornography and censorship will be examined in detail. This examination will, in turn, reveal each position's underlying assumptions about the nature of sexuality, power and the role of the state.

## Notes

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2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. Lucy Bland, "Purity, Motherhood, Pleasure or Threat? Definitions of Female Sexuality 1900-1970" in Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions, Cartledge and Ryan (eds), London: The Women's Press, 1983, p. 12.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. Ibid., p. 13.
6. Ibid., p. 14.
7. Burstyn, "Political Precedents...", op. cit., p. 14.
8. Ibid., p. 12.
9. Ibid., p. 15.
10. Ibid., p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 17.
12. Ibid., p. 17.
13. Burstyn, "Political Precedents..." op. cit., p. 13.
14. Varda Burstyn, private interview, June 1986.
15. Susan Cole, private interview, June 1986.
16. It is important to note here, as Varda Burtysn pointed out in an interview conducted for this study, that the issue of pornography had been of concern to women in the Left during the 1960s.
17. Myrna Kostash, "Power and Control, a Feminist View of Pornography", This Magazine, July/August 1978, Volume 12 number 3, p. 6.
18. Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography, Laura Lederer (ed.), New York: Bantam Books, 1980, p. 1.
19. Debra Lewis, "Pornography, developing Feminist Perspectives", Kinesis, October 1978, p. 11.
20. See Gerald Hannon's article in the April 1978 edition of The Body Politic.
21. Burstyn, private interview, June 1986.
22. Jean Lake, "The Red Hot Video Story", Priorities, Volume 11 number 1, p. 5.
23. Wimmin's Fire Brigade quoted in Susan Cole's "Sparks Fly at Red Hot Video", Broadside.

February 1983, Volume 4 number 4, p. 3.

24. Cole, "Sparks Fly...", op. cit., p. 3.
25. Sara Diamond, private interview, May 1986.
26. For a thorough critique of rape laws see Catharine MacKinnon's article "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: Toward a Feminist Jurisprudence" in Signs, Volume 8 number 4, 1983.
27. Bill C-127 Working Group, "Lobby Logistics: Bill C-127", Broadside, December 1982-January 1983, Volume 4 number 3, p. 3.
28. Although a section was added to C-127 which stated that there must be evidence that there were reasonable grounds for the 'honest belief'.
29. Kate Andrew, private interview, October 1984.
30. See Andrew, private interview, October 1984, and Bill C-127 Working Group, "Lobby Logistics...", op.cit., p.3.
31. See Lisa Freedman and Susan Ursel, "Obscenity Deleted", Broadside, April 1983, Volume 4 number 6, p. 5.
32. See Lisa Steele, "Interview with Susan Cole: Freedom, Sex and Power", Fuse, January/February 1983, p. 25.
33. Cyndra MacDowall, "Extra-Censory Perception", Broadside, April 1983, Volume 4 number 6, p. 5.
34. See Thelma McCormack "Understanding Pornography" Canadian Women's Studies, Volume 4 number 4, Summer 1983 p. 41-42, and Wendy Frost "Censorship: Closing more options for women", Priorities, Volume 11 number 1, March 1983, p. 10-12.
35. The Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, Issues Paper, Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, p. 1.
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42. Ibid., p. 1.
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53. See Susan G. Cole, "Review of *Women Against Censorship*", The Canadian Journal of Women and the Law, Volume 1, 1985, p. 226239.
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55. Lisa Freedman, "Sex, Trade and Commerce", Broadside, Volume 6 number 8, June 1985, p. 8.
56. See The Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, Pornography and Prostitution in Canada, Volume 1, Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1985, p.271.
57. Ibid.
58. Megan Ellis, "Fraser Committee: A masterpiece of compromise", Kinesis, June 1985, p. 6.
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60. Debi Brock, "Sex and the Single Committee", Broadside, Volume 7 number 3, Dec.'85/Jan.'86, p. 8.
61. Ibid., p. 9.
62. Varda Burstyn, "Considering Context and Content", Broadside, Volume 7 number 1, October 1985, p. 3.
63. See Pam Blackstone's 'Letter to the Editor', Broadside, Volume 7 number 6, April 1986, p. 3.
64. For example Coming Together: A Sexuality Conference in Toronto and The Heat is On: Women on Art on Sex Conference in Vancouver.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ARGUMENTS

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the positions that have emerged in the feminist debate about pornography in Canada. I have chosen to classify the positions in the debate into two major groupings and two sub-groupings. The reasons for this decision must be made clear, however, before an exploration of the positions can be undertaken.

The anti-pornography campaign and its accompanying analyses of patriarchy came to the foreground of the feminist agenda in the late 1970s. As the campaign developed it gained widespread support among members of the feminist community; it was generally assumed that pornography and sexual violence were phenomena to which all feminists were opposed. The anti-censorship position rose out of the experiences of some feminists with the Ontario Censor Board and developed in direct relation and opposition to the anti-pornography movement. These groups, anti-pornography and anti-censorship, came to constitute the two major positions in the feminist debate about pornography. The development and delineation of these two groups was apparent in the feminist literature on pornography of the time.

As the debate about pornography and censorship developed in the early 1980s it became increasingly clear that the analyses that accompanied each position were being associated with two other distinct positions within feminism; positions whose members had been debating each other since the beginning of the women's movement: radical feminism and socialist feminism. This association of the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions with radical and socialist feminisms was also evident in the leadership of the two positions. The most prominent spokespeople for the anti-pornography movement were radical feminists and the founders and spokespeople for the anti-censorship position were well known socialist feminist theorists, artists and activists.

This linkage of the anti-pornography position with radical feminism and the anti-censorship position with socialist feminism has made it difficult to clearly classify each position and to make generalizations about the anti-pornography and anti-censorship arguments. For the sake of clarity, in this chapter 'anti-pornography' and 'anti-censorship' labels will be used when I am discussing each position's argument about pornography itself. When I am discussing their underlying assumptions, however, I am referring to radical and socialist feminist ideas and will use those labels. In the last section of the chapter entitled 'Auxiliary Positions' I will discuss two smaller subsets of the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions: liberal feminist and 'pro-sex'. Liberal feminists have generally been associated with the anti-pornography movement and 'pro-sex' with anti-censorship feminists.

I must stress that these categories are products of the debate. They do not reflect all the positions that can or might be taken. They represent the dominant strains of the debate as it has developed in particular circumstances. Many feminists, myself included, have felt excluded by the debate, unable to effectively present alternative positions or combinations of positions. In fact, it is one of the goals of this thesis to assess possible reasons for this feeling of exclusion. There are certainly liberal anti-censorship feminists, socialist feminists opposed to pornography and open to forms of legislative regulation, and radical feminists who are opposed to both pornography and censorship. The simple fact remains, however, that the majority of the debate has taken place between radical anti-pornography feminists and socialist anti-censorship feminists.

In this chapter these two positions will be explored in detail. In each section I will look at how pornography is being defined, what its harm is seen to be, what its function is, what kinds of proposals are made to deal with pornography, and how those proposals are meant to be implemented. Through this expository exercise each position's underlying assumptions about the nature of power, the role of the state and the nature of sexuality will become evident and will be discussed. In the final section of the chapter I will briefly outline the two auxiliary positions, 'pro-sex' and liberal, that have emerged through the debate.



This section is based upon a thorough literature review of journal articles, and articles from the feminist press over the past three years in Canada. Also, major texts dealing with the issue published both in Canada and the United States are drawn upon. It is necessary to point out that although this thesis is primarily concerned with the debate as it has occurred in Canada, the impact of American feminist thinkers, especially in the anti-pornography current, has been great, and, therefore, some of their work is used.

### The Anti-pornography Argument

#### *What is pornography?*

Anti-pornography feminists are consistent in their treatment of pornography as "fundamentally a political problem arising out of the relations between men and women in a patriarchy".<sup>1</sup> These feminists situate pornography on a continuum with other forms of sexual violence against women ranging from sexual harassment in the workplace to rape. Pornography is considered to be "the ideological basis for the systematic persecution of women by men. It is a means of social control".<sup>2</sup>

Anti-pornography women define pornography as all material, written and visual, which eroticizes violence and domination by linking them with explicit sex. Pornography is also defined as an industry supported and encouraged by patriarchal structures: "It's the quintessential expression of capitalism, it's the buying and selling of human beings".<sup>3</sup>

Pornography is also defined by anti-pornography activists as a practice in which women are systematically dominated by men through sex. Canadian feminist Susan Cole does not see pornography as simply an image or representation, but as "the practice of presenting, trafficking and consuming sexual subordination for sexual pleasure".<sup>4</sup> For anti-pornography women then, pornography must be conceptualized as a dynamic process that includes all the social relations involved in the production, dissemination and consumption of violent, sexually explicit imagery and written material.<sup>5</sup>

### *How does pornography function?*

Anti-pornography feminists see pornography's function to be the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo. It is seen to function as a form of education, teaching men and women what their roles are in a patriarchal society. Anti-pornography women feel that "the lesson taught in all 'hardcore' pornography is that men's pleasure comes from inflicting pain and women's from feeling it".<sup>6</sup> Pornography is the practice of "convincing men that women like rape; of conditioning the consumer to fuse sex with aggression, conditioning them through sexual arousal so that they learn it in their bodies".<sup>7</sup>

Pornography is also seen to provide the justification for male domination of women. It is perceived as a patriarchal institution which makes the use of coercion towards women acceptable. It does this through "the control of (women's) sexuality by violence or the constant threat of violence at the hands of men".<sup>8</sup> Women are consistently victimized by pornography and are, thereby, kept in their places. Anti-pornography feminists see all women as victims or potential victims of pornography whether they appear in pornography, have pornography forced upon them in their homes or in the street, or are assaulted as a result of pornography; there is no distinction made between them. Women's participation in the making of pornography is coerced; it is "merely a particularly graphic example of women's role as the primary agents of a socialization process which perpetuates their own subordination".<sup>9</sup> Pornography increases the risk involved in being a woman.

Feminists attempted to make distinctions between erotica and pornography at the beginning of the fight against pornography. Gloria Steinem, in her article "Pornography: A Clear and Present Danger", published in 1978, defined erotica as "a mutually pleasurable, sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by choice". Jillian Ridington and Barb Findlay defined it as showing or describing "sexual activity which is loving, non-coercive and joyous"<sup>10</sup>. These definitions of erotica were opposed to the etymological definition of pornography, "writing about whores", in which the subordination of women is implicit. Anti-pornography feminists' critiques and analyses of patriarchal imagery and sexual violence soon intensified. As a result of this, the emphasis of the movement shifted to the determination of strategies to eradicate pornography, efforts to maintain this distinction were dropped.

The function of pornography has been the subject of much anti-pornography feminist theory. American radical feminist theorists Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin, in their analyses and articles, attempt to explore pornography's function and the reasons for its pervasive popularity. Canadian feminist theorist and philosopher Geraldine Finn combines and integrates their ideas in an unique analysis of the role of pornography in the oppression of women. Finn, in fact, draws from the work of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard as well as that of feminist critics in her contention that contemporary notions of masculinity are constructed in and by pornography. The women in pornography are man-made abstractions that function to reaffirm the male sense of domination and ownership. Pornography underlines men's sense of control over women, as well as their own sense of themselves, because it is their own creation:

She is in fact produced as both idol and idolizer. For her desire is constituted as his desire for her. Indeed, the whole point of her construction is to call forth his sexuality and the experience of sexual superiority and control which his penis is supposed to confer upon him 'naturally'.<sup>12</sup>

Men speak to each other through pornography about their position as men: "It (pornography)...establishes the spectator-subject of pornography, in the community of men, by allowing him to participate in the exchange of women".<sup>13</sup> Finn asserts that pornography is, therefore, about male power, and that male viewers of pornography are excited, not by the notion of 'real' woman, but by "the cultural order made manifest...the power of patriarchy, men's will inscribed on women's bodies".<sup>14</sup>

Finn describes the kind of masculinity created by pornography as "the traditional subject, Man",<sup>15</sup> as rational, autonomous and detached. The male subject's desire to view pornography is really a desire for separation, a desire to be absent, invisible and, at the same time, omnipresent and able to control the world around him. Finn also contends that "the flesh and blood and guts he (the pornographer) objectifies...are his own flesh and blood and guts; denied, objectified, projected onto Other, onto Nature, woman, the Enemy, but never by that means exorcised".<sup>16</sup> Men can never find satisfaction in pornography. It perpetuates an ideal masculine state that can never be obtained because it denies the

reality of the engaged male body, vulnerable and susceptible to emotion. The unattainability of this ideal only "increases the pornographer's isolation, frustration... and resentment".<sup>17</sup>

According to Finn, men try to embody the ideal state of the masculine objectifier and, thereby, perpetuate violence in the world: "For you can only objectify the living by taking away its life."<sup>18</sup> As a result of this process, pornography is filled with violence; Finn claims, "the desire to kill women is virtually built into men's sexuality".<sup>19</sup> Women are left identity-less, with no sense of individual autonomy. They are taught to exist for men and see themselves as "the object known, nature, matter as female".<sup>20</sup> Hence the feminist objection to objectification; made over in the male image of female desire for the constructed male subject, women are consistently tyrannized by male desires, that are often characterized by actual physical violence.

#### *What are the effects of pornography?*

Anti-pornography feminists concentrate heavily on the harm to women and children caused by pornography. They draw a direct causal link between pornography and sexual violence against women. Many base their arguments on social scientific studies that link pornography to increased aggression levels in viewers, and to a shift in negative attitudes about rape.<sup>21</sup> Anti-pornography activists also contend that in their direct experience with battered women they have found that pornography frequently enters these women's descriptions of battering.<sup>22</sup>

Most anti-pornography feminists feel that pornography does affect male behaviour toward women and causes violence against women, if only by contributing to the maintenance of misogynist attitudes in society. It is also seen to work by desensitizing men and women to violent images, thereby leading to an escalation of the intensity and explicitness of sex and violence in pornography and the mainstream media. Pornography is often characterized as affecting the public consciousness in the same way advertising does, by inviting imitation: "...like the cigarette and beer ads, it promises pleasure and success."<sup>23</sup>

These conceptions of the harm caused by pornography are summarized by Andrea Dworkin:  
"pornography and its relationship to actual violence against women...is analogous to the way antisemitic

literature blanketed Germany and enabled what occurred to be justified, encouraged it, incited it, promoted it".<sup>24</sup> These objections to pornography as a form of hate literature and as a direct causal agent in violence against women form the basis upon which anti-pornography feminists develop strategies for dealing with the issue.

*What should be done about pornography?*

At the beginning of the movement against pornography many Canadian feminists objected to pornography but did not advocate any form of censorship; strategies such as picketing, boycotts and street actions were encouraged. However, as the radical feminist analysis developed, it became increasingly difficult for feminists to see the pervasive misogynist images go unchecked and undiluted and several proposals for legal remedies were developed.

Anti-pornography feminists made sure to distinguish their feminist definition of pornography from traditional moralist and civil libertarian approaches to the issue. These women made it clear that they did not object to pornography because it was sexually explicit or because it offended a sense of public decency. Nor did they view it, as many liberals did, as being an open expression of sexuality and therefore protected under freedom of expression. In fact, refutation of the freedom of expression argument was the subject of many anti-pornography feminists' work in the early part of the movement. Feminists such as Debra Lewis and Susan Cole made the point that:

The pornographer tells his customer that women have no right to speak, only the right to get fucked, and so the pornographer works to deny us the freedom of speech...as long as there is no real equality, freedom of speech is useful only to those who already have power.<sup>25</sup>

For these feminists pornography silenced women by terrifying them and denying them a sense of their own sexual autonomy; freedom of speech for women simply does not exist in a patriarchal society.

Andrea Dworkin stated simply: "I am being asked to protect rights that I am being denied simultaneously because I am a woman".<sup>26</sup> Anti-pornography feminists were asking; whose speech is more valuable and deserves more protection, that of a few pornographers or half of the human population?

Anti-pornography feminists, therefore, recommended various kinds of legal reform. Susan Cole, in 1982, advocated regulation of the pornography industry. She made it clear that the proposals she was advocating were not calls for 'censorship'. They were merely forms of industrial regulation, toward which, she claimed, Canadians were more open than Americans.<sup>17</sup> Even earlier than this, anti-pornography feminists and feminists working actively on the rape issue, had developed extensive critiques of the existing legal structure as it applied to women and advocated the reform of all laws that discriminated against women:

What has become increasingly obvious is that not only does the law actively discriminate against women in certain areas and omit to grant us equality in others, but that even those laws which purported to afford women some measure of protection were, in fact, only justifications of the status quo and protected the interests of men and not of women.<sup>18</sup>

These objections were presented to governmental committees through the strong lobbying actions taken by such groups as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

The legal remedies espoused by anti-pornography activists in Canada were heavily influenced by the definitions of pornography developed by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in the Minneapolis ordinance in the United States. Suggestions ranged from adoption of the ordinance's definition of pornography as a form of sex discrimination and its inclusion in the provincial and federal Human Rights Codes, to the inclusion of sex and gender into the list of characteristics of 'identifiable groups' in the Hate Literature section of the Criminal Code. Many women recommended that the term 'obscenity' be replaced by 'pornography' in the Criminal Code and that a complete revision of the existing definitions and subsequent punishments be undertaken. Anti-pornography feminists also lobbied extensively for a standardizing of Canada Customs procedures for blocking pornographic material from entering the country, as well as a strengthening of guidelines concerning abusive materials and sex-role stereotyping in the Broadcasting Act for the CRTC, in the Canadian Film Development Corporation, the Department of Communication and the Canada Council. Feminists from across the country and especially in Ontario and British Columbia presented proposals for restructuring of the provincial systems of prior restraint such as the B.C. Film Classification Board. They also suggested that federal and provincial governments remove all pornography from government properties. Anti-pornography activists

continued to support street actions, boycotts, sex education and public awareness programs as well as their proposed legal reforms.

While feminists opposed to state intervention call the Minneapolis ordinance and its Canadian adaptations 'censorship', most anti-pornography feminists feel they are avoiding censorship by their proposed alternatives. They contend, as well, that any achievements that might be made to immediately increase women's safety and limit the threat of pornography far outweigh any potential danger to women from censorship. As the Working Group on Sexual Violence makes clear:

It may be less overwhelming to turn the focus of the work inward, convincing ourselves in the process that the power structure...is simply too male...to be actively struggled against. But to do so is to abandon those women whose lives are directly and daily affected by the power of the state, and who are simply in no position to ignore it.<sup>29</sup>

Since pornography denies women basic civil rights and "it is such a denial that human rights legislation was designed to address and remedy, it is therefore appropriate that (human rights legislation) be made available to women".<sup>30</sup> Anti-pornography feminists act out of a desire for the betterment of women's situation within patriarchy, as well as a desire for the radical transformation of society:

...there's no question that the majority of Canadians believe that porn should be regulated, our task is then to figure out a way to do it so that women don't get hurt, which is why I like the idea of a civil remedy...where people who are better situated to know the harm that's being done by the practice can take some legal redress and money too.<sup>31</sup>

### Underlying Assumptions of the Anti-Pornography Argument

*What is the nature of power and the role of the state?*

For anti-pornography radical feminists power is male, violent, aggressive and sexual. It is in the hands of men, is deployed by men, constituted by men, perpetuated by men and singularly defined by men. Power is the domination of women by men and the submission of women to men: "The man/women difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other".<sup>32</sup> Male power is constituted in all elements of patriarchy, all political and economic institutions. Pornography is seen to have a specific role in the perpetuation of male power, "a power which extends along the whole desperate continuum of male privilege, from conjugal rights to pimping, from sexual harassment to rape-murder".<sup>33</sup> In patriarchy

"power is an eroticized event, masked as titillation",<sup>34</sup> and pornography serves to create and perpetuate that eroticization.

Andrea Dworkin defines, in her book Pornography: Men Possessing Women, what she has determined to be the seven tenets of male supremacy, seven forms of male power, which are propagated through various ideological arms of patriarchy such as pornography. The first is the power men have to determine their subjectivity, men have 'selves', women do not. The second tenet is that men are physically stronger than women. The third is the "capacity to terrorize, to use self and strength to inculcate fear, fear in a whole class of persons of a whole class of persons".<sup>35</sup> According to Dworkin the penis is the symbol of male power. The fourth tenet of male supremacy is the power of naming, the ability to implant one's own values into language. In patriarchal society "thought, experienced primarily as language, is permeated by the linguistic and perceptual values developed expressly to subordinate women".<sup>36</sup> Men maintain their power through force. The power of owning and possessing is the fifth tenet, the sixth is the power of money, an abstraction that expresses masculinity, and the seventh is the power of sex. Men are able to determine what 'sex' is, and what women's role is to be in relation to their definition. According to Dworkin, man:

exiles (woman) from every realm of expression outside the strictly male-defined sexual or male-defined maternal. He forces her to become that thing that causes erection, then holds himself helpless and powerless when he is aroused by her, his fury when she is not that thing, when she is either more or less than that thing is intense and punishing.<sup>37</sup>

Male power exists, through the degradation of women, only to expand and intensify itself. Male power is the major theme of pornography, and pornography is the major propagator of male power.

Anti-pornography radical feminists do not see the state as the most important seat of male power, although they will contend that "the liberal state coercively and authoritatively constitutes the social order in the interests of men as a gender".<sup>38</sup> Radical feminists do not have a theory of the state; they have a theory of male power. They understand male power as emanating from all societal structures, and from every kind of social relation: "There are pockets of power which women encounter everywhere. I do not really see a significant difference between the jailor who holds the keys to a federal prison and a man who



imprisons his wife in his own home."<sup>39</sup> These women, therefore, will countenance using the state to achieve immediate goals for women.

The ideology of patriarchy perpetuates, through many institutions such as pornography and the educational system, a false sense in women about themselves and their role in society. Radical feminists see male power as fundamentally coercive, aggressive and destructive, and they see it as their task to uncover this perfect system of domination by studying and revealing the characteristics of the specific relations of domination; hence the concentration on pornography.

Radical feminists make the distinction between 'power over' and 'power between', or empowerment. Empowerment is defined as the ability to perceive one's position of oppression, to name it, and to develop strategies for dealing with it. Any situation in which a woman's experience and perspective is validated is empowering. For radical feminists the naming of the many different kinds of sexual violence that exist is empowerment: "Articulating our experiences is a radical act - words such as rape, pornography, battery, incest, racism, poverty, homophobia, and abortion are not polite words in the political vocabulary of those who have power".<sup>40</sup> Women's control of language and speech is considered to be a political act, and an act of creation, of empowerment. The Minneapolis ordinance, which allows women themselves to seek a civil remedy for any damages caused by pornography is seen to be a form of empowerment. The empowerment of women is understood to be a goal of radical feminism. Empowerment does not imply a dynamic of domination and subordination between two people but rather, implies an individual transformation from oppression to autonomy:

empowering women...has to do with something that's lifting up the damage of sexual abuse and creating a context in which women understand what has happened to them is something that they can use, because it has political and social meaning and is important.<sup>41</sup>

In an ideal feminist world all relations of power would be eradicated; unity would be maintained through a "sense of variety and connectedness and continuity with other people and the natural world".<sup>42</sup> Hierarchy, which is considered to be one of the formations of male power of domination and submission, would no longer exist. Dualism, a way of seeing considered to be the result of the male compulsion for

separation from the world and subsequent drive for 'power over', would be replaced by:

an integrative transformation of life in which reproduction is privileged, the human possibilities present in the life activity of woman (are generalized to) the social system as a whole (raising) for the first time in human history the possibility of a fully human community structured by a society of connections rather than separation and opposition. <sup>43</sup>

*What is the nature of sexuality?*

Radical feminist discourse around sexuality betrays a conviction that sexuality and sexual practice within patriarchy are the primary spheres of oppression for women: "sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality".<sup>44</sup> Male sexuality, which is considered both a form and expression of power, is aggressive, violent and coercive:

The male in the process of embodying his sexuality in the full flight of self-expression...is very often a rapist, a sadist, a person violent in language and arrogant in imagination.<sup>45</sup>

Geraldine Finn has argued that, male sexuality is constructed through various cultural practices, most notably pornography. Pornography reinforces, at the same time as it defines or sets the parameters for, male sexual expression. Pornography "establishes male sexuality...as voyeuristic, fetishistic, and narcissistic". <sup>46</sup>

Female sexuality within patriarchy is a false sexuality. Women give 'impersonations' of femaleness that are male-defined. <sup>47</sup> This false female sexuality is epitomized in mainstream sexually explicit pictures of women; indices of sexual availability and vulnerability coexist with indicators of aggression and intimidation, women's bodies are fragmented and decontextualized. Female sexuality is constructed in such a way as to reduce women to passive objects or silent commodities: "the pornographer reduces a woman to a mere thing, to an entirely material object without a soul, who can only be loved physically".<sup>48</sup> False female sexuality is responsive to violence and aggression. Pornography's message is that "sexual violence is pleasurable to men and that women desire or at least expect that violence". <sup>49</sup> Anti-pornography radical feminists contend that pornography and the ideology of patriarchy tells lies about female sexuality.

According to radical feminist theorists, men are inherently fearful of female sexuality and, therefore, project their desires and fears onto women.<sup>50</sup> Men colonize women through the creation of this false sexuality and strip women of the opportunity for sexual autonomy and the pursuit of pleasure. This colonization of female sexuality is, in fact, the result of the structuring of all forms of sexual expression as the "means of maintaining sexual inequality between the sexes".<sup>51</sup> Sexuality is "a practice of social relations involving the body and pleasure and...those relations are completely constructed in terms of hierarchy or power, objectification and violence".<sup>52</sup> Anti-pornography feminists believe that women can never have control over their sexuality because the entire social determination of sexuality is male defined and, therefore, violent and coercive. "In baldest terms, sexuality is violent, so violence is sexual...",<sup>53</sup> deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures. Therefore, "sexuality (is) a social sphere of male power of which forced sex is paradigmatic".<sup>54</sup>

"True' female sexuality, within radical feminist discourse, remains a question. Some women see female sexuality as repressed by the ideology of patriarchy. For these women female sexuality is "an Unknown, it is mysterious, it is connected with recreation; it is capable of multiple pleasures; it is something to be both feared and envied".<sup>55</sup> Patriarchy and pornography teach women to repress their true selves; women are more naturally allied with nature, have an inclination toward unification, bonding, reciprocity and intimacy: "'woman' is simply a lost part of the soul".<sup>56</sup> Many radical feminists call for a return to eros and love and link women's sexuality with their reproductive capacities. For other anti-pornography radical feminists, however, women's sexuality exists simply as an absence. Women's sexuality is fundamentally and inextricably bound to the system of gender domination and oppression. "Women's sexuality is its use"<sup>57</sup> by men. There is nothing 'essential' or 'true' for women outside the system of patriarchy, there is only "women's distinctive experience as woman within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal - private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated, intimate..."<sup>58</sup> There is no 'outside' of patriarchy where women can go to determine their sexual natures. In fact, 'sex' is seen to be merely a male creation in which women are coerced to play the parts assigned to them:

Sexual liberation, therefore, does not consist in the liberation of that sexuality which has been induced in us by the various mechanisms of patriarchal power, but our liberation from

it. We must refuse the sexual reification of our identity, our pleasures, our frustrations...Rebellion, freedom consists in the rejection of the code: 'the austere monarchy of sex'.<sup>59</sup>

For radical feminists, sexual freedom requires the elimination of patriarchal practices.<sup>60</sup> An ideal feminist world would include the values of love, respect, equality, nurturance, creativity and collectivity; it would be a place where, as Susan Cole states "nobody is ever hurt through sex, where sex is not used as a weapon any more to keep women in our place and men on top of us",<sup>60</sup> a place where equality is eroticized.

### The Anti-censorship Argument

#### *What is pornography?*

Anti-censorship feminists define pornography as a complex and heterogeneous cultural product, based in a patriarchal and capitalist social context. It is "many things: a product made to be sold by a multimillion dollar industry, a set of coded messages about sex, and male and female roles in this culture; and a specific form of sexual and cultural activity".<sup>61</sup> Pornography is seen as a process that includes the means and modes of its production, dissemination and consumption. Pornography derives its meaning from the culture in which it is produced: "it is part and parcel of the cultural industry that has given us sexist advertising, racist war movies and classist soap operas".<sup>62</sup> Many anti-censorship feminists employ the term 'pornographic' more generally, to describe a wide range of cultural products and activities in patriarchal capitalist society.

Anti-censorship activist Varda Burstyn describes the social context of pornography, the environment in which pornography is produced, consumed, and made meaningful, as being composed of three specific and pervasive ideologies. The first of these she identifies as the ideology of judaeo-christianity that has historically considered sex and pleasure to be profane, 'dirty', and sinful. As a result of this ideology, sexuality and sexual practices and representations have been ghettoized, repressed and set apart from other forms of cultural expression. Pornography is also seen to be determined by the

language and ideology of industrial capitalism. Economic language and concepts of commodity value and exchange affect our perceptions of sexuality and human relationships. As well, pornography is a product of technological capitalism and is dependent upon it. The prerogatives of industry shape the process of pornography; the profit motive is the main reason for the proliferation and pervasiveness of pornography. The workers who produce pornography are alienated from their labour and have no control over the product. The third ideology that determines the content and reception of pornography is masculinism or patriarchy. Burstyn contends that, within the context of patriarchy, sexuality is associated with conquest, war and aggression. Sexuality is separated from emotion, vulnerability and love. Pornography eroticizes this form of patriarchal sexuality and creates a state of anxiety in men and women when they are unable to live up to the standards embodied in the images.<sup>63</sup>

Pornography is understood to be a variegated genre of sexually explicit material, comprised of cultural products ranging from advertisements to hard-core violent imagery. Burstyn identifies three distinct types of pornography: "sexually explicit material that is not sexist; sexually explicit material that is sexist and is characterized throughout all media... 'garden variety', and hate literature material that is full of hatred toward women".<sup>64</sup> In this way Burstyn expands more traditional conceptions of pornography to include sexist imagery in the mainstream media.

#### *How does pornography function?*

Pornography's function is to bolster and perpetuate the societal status quo. Anti-censorship feminists see pornography as a kind of sex education; it is prescriptive, offering ideas to its readers about the nature of sex, standards of sexual attractiveness and acceptable male and female sexual behaviour. According to some anti-censorship feminists this education is not always negative or misogynist. Sexually explicit material that does not portray misogynist values can provide valuable information about pleasure and desire for men and women.<sup>65</sup> Pornography, therefore, can have a social impact and function that is both negative, in that it reinforces entrenched misogynist values, and positive because it allows space for the exploration and representation of non-misogynist sexual practices.<sup>66</sup>

Misogynist pornography, however, also functions as a form of advertising "in that the consumer can buy the product but not the happiness or status that it promises. This unbridgeable gap between reality and fantasy encourages further purchases".<sup>67</sup> It helps to create and augment an atmosphere in which sexism is perpetuated. Pornography's "specific role in this cultural industry is to eroticize social domination and most notably gender domination."<sup>68</sup> Pornography may be seen as an advertisement for "male power...(T)he finished product, which shows men symbolically controlling women during sex...is then sold to men so that they can reassure themselves that they remain in positions of power socially and sexually".<sup>69</sup> Pornography is seen to be a form of social control.

According to anti-censorship feminists, pornography works to maintain, not only patriarchy, but the complex interdependent structure called patriarchal capitalism. Pornography, as a commodity, works by playing on the desires and fears of both its male and female consumers. It prescribes ways of being that are virtually unattainable, and creates, as a result, ways of living in the world that do not challenge the dominant order:

The result is that many women feel torn between a desire to be loved as they are and wanting to be able to live the experience of 'femininity'...Not only do these false ideological constructions sell billions of dollars worth of cosmetics...they also create anxiety and energy that is used in dealing with the feeling they provoke, thus actively preventing women from understanding the system which oppresses them and fighting it.<sup>70</sup>

#### *What are the effects of pornography?*

Anti-censorship feminists do not believe that pornography causes violence against women. They understand pornography to be a representation, a symbolic image which is constructed; not a literal view of reality. The pornographic image may elicit fantasy from the reader but very rarely does it incite direct action. Rosalind Coward suggests that pornography, comprised of visual images, has no fixed or intrinsic meaning. Instead its meaning arises from "how various elements are combined, the way these elements are articulated together"<sup>71</sup> as well as their reception within a specific social context. What pornography does is to sell "the expectation of a particular kind of pleasure in the image".<sup>72</sup> According to Coward, it is necessary to examine the visual codes that are dominant in sexist images, such as fragmentation and the direct look of the model, and to understand their relationship to sexism.

By situating pornography within the larger realm of cultural imagery and products and considering its constructed symbolic dimension, anti-censorship feminists claim pornography "is not the primary cause of the repression of women's autonomous sexuality and the continued existence of male domination".<sup>73</sup> Although pornography does contain many "pernicious messages" these are "not unique...(t)hey are ideological elements found in many mass-produced products".<sup>74</sup> Anti-censorship feminists state that consideration must be given to the complex relationship between fantasy and action, attitude and behaviour:

...fantasies are multidimensional and symbolic. Some function as rewards, some are self-punishing; they represent wishes and fears and often both at once.<sup>75</sup>

Just as images do not present a literal view of reality, so there is no direct relationship between what an image shows and what its viewers act out.<sup>76</sup>

These women criticize what they see to be the behaviourist tendency implicit in the assumption that pornography is a direct causal factor in violence toward women and that it incites action on the part of its readers. They claim that this understanding of pornography's effects assumes that pornography's "audience will treat (it) much more like 'information' than they will other types of popular culture".<sup>77</sup> Anti-censorship feminist theorist Eileen Manion asks "(h)ave people's interpretive skills degenerated to such a degree that they can no longer distinguish...literal from symbolic meaning? Or is this a peculiarly male foible in the realm of pornography?"<sup>78</sup> Anti-censorship feminists contend that in order to understand pornography it is first necessary to examine the sexist social context in which sexually explicit representations consistently become violent misogynist images.

#### *What should be done about pornography?*

Anti-censorship feminists do not advocate the use of any kind of legal remedy for pornography. Their analyses of the dangers of using the state and legal systems are complex and extensive; they are based on the experiences of feminist and gay artists and activists with the Ontario Censor Board, socialist critiques of capitalism and criticisms of the actions of the anti-pornography movement. Anti-censorship feminists do, however, present alternative ways in which feminists might combat misogynist pornographic imagery, based on an overall analysis of the social structures and specific ideologies that permit it to exist.

Most simply, these feminists object to censorship because they feel it will ultimately be used against feminist interests. They point to the negative experiences many women and men have had with the Ontario Censor Board as examples of how "laws dealing with pornography and censorship are...dangerous, for they are totally subject to interpretation by people who are selected by an anti-feminist system".<sup>79</sup> Anti-censorship feminists contend that a judicial system "whose very structure protects and perpetuates the privilege of men as a group will not - cannot fulfill a feminist mandate in the area of image depiction".<sup>80</sup> Censorship laws, no matter how they are worded, will "enshrine the present inequality of the sexes in law" by implying that women are weak and need protection from men. In this case "these same 'aggressors' are cast in the role of protectors".<sup>81</sup> These women believe that "censorship will not benefit women, but...will certainly benefit police forces and prosecutors who will see their already fat budgets swell".<sup>82</sup>

Varda Burstyn contends that the attempts by anti-pornography feminists and the New Right to bring about more legal controls of pornography only serve to strengthen reliance on the patriarchal capitalist structures of power and domination.<sup>83</sup> Thelma McCormack claims, as do other anti-censorship activists, that "a feminist can be opposed to the censorship of pornography without being a civil libertarian".<sup>84</sup> Civil libertarians protest censorship because they feel it contravenes the rights and freedoms guaranteed them by the Canadian Constitution. Anti-censorship feminists object to censorship because they see it as equally pernicious and threatening to the status of women as misogynist pornography. Advocating censorship places power in the hands of men to protect women: "women's anxieties about rape are being used to justify censorship by the very people who create the anxiety".<sup>85</sup>

Advocates of censorship are criticized by anti-censorship feminists for being classist in their delineation of what constitutes pornography:

This distinction between so-called erotic art and pornography based on some vague principle conceals a basic distrust of the masses: the erotica of the elites expresses a civilized sensuality, while the erotica of the masses is a projection of their lust...To censor pornography is to penalize the poor doubly; first by withholding their entertainment from them and second, by stigmatizing them for not having refined tastes.<sup>86</sup>

In Ontario the Censor Board determined that a particular experimental film was fit for display at the Art



Gallery of Ontario but not at a downtown gallery – The Funnel – : "The message seemed to be that sexual representation whether 'art' or 'porn' will not adversely affect upper-class or educated people but will harm everyone else".<sup>87</sup> Legislation against pornography is seen to act against the interests of "poor women, women of colour, single mothers, lesbians and women in the sex industry", by playing into the hands of the "conservative agenda" which aims to eliminate "amoral sexuality and the immoral sex industries, and (put) women back into traditional roles".<sup>88</sup> Censorship is a tool used by conservative forces to ensure the maintenance of traditional economic and social values. Anti-censorship feminists contend that this kind of legal action will ultimately limit everyone's freedom by endorsing and strengthening the existing repressive social structure.

Most anti-censorship feminists do not support any of the regulations suggested by anti-pornography activists based on the Minneapolis ordinance. Feminist art administrator Anne Gronau speaks from her experience with the Ontario Censor Board when she claims that any kind of censorship obscures knowledge, reinforces sexism through paternalism and "distracts attention from the less visible but more insidious injustices (women) suffer".<sup>89</sup> Feminist lawyer Lynn King points out that even if women write the laws they are not the ones to interpret them. The judge or censor board that does interpret them does not, according to King "stand apart from the way power and privilege work in our society, but (are) part of this system and reflect its values everyday. Those values are not feminist values".<sup>90</sup> King quotes Judge Stephen Borins who comments on the irony of the obscenity code's reliance on a judge's interpretation of 'community standards':

The judge, who by the very institutional nature of his calling is required to distance himself or herself from society for the purposes of the application of the test of obscenity is expected to be a person for all seasons, familiar with and aware of the national level of tolerance.<sup>91</sup>

Varda Burstyn argues in her article "Anatomy of a Moral Panic" that anti-pornography feminists are providing the state with an opportunity to control the perceived threat of feminism by advocating censorship. The issue of pornography, she claims, has diverted most feminist energy away from the social, political and economic conditions that produce it, and from other feminist issues that address these conditions, such as equal pay and opportunity for women in the workplace, daycare and union rights. The

state capitalizes upon this diversion and reinforces claims that pornography is the primary cause of sexism. It sets up the Fraser Committee to address this issue and, thereby, continues to keep feminist attention focused on the issue. The state then contains feminist energies by focusing them on the possibilities of legal reform:

The Catch-22 is that since it is not the legal system in the first instance that is responsible for porn and prostitution, changing the legal system while leaving the economics of sex untouched will do nothing to improve either.<sup>92</sup>

Burstyn contends that when law reform is introduced and state control is expanded, the systems of social control – courts, prisons and military – benefit and the repression of gay, feminist and alternative work and activities escalates.<sup>93</sup>

Burstyn and other anti-censorship feminists propose an extensive program of alternatives to censorship based on the need to confront "the conditions which produce women's sexual exploitation and violence against women"<sup>94</sup> as well as pornography itself. These alternatives include sex education programs in community centres as well as in schools that would include parents and children. Direct actions such as picketing, boycotts and negotiations with neighbourhood stores that carry pornography are encouraged. Anti-censorship feminists also endorse the production of more alternative erotic imagery as well as campaigns for resources from government and art bodies to help artists who are attempting to do this. A feminist-oriented approach to the sex-industry is needed to protect prostitutes and present other opportunities for them. The decriminalization of prostitution is also advocated.

Anti-censorship feminists assert that "to stop the sexual exploitation of women and young people is to fight for economic independence."<sup>95</sup> They advocate, therefore, equal pay for work of equal value, affirmative action, full employment, quality social services, adequately funded shelters and programs for battered women and their children, education and jobs for youth and reproductive and erotic rights for women, including safe reliable contraception, the right to choose abortion or refuse sterilization and an end to compulsory heterosexuality. Children's rights, safety programs and the abolishment of age of consent laws are also on these feminists' agenda.

Anti-censorship feminists feel the only way to address misogynist pornography is to act as autonomous women: "women are agents and not merely victims, who make decisions and act on them".<sup>96</sup> They feel it is necessary to look at and understand pornography "with our own eyes and not as we imagine men look at it".<sup>97</sup> Women and feminists need to examine themselves, their experiences with pornography and sexuality and speak with conviction from a position of power and self-determination:

Feminists can succumb to the pressures for censorship or we can aggressively present educational and artistic images that show the world as we view it and wish to see it, as part of a fight for a pro-women and sex-positive society.<sup>98</sup>

For anti-censorship feminists the only real solution to misogynist pornography is to explore all the possible ways and means to "empower women and other oppressed groups".<sup>99</sup> Women "are intelligent human beings not passive victims, and we are directly affected by the culture around us. We have something to say on the question of images of women, regardless of how they affect men".<sup>100</sup>

#### Underlying Assumptions of the Anti-Censorship Argument

*What is the nature of power and the role of the state?*

Anti-censorship socialist feminists do not claim that power is inherently male or inherently bad. Power is understood to be a quality of human relationships whose form and structure is determined by dominant social institutions. These feminists feel that power inheres in all human interactions, that it is consistently being negotiated for, and that it can, potentially, be balanced and shared between all people. Specific relations of power are present and are played out at all levels of society, but are most evident in societal institutions, such as the sex industry, mainstream media and the state.<sup>101</sup>

Patriarchy as male dominance, as a form of power, is not universal, nor does it have a universal form. It is specific to specific societies.<sup>102</sup> In contemporary Western society, patriarchy is shaped by the structures of industrial capitalism. These structures determine the way in which women will be subordinated, and influence the form of sexual expression and the shape of desire, language and human perception: "...the causes of women's oppression have been many and complex, drawing on the fundamental social and economic structures of society".<sup>103</sup> In modern society the causes of women's

oppression are shaped in terms of the principles of capitalism: profit, efficiency, expansion and exploitation.

Anti-censorship socialist feminists concentrate on the state and economic concerns as specifically oppressive to women because they are the institutions, within this particular formation of patriarchy, that wield a great deal of influence and authority and have the greatest interest in the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo. These women's distrust of the state is clearly in evidence in their arguments against censorship. The legal system has an "innate prejudice against women".<sup>104</sup> "The vast and complex body of the state is not neutral, but works along clearly patriarchal lines".<sup>105</sup> The state functions through the means of social control, like pornography, to foster social relations and structures that will merely duplicate existing forms of domination, men over women.

Socialist feminists' assumptions about power and the state are based on adaptations of more traditional Marxist critiques of capitalist economic structures: "socialist feminism (conceives) of contemporary male dominance as part of the economic foundation of society, understanding 'economic' to include childbearing and sexual activity".<sup>106</sup> Socialist feminists expand traditional Marxist categories, such as the division of labour, to include the division of labour by gender, and the means and modes of production to include the means and modes of reproduction, childbearing and rearing and sexual practices. With the expansion and reformation of these analytic tools to include women's experience, socialist feminists link women's oppression with capitalism: "The alienation of contemporary women is a historically specific product of the capitalist mode of production".<sup>107</sup> Freedom will only come about as a result of the transformation of the economic base of society which includes the realms of sexuality and procreation.

Socialist feminists, therefore, do not require the abolition of power per se, but rather, advocate its reformation and redistribution: "we want state power, we want to redefine what the state is, but we want to take power and want to acknowledge that there is power".<sup>108</sup> According to these women, one of the most important spheres of human relations in which women need to take power is sexuality.

### *What is the nature of sexuality?*

Many socialist feminists see sexuality as a form of expression of desire that is socially constructed. It is a complex process of relationships, determined by social institutions which perpetuate certain ideologies: "Sexuality is not something that we 'have'...our sexuality is shaped and even constituted by and in the relations that we have with others and with society at large".<sup>109</sup> These feminists understand that "there is no inherent meaning in the sexual acts themselves...meaning (comes) from the constellation of social events around the act".<sup>110</sup> Socialist feminists draw from the work of Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks in their consideration of the various formations of sex and desire over time and the various institutions which shape and determine them.<sup>111</sup>

In modern patriarchal post-industrial capitalist society, women's and men's sexualities are characterized by differing forms of repression. Men are tyrannized by dictates that they must dominate and be in control. For women the various ideologies at play, capitalism, judaeo-christianity, patriarchy, all serve to construct a sexuality fraught with fear and danger. Women are kept from contributing to the construction of their sexual desire and are, instead, instructed in the ways of passivity and submission: "patriarchy interferes with female desire and...women experience their own passion as dangerous".<sup>112</sup>

Socialist feminists, however, do not focus entirely on the repressive nature of female sexuality. Rather, they see sexuality as an arena of struggle in which competing forces, including women, work at bringing their conception of sexuality to the fore. Women's experiences of sexual pleasure and empowerment within society cannot be dismissed as ultimately coerced. Instead they must be examined and understood in all their plurality and diversity.<sup>113</sup> It is necessary to see "sexuality as an open terrain in which the powers of the state, of the scientific and moral establishments, and of the sexist ideology of male-defined pleasure are constantly meeting resistance from individuals and groups".<sup>114</sup> If we understand the terrain of sexuality as being both "a realm of pleasure and a realm of denial, violence and danger"<sup>115</sup> for women, we will come to see women "both as subjects and objects and...sexuality as both institutional and experiential",<sup>116</sup> and, thereby, empower women, at least theoretically, by validating their own sexual pleasure and by opening a space for sexual exploration.

The area of sexuality is highly politicized in contemporary society. Socialist feminists understand that sexuality is a place where women must have power. They believe that "power is implicit in sexuality",<sup>117</sup> and that sex practices themselves are made up of the exchange of power:

Sexual play has to do with exchanges of power, it has to do with experiencing the polarities. It isn't just a question of being, say points five and six on a scale of one to ten because that's 'equal', it may also be being ten and being one at various times....sexuality is complex...it isn't reducible.<sup>118</sup>

Socialist feminists feel that women should be encouraged "to take our courage and our heads and our feminism into the bedroom...to both seek our pleasure and understand our pleasure".<sup>119</sup> Feminist sex is sex where women have power and control; where women enter into a relationship with knowledge and understanding of the nature of their pleasure:

Desire does not have to be destructive and power in sexuality does not have to mean humiliation...Power can be understood... as a process resulting from interaction among people who are doing something together. Desire for pleasure can include a desire...to give as well as to get pleasure.<sup>120</sup>

The socialist feminist understanding of the social construction of sexuality implies that sexuality is malleable; that practices that are oppressive and dangerous may be transformed:

The notion of sexual transformation...forces us to give up the static picture of an unchanging sexual order depending on infant-child socialization that is impermeable and rigid.<sup>121</sup>

The socialist feminist stance on the malleability of sexuality does not mean, however, that women can change their sexual situations by simply 'coming to consciousness' about their repressed sexuality:

Sexuality is malleable but to a point...to say that it's malleable when you talk about how sexual desire is socially constructed is not the same thing as to say that it remains malleable all of our lives at all points, is always accessible to our consciousness and it is always possible to go in there and change it.<sup>122</sup>

Indeed, women are not often free to decipher the complex processes that determine their sexual natures. They are often constrained by fear of degradation and violence. But, in the context of "a sexual reign of terror",<sup>123</sup> women must realize that the exploration of their sexual fantasies and pleasures can "offer...relief to...recurrent fear or tension",<sup>124</sup> and can prove to be, in a society characterized by sexual repression, an inherently subversive act.

Exploration and transgression, however, are only half of women's battle for power in the sexual arena. Women must also build their own sexuality: "This building is not an individual matter; the culture around us, our sexual partners, our friends and our political values are all involved in the process."<sup>125</sup> We explore and build our sexuality in context, "as members of certain groups that both inherit certain traditions and resist them".<sup>126</sup> Within these communities, ideals and ethical practices are determined. Socialist feminists feel that this process will result in the eventual transformation of social structures and relations, and will allow each individual the space and freedom to acquire their own sexual autonomy and to determine their preferred sexual practices.

#### Auxiliary Arguments- Liberal feminism and Sex Libertarianism

During the course of the debate within feminism about pornography and sexuality other positions have emerged. The two positions which have surfaced most clearly apart from those outlined above, are those of liberal feminists and pro-sex feminists or sex libertarians. These positions are related to the two main arguments, but also diverge from them in specific areas.

#### *Liberal feminism*

Liberal feminists are women who may be seen to work 'within' the system to bring about improvements for all women. They populate the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and advisory committees on the status of women in provincial and municipal governments. They are also often members of women's business clubs, professional women's associations and university women's clubs. Their actions are very much focused on lobbying for legislative changes.<sup>127</sup>

Liberal feminists are, most often, anti-pornography; they borrow their definition of pornography from the radical feminist critique. Pornography is "a presentation...of sexual behaviour in which one or more of the participants are coerced overtly or implicitly into participation...in which an imbalance of power is obvious or implied...in which such behaviour can be taken to be advocated or endorsed".<sup>128</sup> Liberal feminists understand pornography's function to be a form of social control. It denies women's

humanity by controlling their sexuality, objectifying them, allowing their violation and emphasizing their biological functions. Pornography limits women's "full participation in society".<sup>129</sup>

Liberal feminists opposed to pornography feel that it is a major causal factor in violence against women. They cite social scientific studies in which it is concluded that the coupling of sex with aggression could lead to "conditioning processes whereby aggressive acts become associated with sexual arousal".<sup>130</sup> Pornography is believed "to foster a cultural climate that is tolerant of acts of aggression against women".<sup>131</sup>

Liberal anti-pornography activists take a similar approach to radical anti-porn feminists in their critique of freedom of expression. They often cite radical feminist theorists such as Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin in their work. In their arguments against the state however, they work within the established framework of liberalism and speak of reform rather than revolution. Lorraine Clark and Jillian Ridington argue that it

is justified to prohibit what causes harm to others...it must...be acknowledged that if one gets sexually aroused from things which create a clear and substantial risk to the safety and/or rights of others, then one can justifiably be prohibited from getting one's responses that way.<sup>132</sup>

Ridington notes that "social change requires easy public access to information that challenges the beliefs and practices of the status quo".<sup>133</sup>

Liberal feminists encourage the use of all available channels to fight pornography: street action and boycotts, education, alternative imagery, as well as amendments to the Criminal Code "which would entrench the physical and sexual autonomy of women and children within the law".<sup>134</sup> They also support the definition of pornography as hate literature and its inclusion in the Hate Literature section of the Criminal Code. Human Rights Code amendments are also endorsed.<sup>135</sup>

Liberal feminists borrow their analyses of violence against women and pornography from the work of radical feminists, but their underlying assumptions about the nature of power and the role of the state are characterized by liberal democratic political theory. They focus on women's lack of equality within liberal democratic society and appear to trust in the ability of the state to distribute benefits and to



administer justice fairly.<sup>136</sup> The misogynist treatment of women in society violates liberalism's political values of fairness and justice; women are denied rights and discriminated against. The origin of this discrimination however, is "not mandated by the legal system but is rather informal or based on custom".<sup>137</sup> Liberal feminists understand the limitations of the state, but they continue to contend that working within the existing social structures for the "extension to women of...liberty, equality, autonomy, self-fulfillment and justice"<sup>138</sup> in the area of legal reform is an important feminist strategy. For these women feminism is

the working for the betterment of women in society and the equality of women in society on every level, economic, political, social, starting with the control over our bodies and control over our lives.<sup>139</sup>

Liberal feminists do not espouse a radical redefinition of social structures or structures of knowledge, instead they work toward the inclusion of women into the ideal liberal democratic state.

Liberal feminists draw the distinction between public display and private practice in the realm of sexuality and sexual practice. Their determination of 'public' and 'private', however, differs from more traditional liberal ideas. Liberal feminists claim that when a specific sexual practice infringes on the rights of others it becomes a public concern.<sup>140</sup> If a woman is being battered in the bedroom the issue is no longer 'private' but 'public':

It is a matter of differentiation between private practice and public endorsement and private practice is something I would not intervene in unless one of the participants wanted intervention.<sup>141</sup>

Women's rights to freedom from harm are felt to supercede the rights of men to sexual pleasure: "I'm more concerned about the freedom of women from harm than I am about the freedom of a handful of people to make their material public."<sup>142</sup> It may be contended that liberal feminists focus their attention on social scientific studies that link pornography with aggressive behaviour because "they have no 'political' grounds for opposing (pornography) unless it can be shown to have a direct causal connection with the violation of women's rights."<sup>143</sup>

Liberal anti-pornography feminists believe that ideal sexual practices should be entirely consensual and relegated to the private realm, out of the jurisdiction of the state. Power should have no part in

sexual relations: "the most joyous sex is about giving rather than dominating."<sup>144</sup> Ideal sex occurs when women are empowered: "it's a matter of exchange of energies not power".<sup>145</sup>

### *Pro-sex/Sex Libertarians*

During the course of the debate within feminism about pornography, sexuality, and sexual practice an alternative position has emerged called 'pro-sex'. Although many women believe that the anti-censorship position includes the 'pro-sex' position, real 'pro-sex' women, or sex libertarians, distinguish themselves from socialist feminists. The pro-sex position first surfaced in the United States in the early 1980's among lesbian-feminist women. It is a position that is closely affiliated with the gay liberation movement and several gay activists' analyses of the mechanisms of their oppression. Some of the proponents of the sex libertarian position in the United States are Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia and Amber Hollibaugh. In Canada the work of Sue Golding best reflects this position.

Pro-sex women do not have a specific critique of pornography, instead they criticize anti-pornography feminism. Muriel Dimen notes that the radical feminist current in North America has been predominant in the movement for many years. The entrenchment of radical feminist analyses has brought with it a morality or 'political correctness'.<sup>146</sup> According to Dimen people have a "deeply rooted wish to belong to a collectivity in which what one desires to be is also moral to be".<sup>147</sup> Radical feminism has offered that collectivity and attempted to enforce the 'correctness' of certain desires. However, "(w)hen the radical becomes correct, it becomes conservative".<sup>148</sup> Within feminism, many lesbian feminists felt oppressed by the moral hegemony of the anti-pornography current, and were experiencing a contradiction between what they felt they 'ought' to desire and what they actually were desiring. This contradiction between theory and experience prompted many of these women to develop a 'pro-sex' analysis of patriarchy.

Gayle Rubin outlines, in her article "Thinking Sex: Notes For a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", some of the basic tenets of the pro-sex position. Pro-sex women wish to develop "a radical theory of sex" to "identify, describe, explain and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression".<sup>149</sup>

Rubin identifies the area of erotic expression as "a vector of oppression",<sup>150</sup> and calls forward for reassessment several aspects of traditional thinking about sex. The first of these is the notion that sexual desire is a 'natural' force, that exists prior to social life. Rubin takes issue with this assumption and claims instead that "desires are not preexisting biological entities, but are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices".<sup>151</sup> Rubin also cites the work of Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks which examines sexuality as constituted in history and society.<sup>152</sup> Rubin disputes the traditional view of sex as sinful and suspicious and takes issue with what she has termed the "fallacy of misplaced scale": the fact that "sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance".<sup>153</sup>

Rubin analyses the phenomenon of "the hierarchy of sexual values", a condition in Western society in which certain forms of sexual expression are valued above others. The highest position on the scale is married, heterosexual, reproductive monogamy, next is monogamous heterosexual couples, all other heterosexuals, stable long term gay relationships follow, and, after them, promiscuous gay people. Lowest on the scale are the "despised sexual castes", transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, prostitutes, porn workers and 'generation-crossers' or people who engage in sex with children.<sup>154</sup> These hierarchies of sexual value are maintained through institutions such as the Church, psychiatry and the mainstream media. High status forms of sexual expression are validated, and the lower forms are considered to be illnesses, mental diseases and disorders. The people who populate these lower orders are persecuted and oppressed: "...these hierarchies of sexual value...function in much the same way as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism and religious chauvinism".<sup>155</sup>

Given the historical and social construction of sexuality, and the systematic policing and persecution of specific forms of sexual expression by various social institutions, it is necessary to review "the particular varieties of sexual persecution"<sup>156</sup> and work against prevailing sexual assumptions that erotic 'perversions' are escalating:

The perversions are not proliferating as much as they are attempting to acquire social space, small businesses, political resources, and a measure of relief from the penalties of sexual heresy.<sup>157</sup>

Rubin reviews the ways in which the persecution of erotic expression takes place, how "(s)exual speech is

forced into reticence, euphemism and indirection".<sup>158</sup> She focuses attention on the state and the ways in which the hierarchy of sexual values is held up within government bureaucracies and the law: "At their worst sex law and sex regulation are simply sexual apartheid".<sup>159</sup>

Rubin takes great pains to distinguish her theory of erotic repression from both radical and socialist feminist theory. She accuses the anti-pornography radical feminists of having "condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression as anti-feminist".<sup>160</sup> The anti-pornography movement, claiming to speak for all women, has created a conservative sexual morality. Alternatively, socialist feminists, Rubin claims, are ideologically condescending when they exhort women to examine "the meaning, sources, or historical construction of their sexuality ...The search for a cause is a search for something that could change so that these 'problematic' eroticisms would simply not occur."<sup>161</sup> Rubin contests that these 'sex moderates' are simply unable to confront their own uneasiness about certain forms of erotic expression.

Rubin examines the issue of 'consent', claiming that, within the lower castes of the sexual hierarchy, criminality is more the issue:

Within the law, consent is a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest status sexual behaviour. Those who enjoy low-status sexual behaviour do not have the legal right to engage in it.<sup>162</sup>

The traditional radical feminist critique of the coercion of women into sexual acts and the analyses of the constraints that impede the truly 'free' consent of women do not apply to people who are erotically oppressed:

There certainly are structural constraints that impede free sexual choice, but they hardly operate to coerce anyone into being a pervert. On the contrary, they operate to coerce everyone toward normalcy.<sup>163</sup>

Rubin and sex libertarian women have distinguished their struggle from the general goals of feminism.<sup>164</sup> They claim that feminism is the theory of gender oppression and, although it does deal with sexual expression and repression, it is not focused specifically on those issues. Rubin feels it is necessary to separate the categories of sex and gender:

Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications, feminist theory has some

explanatory power. But as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes irrelevant and often misleading.<sup>165</sup>

Sex libertarians claim that it is necessary to recognize the "political dimensions of erotic life".<sup>166</sup>

Rubin argues for 'theoretical pluralism', stating that different forms of power require different analytic tools.<sup>167</sup> Other pro-sex women however, maintain the label of 'feminist', and argue for a variegated body of feminist theory that would include many different forms of analysis. They also argue for a political and social movement which would "speak to individual needs"<sup>168</sup> and endorse the strategies of coalition politics.

### Some final words

It may be claimed that the focus of this exposition and the arguments themselves are highly theoretical and abstract. These theoretical issues, however, are at the core of feminist practice and their definition and determination will, in turn, help to determine the agenda for future feminist action. Thus the heated and impassioned debate over these issues; these women are battling over the very meaning of feminism and no less than the future of the movement is at stake.

In the following chapter I will offer an interpretation of the debate in an attempt to understand it more clearly. Each position's criticisms of the other will be reviewed. I will then explain what I have found to be their most fundamental points of difference.

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE DEBATE: AN INTERPRETATION

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the feminist debate about pornography in detail. In order to do this I will review and discuss the criticisms and accusations that characterize the debate. I will also analyze the similar structures of the criticisms. The examination of these criticisms will lead to a discussion of the fundamental theoretical differences between the positions that underlie the debate. These differences concern definitions of patriarchy, ideology, feminist praxis, and feminism itself.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the two major positions in the debate, anti-pornography and anti-censorship, are directly associated with two other distinct positions within feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism. The most prominent spokespeople for the anti-pornography movement are radical feminists and those who speak for the anti-censorship position are most often socialist feminists. This is not to imply that liberal feminists and pro-sex women have not been actively involved in the debate, but it may be contended that these two positions have been subsumed under the two dominant positions; liberal feminists are predominantly anti-pornography and pro-sex women are, generally, opposed to censorship.

The association of radical and socialist feminist arguments with the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions has made it difficult to classify the positions. For the sake of clarity I will use the label 'anti-pornography' only when I am referring to both liberal and radical feminists or to the anti-pornography movement specifically. The label 'anti-censorship' will be used to refer to both socialist and pro-sex feminists or to the anti-censorship movement in particular. At all other times, most notably during discussions of theoretical issues, the labels 'radical' and 'socialist' will be employed.

## The Criticisms

The anti-censorship position came about in Canada as a result of a number of different factors. Since the anti-censorship argument evolved after the development of the anti-pornography position, it has based much of its analysis on a critique of the anti-pornography feminist analysis of pornography and sexuality. This section will be structured to present the anti-censorship critique of anti-pornography feminism first, followed by the anti-pornography response to the criticisms and their own criticisms of the anti-censorship position. It must also be noted that much of the criticism that has characterized this debate has addressed the underlying assumptions of the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions which are associated with radical feminist and socialist feminist analyses. A large amount of criticism, therefore, is exchanged specifically between radical feminists and socialist feminists. After I present an exposition of the criticisms I will attempt to analyze the criticisms in relation to each other.

### *Anti-censorship feminists criticize Anti-pornography feminists*

Anti-censorship criticisms of the anti-pornography movement take two distinct forms: socialist feminist criticisms of theoretical inconsistencies and inadequacies within the radical feminist argument, and criticisms of the anti-pornography movement's general impact on feminism. The former will be explored first since it provides the groundwork for the latter.

Socialist feminists' most common criticism of the radical feminist argument about pornography is that it is theoretically reductionist. Radical feminist theory fails to recognize the complex nature of the relationships between image and reality, fantasy and action and sex and violence. Radical feminists simply collapse these distinctions in such a way as to reveal an inescapable and unavoidable position of oppression for women. They tend to read through the image, socialist feminists claim, as if it were a neutral mirror of reality, instead of understanding it as a complex social construction whose meaning is not implicit but contextually specific and determined in the processes of communication around it.

As a result of this simplistic understanding of the image, radical feminists believe that images directly affect behaviour. Socialist feminists see this to be a behaviourist assumption which leads to the conclusion that all people are consistently conditioned and manipulated by all kinds of imagery. It implies that people are unable to distinguish between symbolic and literal meaning:

To assume that symbols have a unitary meaning, the one dominant cultures assign to them, is to fail to investigate the individual's experience and cognition of symbols...This assumption grants mainstream culture a hegemony it claims, but rarely achieves...<sup>1</sup>

Socialist feminists contend that women need to examine the symbolic context of the imagery and the elements affecting interpretation before they can begin to understand the images' impact on their viewers:

"We need to know what the viewer brings with her to make an interpretation: a cultural frame, resonances, connections and personal experiences."<sup>2</sup>

According to socialist feminists, radical feminists simplistically claim that the pornographic image is sexual violence because it is seen to engender it: "pornography is a code word for vicious male lust".<sup>3</sup> This is a dangerous reduction which runs the risk of alienating many women who might have a relationship with pornography. To define "pornography ...as the enemy (is)...to make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them".<sup>4</sup>

The conflation of pornography with sexual violence betrays a larger theoretical reduction within the radical feminist position: the statement that all heterosexual sexual practices are violent and coercive for women. Socialist feminists claim that this assumption is severely disempowering for heterosexual women. It does not allow them the experience of their own pleasure and leaves them to live with a fundamental contradiction: how can heterosexual women have sexual pleasure within a patriarchal society? Some socialist feminists women feel that this "revulsion against heterosexuality (serves)...as the thinnest of covers for disgust with sex itself".<sup>5</sup> Socialist feminists contend that radical feminists see all sex as sexism and confuse "erotic power in sexual play...with the power of coercion in rape".<sup>6</sup> This world view ultimately works to "deny women any agency at all in the long history of heterosexuality".<sup>7</sup>



Socialist feminists also criticize what they see to be the essentialist assumptions of radical feminist thinkers in the areas of male and female sexuality. Within the radical feminist argument, socialist feminists assert, are assumptions about the innate qualities of 'maleness' as violent, coercive and dangerous and female sexuality as the opposite:

Male sexuality is driven, irresponsible, genitally oriented and potentially lethal. Female sexuality is muted, diffuse, interpersonally oriented and benign. Men crave power and orgasm, while women seek reciprocity and intimacy.<sup>8</sup>

This polarization of male and female qualities and reliance on biological explanations for gender differences does not serve feminism, socialist women claim, but, rather, further emphasizes the dichotomies structured by capitalist patriarchy which are false and originally meant to keep women in their positions of oppression. To emphasize women's 'biologically inherent' reproductive capacities and the subsequent qualities of nurturance, emotionality and physicality, is to espouse ideas that are "bound up, through symmetrical opposition, in the very ideological system feminists want to destroy".<sup>9</sup>

Socialist feminists include in their criticisms those radical feminists who claim that women's sexuality does not have innate qualities but is entirely constructed within patriarchy. Radical feminists understand women's passivity to be socially constructed but claim that violence is innate, "intrinsic and the crystallization of maleness".<sup>10</sup> According to socialist feminists these are contradictory assumptions.

Some radical feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Mary Daly and Patricia Hughes attempt to build a feminist moral system based on the reclaiming of 'feminine' values, such as nurturance, emotionality and integration. Socialist feminists feel that these attempts lead to a form of moral absolutism that excludes a vast majority of women.<sup>11</sup> These theorists ignore the specificity of women's experience and espouse ahistorical and essentialist notions of the constitution of gender and gender oppression. Their work is seen to contain universalizing claims about women's experience which are based on white, middle class North American values. Universalization has been criticized by other feminists as a patriarchal conceptual tendency which contravenes the feminist valuing of personal experiences and specific, individual, material circumstances.

Radical feminist theorists lack an historical analysis of women's oppression, socialist women contend. They see patriarchy as timeless and women's position within it as fundamentally unchanging over class, race and social barriers.<sup>12</sup> Because of this failure, radical feminists have not learned from the experiences of first wave feminists. Socialist feminists contest that, during the first wave, the social purity movement's campaign against prostitution and venereal disease and its focus on

woman as sexual victim...became a weapon with which the male ruling class ...strengthened its hegemony over women, sexual outlaws and the poor, by establishing a state apparatus of protectionist sexual policies.<sup>13</sup>

Socialist women opposed to censorship feel that radical feminists are in danger of repeating this mistake by advocating the use of protectionist measures for pornography.

These theoretical faults lead to problems with the anti-pornography movement's practice according to socialist feminists. The most common criticism of the anti-pornography movement is of its intensive focus on women's sexual victimization and domination by men. This focus mobilizes fear, rage and anger in women:

today's anti-porn campaigns achieve their energy by mobilizing a complex amalgam of female fear and rage and humiliation in strategic directions that are not in the long term best interests of (the) movement.<sup>14</sup>

These emotions may be successful motivators toward action and analyses, socialist feminist concede, but their application to the determination of social policy

creates a demand for revenge and punishment and gets in the way of the kind of person-to-person group-to-group confrontation and negotiation that alone can bring about real social healing - the precondition of real change.<sup>15</sup>

Anti-pornography feminists' focus on pornography limits the potential of the movement by drawing feminist attention away from other crucial issues for women such as abortion, daycare and other economic issues. Anti-censorship feminists contend that a focus on pornography alone "cannot fully define the situation in which we find ourselves".<sup>16</sup> Anti-pornography women's concern with pornography and legal reform has contained feminist energy and weakened the movement.

Anti-censorship women are critical of what they see to be the moral hegemony of the anti-pornography movement. The creation of strict moral categories with regards to sex and sexual imagery has resulted in the establishment, within feminism, of "the very old idea that sex is an especially shameful, disturbing and guilt-provoking area of life".<sup>17</sup> Anti-censorship feminists claim that women have "chosen a rhetorical strategy that can arouse and engage but that cannot lead us to a position beyond the old moral categories of female righteousness".<sup>18</sup> The moral absolutism anti-censorship feminists criticize in theory is seen to have "fostered a blamatory and elitist attitude among those who consider themselves woman-identified"<sup>19</sup> in practice. Anti-censorship women feel that this moral absolutism and its imposition by the anti-pornography movement is one of the primary reasons for the continued animosity of the debate.

Anti-censorship feminists claim the:

anti-porn world view purports to solve several problems at once; it explains movement failures; ...it reestablishes unity at a time when differences among women were increasingly visible and theoretically important.<sup>20</sup>

According to anti-censorship feminists, this unity has come at the high price of masking the potentially fruitful diversity of women's experience. These women contend that anti-pornography "feminist fear of...difference manifests itself as a concern with public relations, an attempt to keep the women's movement respectable and free of pollution".<sup>21</sup>

The anti-censorship criticism of the anti-pornography feminist position regarding the use of the state was reviewed in the previous chapter. There is no need to repeat their criticisms here. Suffice it to say that anti-censorship women believe that advocating legal reform is a dangerous tactic for feminists. They believe anti-pornography feminists' call for the use of the state is the result of faulty theoretical assumptions, a lack of historical perspective and the imposition of a rigid 'feminist' morality.

All of these factors, the focus on victimization, the perpetuation of women's fear and rage, the determination of a form of feminist moral absolutism, and the enforcement of unity have had a great impact on the condition of the women's movement. Anti-censorship women contend that the

anti-pornography movement's moral code based on reclaimed feminist values, its critique of pornography and sexual representation, and its call on the state for legal protection bears "a striking resemblance to (claims) of the dominant culture..."<sup>22</sup> and has created the conditions for feminist cooptation by right wing conservative interests. The focus on sexual violence and women's victimization has also "alienated many of the former allies in the women's movement and discouraged younger women from participating".<sup>23</sup>

*Anti-pornography feminists respond and criticize*

Radical feminists opposed to pornography refute socialist feminist criticisms of theoretical reductionism, along with claims that they focus too intensively on women's victimization, by stating that their concern is not with theory but with helping women who are victims of sexual violence. Radical feminists claim that socialist women deny the reality and extensiveness of sexual violence: "violence against women is not a minority experience, we all experience it".<sup>24</sup> Socialist feminists, they state, are armchair critics; they are not the women who work with victims of sexual violence and pornography at rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women. Radical feminists claim that socialist feminists are more concerned with theoretical abstractions than with women's lived reality.<sup>25</sup>

Radical feminists ask: "Why does the left-wing...automatically become victim oriented when analyzing the state, but refuse to question the way in which sexuality can be used against us?"<sup>26</sup> They accuse socialist feminists of arguing backwards from their anti-censorship stance to a position in which they are forced to defend pornography.<sup>27</sup> Socialist women are accused of

taking the view...that pornography is ...a non-issue, a red herring, a distraction from work on basic change...it is in fact benign, something that does not harm but rather helps men and sexually liberated women to have hotter sex. In short censorship is a feminist issue but porn is not.<sup>28</sup>

They state that the socialist feminist critique of pornography is based on civil libertarian ideals of freedom of expression or simplistic Marxist notions "in which 'men' are substituted for the ruling class".<sup>29</sup> Socialist alternatives to pornography, these women claim, "address the values of the next generation. They do not address present tense oppression".<sup>30</sup> In other words, for socialist women, the problem of pornography will disappear only after the revolution.

Radical feminists refute the socialist feminist accusation of essentialism in the area of sexuality. They claim that they do not view the qualities of gender or sexual desire as natural forces. Instead, they claim that sexuality is a social construction. Sexuality "is a practice of social relations involving the body and pleasure and...those relations are completely constructed in terms of hierarchy or power, objectification and violence".<sup>31</sup> The patriarchal construction of sexuality is "the means of maintaining sexual inequality between the sexes." The expression of sexual desire is not immune to these qualities. In fact, radical feminists contend, male and female sexuality and sexual desire itself are male constructions.

In light of these assumptions radical feminists claim that socialist women cannot simply dismiss themselves from these relations and freely pursue 'alternative' sexual practices. They claim that socialist feminists' exhortation to women to explore their pleasure is, in reality, an exhortation to celebrate patriarchal forms of sexual expression that have oppressed women for years. Women who are practicing 'alternative' sex, for example lesbian sado-masochists, are not subverting the dominant patriarchal codes of behaviour: "those who call themselves sexual dissidents may not be dissident at all, but rather the most eloquent proponents of the sexual status quo".<sup>32</sup> According to radical feminists, "sado-masochism is a mainstream practice"<sup>33</sup>; it is simply impossible for women to divorce themselves and their desires from the pervasive effects of patriarchy.

Radical feminists accuse socialist feminists of failing to analyze the area of sexuality carefully. They claim that if socialists can agree that sexuality is socially constructed and social structures are determined by patriarchy, then how can they believe it is possible for women to have uncoerced sex? Radical women claim that it is socialist women who see sexual desire as essential, as "the last bastion of individual expression".<sup>34</sup> Radical feminists suggest that, because sexuality is an area in which women are uncertain and fearful, women, especially socialist feminist women, find it difficult to examine sexuality closely and, therefore, protect it. This protectionist attitude toward sexuality prevents socialist women from understanding that "sexuality is socially constructed so that women are going to get hurt".<sup>35</sup> Some radical feminists feel that this defense of patriarchal sexual practices is "a desperate attempt to avoid the

anti-sex 'prude' label".<sup>36</sup>

Change in the area of sexual expression and representation will be difficult to bring about, radical feminists concede. Just as sexual practices within patriarchy can never be truly liberating or politically subversive, sexual imagery can never break the codes of male objectification. Radical anti-pornography women criticize the socialist anti-censorship strategy of creating 'sex-positive' imagery and texts to counteract misogynist pornographic material. These women claim that, since it is impossible to determine what female sexual practices might be, it is equally impossible to create feminist erotic imagery.<sup>37</sup>

Radical feminist Susan Cole admits it is very difficult for a woman to have sexual relationships or to make or appreciate sexual imagery within the patriarchal order. For Cole, the question of "how to get outside that perfect system of victimization to real political agency for women"<sup>38</sup> is a true dilemma. According to radical feminist women, living with this contradiction is simply a part of the burden of being feminist in a patriarchal world.

Radical feminists respond to socialist feminist criticisms about the use of the state by stipulating that they do not see the state as being the central locus of power. They see the educational system and the mass media as equally dangerous. For radical feminists there is no 'outside' the structures of patriarchy, therefore the question of using the state is a purely theoretical one. These women want to effect changes for women's material existence as quickly as possible. Theoretical 'correctness' is not of concern to them:

At this point in the development of feminist ideas we can say that as long as the state is male-dominated and the system that creates it is male-defined, we will never know whether the state can ever be neutral or whether women can ever exercise enough clout to transform the practice of the state in a non-sexist world. In the meantime, regardless of what role we may fantasize for a future government, it is our responsibility to examine the specific practices of present governments and assess our positions.<sup>39</sup>

Cole suggests that the feminist influence on the state has been 'stunning'<sup>40</sup> and that women can continue to have an impact on the legislative process as long as they are aware of the potential dangers. In response to socialist feminists' anti-state positions Cole states: "My fear is that if feminists withdraw entirely from the legislative and legal processes, there is an even greater risk that the law will be used

against us".<sup>41</sup>

Anti-pornography feminists answer criticisms that accuse them of being coopted by the right wing by stating that this is simply not the truth. Catharine MacKinnon notes that it is a fiction created by the media. Referring to the campaign for the implementation of the Minneapolis ordinance, she notes: "so far we have received no support - meaning no legitimacy, votes, audiences, money, access - from the organized Right".<sup>42</sup> In Canada, Susan Cole points out, the danger of cooptation is virtually non-existent: "Canadian moral majoritists trust the police far more than they trust women".<sup>43</sup> Anti-pornography women feel that anti-censorship forces are far more at risk of cooptation because of their attitude toward sexuality and alternative sexual imagery. They cite, specifically, Varda Burstyn's interview in Forum as the "consummate liberal act"<sup>44</sup> and one betraying a naive trust in the powers of the mass media. Anti-censorship women run the risk of cooptation because they are not fully aware of the the limitations of the 'perfect system of victimization' that is patriarchy.

Susan Cole accuses anti-censorship activists of using alarmist language in the presentation of their cause. She notes that words such as 'ban', 'censorship', and 'resistance':

are being used to distort the political situation or to scare the living daylights out of us in a cynical attempt to make state censorship appear worse than any other form of censorship or more terrifying than anything else we might experience.<sup>45</sup>

The treatment of such films as Not A Love Story by the Ontario Censor Board is not the result of an explicit desire to repress political ideas, Cole claims, "but the result of the Board's arbitrary standards".<sup>46</sup> Anti-censorship activists, therefore, misunderstand the nature of the censorship process and, consequently, sensationalize the issue through the manipulation of language in order to gain support for their position.

It does not appear as though anti-pornography feminists have directly addressed the anti-censorship feminist criticisms concerning the moral absolutism and hegemony of the anti-pornography movement. Nor have they addressed the criticisms regarding the lack of historical perspective, the diversion of feminist attention away from other issues, or the imposition of a false unity upon the movement. Anti-pornography women do, however, feel anti-censorship women "have made

the debate on pornography all but impossible. They have misrepresented the issue as a pro- or anti-censorship debate".<sup>47</sup> They feel anti-censorship feminists have impeded analysis of and action against pornography by focusing on censorship. For anti-pornography women, this insistence on the dangers of censorship has been a root cause of the debate.

#### *Some thoughts on the criticisms*

As has been shown, the major positions in the pornography debate appear to be polarized over a number of issues. During the past few years, accusations have flown between the camps in Canada. Although it is obvious the debate in the United States between anti-pornography feminists and pro-sex women has been much more intense - "the fights between W(omen) A(gainst) P(ornography) and lesbian sadomasochists have resembled gang warfare"<sup>48</sup> - in Canada the ideological splits between radical anti-pornography feminists and socialist anti-censorship feminists have surfaced clearly and dramatically.

The anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions have been argued in the 'Letters' sections of the feminist press and at conferences, rallies and women's groups throughout the country. During the course of the literature review and participant observation at these conferences and rallies undertaken for this study, it has become clear that many of the accusations from one camp to the other have been the same; the only difference is the issue. The formulation appears to be: pornography is to socialist anti-censorship feminists what censorship is to radical anti-pornography feminists.

Each camp accuses the other of mobilizing fear and anger in women and of appealing to emotion over intellect in order to gain support for its position. Anti-censorship socialist critiques of the anti-pornography focus on victimization are extensive. These women feel that the focus on sexual violence gets in the way of intelligence, appeals to emotions and ends up frightening women more than anyone else.<sup>49</sup> Alternatively, anti-pornography feminists Susan Cole and Eve Zarembo have criticized what they term to be anti-censorship women's sensationalization of the motives and actions of the Ontario Censor Board, as well as their use of alarmist language in the discussion of censorship.<sup>50</sup>

Anti-pornography feminists claim that anti-censorship women are paranoid:



The audience at the FAC (Feminists Against Censorship) Forum were in an uproar over a phantom, while ignoring a clear and present danger (pornography) – the result of engaging people's emotions before informing their minds.<sup>51</sup>

Both positions accuse the other of collapsing into liberalism. Anti-pornography women are accused by anti-censorship feminists of being liberal because they advocate the use of legislation in dealing with pornography and seem to believe that the liberal democratic state will serve their interests. Anti-censorship women feel that anti-pornography feminist theorists have given in to civil libertarians by allowing their analyses of pornography and sexuality to be used by them in campaigns for legislative reforms.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, anti-pornography feminists accuse anti-censorship feminists of espousing and defending the civil libertarian ideals of freedom of expression in their critique of censorship. As well, they criticize anti-censorship feminists' use of mainstream media, for example Burstyn's appearance in Forum, as a liberal act. Anti-censorship feminists are seen to be naively uncritical of the most liberal of institutions, the popular media.

Both anti-pornography and anti-censorship camps accuse the other of relying too heavily on American based theory and analyses instead of validating the work of Canadian women. Anti-censorship women see anti-pornography feminists' use of such theoreticians as Dworkin, Griffin and Millet, and the adaptation of the Minneapolis ordinance, as a failure to recognize the specificity of Canadian women's political and social experience, and an attempt to impose the concerns of American feminists on Canadian women. Anti-pornography women criticize anti-censorship feminists for importing American sex libertarian ideas, as well as American criticisms of the anti-pornography movement. Both groups feel the other ignores the specifically Canadian political reality; anti-censorship women ignore Canada's long tradition of industrial regulation, anti-pornography women ignore the threatening history of the Ontario Censor Board and the actions of other state mandated systems of prior restraint.

Perhaps the most revealing common accusation is that of collaboration. Both groups accuse the other of cooptation and of betraying 'true' feminist interests. Radical feminists opposed to pornography are coopted by the Right wing – they have worked together in the area of legal reform – and, ultimately

they agree with the moral majority about the eradication of all sexually explicit material. They betray feminist interests by imposing moral standards and ignoring women's specificity and sexual needs. Socialist women opposed to censorship are accused of having collaborated with the mainstream media and the pornographers themselves. Varda Burstyn's interview in Forum is cited as an example of how socialist women betray feminist interests by trusting patriarchal institutions and discussing feminist disagreements in public forums.

It appears that each side accuses the other of defending issues that it perceives to be the most threatening to women. Anti-pornography feminists criticize anti-censorship women of being so strongly opposed to censorship that "they argue backwards" from that point to a defense of pornography.<sup>53</sup> Anti-censorship women see that some anti-pornography feminists have attempted to downplay the threat of censorship by ridiculing attempts to reveal the hidden political motives in the actions of such groups as the Ontario Censor Board. Anti-pornography women define censorship as a variegated practice determined by context and destructive in degrees, which is exactly the way in which anti-censorship women define pornography. Both groups are attempting to bring their issue to the foreground of feminist discussion.

It becomes obvious, after an examination of these criticisms, that both groups perceive the problems very differently; their accompanying analyses betray different areas of concentration. Radical feminists see sexuality to be the primary sphere of oppression for women and have developed an extensive analysis of it. Socialist women have a more complex understanding of the machinations of the state and see it as a fundamental source of women's oppression. Both groups point out the limitations of the other's analysis; radical feminists criticize socialist women's fear of the state, socialist women criticize radical feminists' fear of sexual imagery. In light of this, the deeper structures of the debate become clearer. Simply, these groups are arguing past each other about issues and from positions that are fundamentally different.

These fundamental differences, I contend, lie in each position's definition of patriarchy and ideology, and in its perception of feminist praxis, the implementation of theory into practice. These

differences, in turn, betray even more profound differences in the perception and definition of feminism itself. It is no wonder, then, that the debate about pornography and censorship has stalemated time and time again.

### Fundamental Differences

In this section the similarities between the two positions on pornography and censorship will be used as a point of entry into a discussion of the areas where, I contend, the fundamental differences in the two arguments have emerged: in the definition of patriarchy, ideology, the understanding of feminist praxis, and the definition of feminism itself.

The anti-censorship and anti-pornography arguments have been explored in detail in the preceding chapter and the section above. It has been made clear that the positions these women have taken in relation to the issues have revealed quite different understandings of more fundamental issues such as the nature of sexuality, power, and the role of the state. I have stated that these underlying assumptions reflect a longer standing division within feminism: the division between radical feminism and socialist feminism. These differences have also been explored in the preceding chapter. But what are the similarities between these two positions?

Both positions seem to agree that the function of pornography is an ideological one. Pornography is seen as a form of advertising and of sex education that helps to maintain the status quo. Both anti-pornography radical feminist analysts and anti-censorship socialist feminist theorists rely on the concept of 'social construction' in their understanding of the issues. Both claim that it is necessary to see pornography as socially constructed and culturally specific. They also agree that sexuality is a social construction and both borrow concepts from the work of Michel Foucault. Why, then, do anti-pornography women and anti-censorship women disagree on the actual definitions of pornography and censorship?

It may be contended that these women disagree because they are working with different ideas about what relations of power constitute the society in which these phenomena are constructed and how the process of construction works. It seems obvious that these two groups differ in their definitions of patriarchy and ideology.

### *Patriarchy and Ideology*

Radical feminists' analysis of and position in relation to pornography betrays a conviction that the most oppressive and pervasive power relation of all human relations is that which exists between men and women.<sup>54</sup> Patriarchy is defined as the systematic oppression of women by men, or, simply, as a system of oppression based on gender. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy has existed throughout history and across cultures. Patriarchy also perpetuates the most prevalent ideology in the modern world; it affects all relationships, all ways of being, all ways of perceiving. Patriarchal ideology is defined as a world view based on the oppression of women by men, and is understood to be produced by men and imposed on women.

These women understand sexuality to be the "primary social sphere of male power"<sup>55</sup>. For radical feminists there is no 'outside' patriarchy: its ideology is all encompassing.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, there is no 'true' female sexuality. They, therefore, have developed an extensive analysis of female sexuality and sexual oppression. It is from this perspective that they define pornography and sexuality as sexual violence against women and determine strategies for combatting them. It is also from this perspective that these women set the overall agenda for feminist action. It is not surprising, then, that ending sexual violence is the first item on their agenda.

Socialist feminists also understand patriarchy to be the systematic oppression of women by men, but they define it further by insisting that it has taken different forms over time and across cultures. Although these women perceive patriarchy as a predominant, pervasive, and oppressive form of social organization, they contest that the structures of capitalism are equally oppressive and pervasive: "socialist feminists look towards both an economic, class and gender system as being essentially responsible for

creating the matrix of oppression in which we live".<sup>57</sup> These two systems of power relations combined oppress both men and women, but women doubly so. Women's oppression is seen to take place in the economic spheres of life as well as the sexual ones. Socialist feminists believe that the structures of capitalism and patriarchy affect all aspects of life. But, they also believe that individuals and communities can pose challenges, through various forms of action, to these dominant orders.

Socialist women define ideology as a dynamic process, an area of struggle that is continually being shaped and reshaped by conflicts that take place between institutions - such as the media and the state - which serve dominant interests, and individuals and groups who are striving for economic and sexual autonomy.<sup>58</sup> It is from this perspective that socialist feminists opposed to censorship define pornography as a variegated genre of cultural product that includes non-sexist and misogynist imagery, and sexuality as a sphere of social relations that is potentially both dangerous and pleasurable for women. Socialist feminists base their strategies for combating pornography and sexual oppression, as well as their long term goals for feminism, on this definition of patriarchy and this dialectical understanding of ideology. It is not surprising that one of their primary goals is economic autonomy for women.

The more superficial differences in the radical and socialist feminist positions on pornography can be partially reduced to the theoretical issue of how patriarchy and ideology are defined. Radical feminists see ideology as some 'thing' that is imposed from above by men; they do not feel women can escape its pervasive effects. Theoretically, then, within this understanding, there is no hope for women, no agency, no possibility for fighting back. Socialist feminists' definition of patriarchal capitalism and their definition of ideology, which includes the possibility that women and other oppressed groups can fight back to express alternative views and, perhaps, help to influence the development of society, leaves room, in theory, for women's individual and collective agency. In the socialist feminist theory of patriarchy women can be both oppressed and empowered; there is potential for women's liberation. In the radical feminist definition of patriarchy and understanding of the top-down imposition of its ideology, there is no room for such empowerment. Women's agency ends with the naming of oppression.

If socialist feminists' theory allows for women's liberation and radical feminists' does not, then why are all feminists not socialist feminists? This question brings us to a consideration of the next fundamental difference that has emerged between radical and socialist feminists in the debate about pornography: their understanding of praxis, or the relationship of theory to practice.

### *Feminist Praxis*

Socialist feminists have criticized radical women for only seeing women's victimization and, therefore, only finding women's victimization. Radical feminist theory is understood to be profoundly pessimistic and limited. The anti-pornography movement's analysis of the victimization of women through pornography severely limits, socialist women claim, women's self-perception as social agents who have the ability to influence their life course. The lack of potential emancipation for women in radical feminist theory is seen to have a direct impact on the kinds of strategy radical feminists develop and put into practice.

Socialist feminists feel it is necessary for their strategies "to reflect the morality (they) want to build" to "get at all the causes of violence and sexism".<sup>59</sup> Varda Burstyn stipulates that, in order to do this, there must be a consonance or symmetry between the means chosen and the ends themselves:

If we are to construct loving, responsible relations between people of all ages and sexes, we must ground our legal and social actions in the best of what people are living today, not the worst.<sup>60</sup>

Socialist feminists believe that all feminists should make sure that the methods and strategies they use do not undermine their goals. In this way, socialist women work from a dialectical understanding of the relationship between theory and practice; women's experiences in the world and their visions, desires, and goals for the future shape each other and, thereby, create an ever-evolving feminist practice.

Radical feminists have a completely alternative conception of the role of theory in the determination of action and, as a result, a different understanding of feminist praxis. They believe that the method or strategy used "organizes the apprehension of truth (and)... determines what counts as evidence and defines what is to be taken as verification".<sup>61</sup> Their strategies are directed toward revealing the 'truth' of women's oppression. For radical feminist women, strategy does not need to reflect the

desired ends themselves, but should reflect and act upon the real material circumstances that exist, in the present, for women.

Radical feminist praxis is grounded in the position of women within patriarchy: a position of oppression. For these women, consciousness raising, which is the collective naming of women's experience of oppression, is "the major technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice and theory of social change of the women's movement".<sup>62</sup> All feminist action and theory is based upon women's concrete experiences of oppression.

Radical women refute the socialist feminist critique that they deny women agency. Susan Cole states: "people say 'you see women as victims', I say we see women as survivors and incredibly strong, they can do amazing things."<sup>63</sup> They claim that they revive and champion women's voices from within the constraints of oppression, and that the power of this collective voice is the revolutionary force of feminism. The presumption of women's ability to understand the mechanisms of their oppression is the basis for radical feminist theory.

Radical feminists criticize socialist feminists' praxis by claiming that these women assume agency on the part of women before they have actually achieved it. By doing this, radical women contend, they obscure the reality of women's oppression. Socialist feminists assume equality in their action "rather than making the action itself do something to make equality come about".<sup>64</sup> Susan Cole cites the example of the Minneapolis ordinance:

MacKinnon and Dworkin...didn't want to devise a law that said 'everybody's created equal, so we do nothing or we do something for everybody'. They wanted a law that would do something, that would bring about women's civil equality... instead of establishing a law that assumes it's already taken place.<sup>65</sup>

Radical women, therefore, do not concern themselves with 'liberatory thinking' but, rather, work for short term goals to alleviate women's condition of oppression. They do not, however, lose sight of their long term aspirations: abolition of the gender system.<sup>66</sup> For them, any action that might help improve the lives of women is endorsed.

Many socialist women feel that consciousness raising and the strategy of naming was once of primary importance for women. They contend, however, that it has ceased to be a useful way of bringing about social change. Instead, socialist feminists argue, this strategy only perpetuates the structures of patriarchy that oppress women by threatening men and further entrenching them in their positions as oppressors. Socialist women feel it is necessary to move beyond what they see to be this initial stage of naming, beyond the fear and rage that motivated so many women to take up feminist activities, to the development of more 'positive strategies'.<sup>67</sup> These women feel that it is important for feminists to take stock of the changes that the movement has made for women in the past years, and to make a real assessment of the areas in which women have gained and those in which they have lost ground.

Socialist feminists feel that strategies for change must be based on long term social transformation. They feel that "there is no effective— no realistic— substitute for basic change, no alternative to social transformation"<sup>68</sup> and exhort women to work on a diverse number of issues within feminism and on those issues which concern women in other social movements. Socialist women believe "all those who struggle against oppression must try to discover the underlying causes of that oppression and...separate these causes from the more superficial symptoms".<sup>69</sup>

Radical feminist theory, then, is meant only to be the description of women's experience within patriarchy, while socialist feminist theory contains, within itself, a certain vision of human liberation and ideas about movement toward change. Socialist feminist praxis is based on the dialectical relationship between material experience and theory, and the idea that how we name partially determines what we name. Radical feminists, alternatively, work from the ground up, from action to theory, experience to description, and from a formulation that states; what we experience determines how we name it. Simply put, radical feminist praxis is based on the concrete actions of women, while, for socialist feminists it is based on the interrelation of ideals and reality.

Socialist feminists feel that radical feminist theory may be helpful as a description of patriarchy and as a motivator for women. However, as a blueprint for action it is seen to fall short of a realistic



assessment of the structures of society and the state, and could potentially lead women and the movement into dangerous situations. Radical feminists concede that socialist women may have a plethora of strategies, but claim that they are too diverse and too diffuse to effectively change the plight of women. In socialist feminist theory women's liberation and autonomy may already exist, but in practice their implementation, based on socialist strategies, will take a very long time. According to radical feminists, the many women who suffer daily at the hands of men cannot wait. The fact that radical feminists act on the immediate concerns of women explains why not all feminists are socialist feminists.

### *Feminism and its Goals*

In the preceding segments, I have reviewed and analyzed the differences between radical and socialist feminist definitions of patriarchy and ideology and their understanding of what constitutes feminist praxis. I have contended that the more superficial debate about the issue of pornography have made these fundamental differences clearer and brought them to the foreground of feminist discussion.

It seems obvious that the differences outlined above, in the definitions of patriarchy, ideology and feminist praxis, would ultimately bring us to a point at which the definition of feminism itself is at issue. In this segment I will review the ways in which radical and socialist feminists define feminism, how they describe the movement, and what they see its goals to be.

Radical feminists have defined feminism as:

a method of analysis and work, and a perspective that puts women first, that starts with our own and other women's experiences as a basis for working towards ending women's oppression.<sup>70</sup>

Susan Cole defines it as:

a body of ideas that understands that the most important personal, political, economic, geo-political, cosmological relationship is the relationship between the sexes, and notices that one sex has more power over the other and does something to change that.<sup>71</sup>

Radical feminism means emphasizing the collective experience of women as oppressed. It means "concentrating on those experiences that have to do with women, what women have in common: experiences like rape, abortion, economic discrimination, motherhood, prostitution, battery".<sup>72</sup> For these women, the oppression of women by men is first, above all other social relations, and is considered

unique: "(t)here is nothing analogous to the situation of women in relation to men".<sup>73</sup>

The goal of radical feminism is "the transformation of (this)...pervasive system based on gender".<sup>74</sup>

It is believed that women's experience of

motherhood and the sexual division of labour offers the material basis for a more integrated relationship to the world and others, and the potential...of an alternative consciousness and struggle for a non-alienated world.<sup>75</sup>

Feminism is a movement which concerns itself with the revaluing of what have traditionally been 'feminine' qualities: women's repossession of their reproductive capacities and their related qualities of nurturance, connectedness, continuity, creativity and integration.<sup>76</sup> Society would be reordered in terms of these feminist principles.

Most radical feminists agree that feminism is a deeply ethical movement, based on values that are grounded in the specificity of women's experience. The radical feminist movement, according to Andrea Dworkin, attempts to be a social movement "based on the integrity of individuals".<sup>77</sup> For Dworkin the ideal is to be "able to experience people as individuals and not through these hierarchies and this prism of identity that people basically develop as a way of surviving inequality and injustice".<sup>78</sup>

Radical women see the sphere of sexuality as the centre of women's oppression. Some radical women, therefore, urge women to escape this sphere of domination and to give up "their personal stake in heterosexuality".<sup>79</sup> Radical feminists withdraw from many patriarchal institutions and work to create separate spaces for women: shelters and women's centres, medical clinics, and alternative cultural institutions such as feminist press, radio, music, dance and theatre. Their main goal is to allow women control over their own bodies. Most of their work, therefore, is in the areas of reproductive freedom and sexual violence.

Canadian radical feminist theorist Angela Miles develops a description of the feminist movement in her essay "Feminist Radicalism in the 1980's". In this piece she deals with the issue of difference and diversity within feminism and outlines the characteristics of what she calls 'integrative feminism'. Integrative feminism is a form of radical feminism that calls for the development of a "universal

redefinition of progressive struggle".<sup>10</sup> It is defined as "a theory and politics built from both women's oppression and women's potential strength".<sup>11</sup> Integrative feminism is determined to recognize the differences in the experiences of women, as well as their common experiences of domination:

Many feminist radicals are committed to building a movement which does not merely tolerate difference but celebrates it as a source of creative tension in the necessary struggle to redefine unity beyond sameness.<sup>12</sup>

Many integrative feminists believe, as has been illustrated in the preceding segment, that the role of theory within feminism is limited. Feminists, these women claim, must recognize that "all universal claims must necessarily be false".<sup>13</sup> Miles contends, however, that the many feminist theories of the oppression of women will, eventually, lead the way to a more complete understanding of the mechanisms of patriarchy.<sup>14</sup>

Integrative feminism, then, is based on the assumption that "women's specific material experience can ground a new vision of liberation and a redefinition of progressive politics".<sup>15</sup> These women propose the revaluing of female qualities such as nurturance, connectedness, and unity as a goal of the feminist project. They feel that their movement, while it accepts the differences in women's experiences, is ultimately concerned with the integration of all of these various perspectives into an interconnected, unified feminist movement.

Socialist feminists define feminism as:

A philosophy that asserts the right of women to full equality within society, and, beyond that, argues for a society that is based on a transformation of the relations between men and women where men and women are equal and where gender isn't a factor in decisions around who has power and who doesn't.<sup>16</sup>

Varda Burstyn states:

I've always made the point that feminism is the understanding that women are oppressed and the commitment to fight it. I've always insisted that's the only thing you can say about feminism because once you've said that everything else is differentiated, there's nothing else that unites women.<sup>17</sup>

Socialist feminists' goals are to challenge modern society at its roots, and to transform all institutions, especially economic and political institutions, and the realms of sexuality and procreation, in

such a way as to grant all human beings equal access to power. Socialist women wish to challenge not only patriarchy but the structures of capitalism as well.

These women wish to develop "a sense of political unity among oppressed groups".<sup>88</sup> They encourage women's culture and women's art and other forms of cultural work in the hopes of fostering a sense of community among all oppressed people. They work towards the alteration of the nuclear family and the development of family communities, cooperative homes and community sharing of different kinds of responsibility. They also work towards reproductive freedom and economic autonomy for women.

For socialist feminists "it is necessary to approach all political issues with a consciousness that is explicitly feminist as well as explicitly anti-racist and explicitly socialist".<sup>89</sup> The socialist feminist movement, therefore, is characterized by:

an alliance of different groups of women...who, on various levels, want to promote equality for all women, and (it) encompasses many different philosophies, different socioeconomics, different racial and sexual positions.<sup>90</sup>

Many socialist women feel, partially as a result of the debate on pornography, censorship and sexuality, that feminism should not strive toward unification, but should recognize the many varied perspectives of women and realize that their different interpretations of the nature of women's oppression are vital to the movement. Socialist feminists state that the development of one unitary ideology of feminism is a dangerous step that would exclude many women who are necessary to the movement.<sup>91</sup> They endorse organizing with other social movements, as well as continuing to develop a strong, separate, diversified women's movement. Varda Burstyn states:

I no longer believe that movements for change which don't have feminism as a part of them can create the lasting changes that they want...feminism is deeply necessary to these movements, otherwise you have the reproduction of oppression within movements for social change.<sup>92</sup>

As has been mentioned in the previous segment, socialist feminists believe in a consonance between means or strategies they choose to effect, and the ends they are striving for:

Socialist feminists expect that there will be a distinctive revolutionary period, characterized by acute social turmoil, but they also expect that this turmoil will be determined by the kind

and quality of pre-revolutionary activity that has preceded it."

These women "formulate the question of women's oppression in a distinctive way, and this formulation is related, in turn, to its distinctive methodology for answering it."<sup>34</sup> Their formulation includes the understanding that patriarchy in modern society is determined by the structures of capitalism, as well as the belief that individuals can become aware of the structures of their oppression and can, thereby, overthrow them:

gender-class, like social-class, is not biologically inherent but socially constructed and therefore amenable to change through conscious struggle and choice."

Socialist feminism embraces other social movements directed toward the end of human oppression, as well as alternative forms of analysis based on alternative forms of oppression. These women are particularly noted for their work with women in unions in North America and their support for various solidarity movements in Third World nations. They feel that feminism must be able to speak to women's individual needs." Sara Diamond states: "the only way that you are going to get any endorsement of really radical social change is if there's space for individualism and individuality."<sup>35</sup> Feminism in the 1980s must be reconceptualized as a coalition movement, made up of diverse groups of women working on a variety of issues.

#### *Some thoughts on the differences*

These differences convey the extensive nature of the debate and the degree to which these two groups, radical and socialist - which constitute a large part of the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions respectively - are divided. In the next chapter, as part of an analysis of the debate in general, I will address some of the inconsistencies that have emerged as a result of the discussion above in each group's theory and practice. In this segment, however, I would like to propose that these two positions are not, in fact, so far apart in their definitions of feminism and the nature of the movement.

Both groups attempt to deal with the issues of diversity and difference of opinion within feminism and feel it is necessary to make room for the plurality and specificity of women's experiences. Both seem to recognize that feminism is an unfinished movement, ever expanding to include new groups of women

and new analyses of women's oppression. Both groups also see the necessity for feminist involvement in other social movements, such as the peace and environmentalist movements. It appears that the only difference that arises here is in each position's naming of the way in which they choose to incorporate this diversity. Radical feminists call their effort to embrace diversity in women's experiences 'integration'. Socialist feminists call it 'coalition'.

Radical feminist theory has developed over the years, from an initial belief in the overriding commonality of women in the early part of the movement, to a recent, growing recognition and incorporation of the great diversity of women's interests and experiences. The majority of radical feminist theory, however, still speaks to one group of women, who are supposedly unified by the threat of sexual violence and male oppression.

It is interesting to note that the radical feminist movement is using a term to describe their movement's practices that belongs to the terminology associated with their movement's goals: the 'integration' of all women under the general rubric of feminism, and the 'integrative transformation of life' which these women would like to achieve." It may be contended that radical feminist women are enacting a kind of means-ends consonance, an act for which they have often criticized socialist women. In any case, this recognition of diversity is subsumed under the radical, integrative feminist goals of 'unity beyond sameness' and a 'universal feminist politics'."

Socialist feminists have called their attempts to deal with women's diversity 'coalition'. As opposed to the radical feminist strategy of integration, the concept of coalition is part of socialist feminists' very definition of feminism. It is in the fundamental nature of the movement to recognize the limits of women's common experience and to understand the need for the expression of these differences. The concept of coalition betrays an idea of political action that is directed toward particular women's issues, as opposed to the development of an overarching feminist politics.

It would be my contention, however, that these positions share more similarities than differences in their definitions of the function of the movement. Both groups speak of the necessity for the movement

to address and respect the individual. Andrea Dworkin states: "(w)e've always tried to build a movement that was based on the integrity of individuals".<sup>100</sup> Both Sara Diamond<sup>101</sup> and Chris Bearchell<sup>102</sup> feel a social movement should address individual demands and make room for individual voice and action. These spokespeople for each position appear to share a similar understanding of the nature of the movement.

If these similarities exist, some questions remain to be answered. Where does each position fit in the other's incorporation of diversity? Is the radical feminist notion of integration flexible enough to allow for the socialist feminist position and the anti-censorship movement, theory, strategy, action and all? And, conversely, does the socialist feminist concept of coalition politics include the anti-pornography movement's analysis and strategies? Would the radical feminists be willing to integrate the socialists and would the socialists be willing to coalesce with the radicals?

In theory at least, it appears so. Radical, integrative feminists should embrace the socialist feminist analysis of patriarchy as a part of their evolving theory of women's oppression. Socialist feminists, as well, should not have a problem accepting the radical feminist positions, since they advocate the concept of a coalition movement. They should consider radical feminist activists who are opposed to pornography to be just one part of a diversified women's movement. If difference of opinion and diversity of experience are so well tolerated by both positions then what is the debate on pornography and sexuality about? Where does it come from? And, why has it been so vitriolic and heated? These questions will be explored in the following chapter.

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## CHAPTER 5

### THOUGHTS ON THE DEBATE

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented an interpretation of the debate in which I contended that the more superficial disagreements about pornography and censorship within feminism were based on much more fundamental issues. I was able to point out, through an examination of each position's criticisms of the other, the fact that anti-pornography and anti-censorship women worked from different areas of emphasis. Anti-pornography women placed a great deal of importance on the realm of sexuality. Their analysis of this area was intensive and detailed. Anti-censorship women, on the other hand, emphasized the area of state power and its potential threat to women. Stated simply, it became obvious that both of these groups were arguing past each other; criticizing two different phenomena, pornography and censorship, from analyses concerned with two different spheres of power relations, sex and the state. It also became clear that not only were these women debating each other about different issues, they were arguing from different definitions of ideology, patriarchy, and feminist praxis.

In this chapter I will continue with an analysis of the debate. In the first section of the chapter entitled 'Some thoughts on the Debate' I will take up the questions based on the interrelated concepts of 'discourse', 'power', and 'language' that I posed in the first chapter. I will discuss how these concepts help to elucidate the debate and will speculate as to the fundamental nature of the debate. In the second section of the chapter entitled 'Some More Thoughts' I will present a discussion of the contradictions and limitations of the radical and socialist feminist arguments. This process will allow me to speculate as to some of the root causes of the debate. The third section of the chapter will include speculation as to the impact of the debate about pornography and censorship on the Canadian feminist movement based upon readings, interviews and personal experience. By doing this, I hope to reveal some new insights into the nature of the debate and, perhaps, thereby, point the way toward some healing of wounds within the feminist community.

### Some thoughts on the Debate

In the first chapter's discussion of the methodology used for this study I reviewed the concepts of 'language', 'power', and 'discourse' and suggested that they might provide some useful ways in which to conceptualize the debate. I also posed some questions about the debate based upon these concepts. I would like to return to these questions now and attempt some answers to them.

How do the concepts of discourse and discursive practices apply to the debate about pornography and censorship? What does John Thompson's discussion of power and language reveal about the fundamental nature of the debate?

I would like to suggest that if, as has been discussed in the first chapter, dominant institutional discourses constrain and limit what is visible, what is considered problematic, and what we are able to discuss, then it is necessary to question the ways in which the debate within feminism about pornography and censorship might reflect these constraints and limitations. It is my opinion that this debate reflects the structures of the dominant discourse to a great extent. I would also submit that the fact that many feminists have not looked beyond the issues, beyond "what is visible, the relation between objects and concepts...(that) the discourse proposes"<sup>1</sup>, has prevented a resolution of the debate and a consolidation of a feminist position around the issues.

Simply stated I feel that feminism has fallen prey to a framing of the issue of pornography that is the result of the political doctrine and discourse of civil libertarianism and patriarchal democratic capitalism. I feel it would be a fair assessment to state that, within this discourse, political debate is most often characterized by polarized positions that argue from fundamentally different assumptions about the world. The 'problem' of pornography has, traditionally, been juxtaposed with the 'perils' of censorship. We are given a choice between 'pornography' and 'censorship', to fight against one is to embrace the other. There is simply not room, within this discourse of polarized political debate, to reject or embrace both.

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I feel it has become clear, throughout the analysis and exposition conducted in the earlier chapters, that both anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists have been caught up in this framing of the issue. This is illustrated in Chapter 4's segment entitled 'Some Thoughts on the Criticisms'. I make the point there that anti-pornography women argue from a critique of pornography to a defense of censorship, and that anti-censorship feminists argue from a critique of censorship to a defense of pornography. Although both groups reject the patriarchal, civil libertarian, or conservative, moral positions on the issues, and oppose the content of their arguments, these women seem unable to perceive the ways in which these dominant discourses have determined the structure of the debate itself. Instead it seems that they have internalized these structures and reproduced them in the debate within the feminist movement.

It must be contended then that instead of understanding that the framing 'pornography versus censorship' is itself a construction of masculinist discourse, feminists have been caught up in attempting to resolve a battle that need not be taking place. It can be claimed that an inability to determine the ways in which dominant, patriarchal discourses can limit our capacity to see and talk about issues is another reason for the debate. What is needed is the ability to look through and beyond the rigid ways of thinking imposed by dominant discourses which are in contradiction with the feminist enterprise<sup>2</sup>; to examine the blanks, silences and oversights in the discourse with "a new gaze, an informed gaze, itself not the product of any individual, but made possible by changes on the exercise of vision".<sup>3</sup> Why is it that patriarchal capitalist society is unable to reject both pornography and censorship? How does this particular framing of an issue serve the dominant discourse? What are the assumptions implicit in the framing of the debate in this manner? What do these assumptions reveal about the place of women in the dominant discourse?

It may indeed be true that the debate within feminism about pornography and censorship reflects patriarchal ideas about the constitution of 'political debate', but, as we have seen in the previous chapters, this debate has revealed more fundamental differences of opinion within the movement. How are we to come to understand these differences?

Thompson and other theoreticians have asserted that language is power and that most power struggles are concerned with signification, with the naming of reality. In light of this, I would contend that the previous chapters have revealed the fact that this debate has been, on every level, a debate about language and naming; struggles over definition, over who will take the power to name reality. This hypothesis might be applied to every level of the debate examined so far. On the most superficial level, we have seen a struggle between two definitions of pornography and two definitions of censorship. This struggle in turn has revealed two opposing understandings of the nature of sexuality, power and the role of the state. It has become clear, as well, that the groups' definitions of patriarchy and ideology are at odds, as are their beliefs about the nature of feminist praxis.

I have pointed out that all of these definitional struggles are, in a sense, contained within and exposed by the two fundamentally different 'namings' of the 'realities' of pornography and censorship. It has become clear through the process of review and analyses undertaken in the previous chapters that these two different 'namings' have their basis in a more fundamental definitional struggle that has existed for many years within feminism: the struggle between radical feminists and socialist feminists. In effect, it appears that the feminist debate about pornography, at some point in its development, has been coopted, directed and, in essence, displaced by the debate between prominent radical and socialist feminists. This cooptation has not only excluded many feminists who do not share the radical anti-pornography position or the socialist anti-censorship position in the debate, it has drawn feminist attention away from the realities that served as catalysts for the debate in the first place: violent, misogynist pornography and sexual violence against women and children. Radical feminist discourse and socialist feminist discourse have been competing, by means of the debate about pornography, for dominance within feminism. I contend, therefore, that what this debate is 'about', the issue it is most concerned with is the determination of the definition of feminism itself. Who is going to have the power to define the reality 'feminism'?

At the end of Chapter 4, I have stipulated that both groups' definition of feminism and their views about the incorporation of diversity and difference of opinion within the movement are not, theoretically



very different. The definitional struggles embodied in the debate, however, suggest otherwise. I would like to submit that feminists have not only internalized the framing of the issues of pornography and censorship from patriarchal dominant discourse, but have accepted dominant methods of political debate as well. This point is evidenced by the polarized positions, vitriolic accusations and counter-accusations, and the tones of reproach and condemnation that characterize the feminist literature in this area.

We have been engaging in a struggle of words, for power, that is deeply anti-feminist in more ways than one. In terms of radical feminist discourse this struggle for power, for the right to define and direct the feminist agenda seriously contravenes the view that power is a male construction and that, in a feminist world, all power relationships would be abolished. And, contrary to socialist feminists' desire for means-ends consistency in their praxis, this debate might be seen to threaten the long term goals of the movement by damaging the public face of feminism and by perpetuating bad feeling among its constituents. In either case, it seems clear that the point at which constructive criticism might have been exchanged has long past, and that the debate is no longer serving the interests of the movement.

The application of the concepts of discourse, language and power to the debate has demonstrated some ways in which the feminist enterprise, even at the height of internal upheaval and change, might be coopted and institutionalized by the forces of the patriarchal status quo. The structure and tone of the debate reflects, most definitively, the qualities of political debate as it occurs within patriarchal, capitalist society: a society both radical and socialist women wish so desperately to change. We, as feminists, must come to recognize this fact and rethink the purposes of the debate. Perhaps, if this were to be done, we might dissolve the deadlock in this battle for the power of naming, and move out of this unnecessary war zone.

## Some More Thoughts

At the end of the previous chapter I contended that, although socialist and radical feminists appeared to share only differences, there was one glaring similarity between them: their belief in the necessity for diversity and difference of opinion within the feminist movement. I then pointed out that, as a result of this shared opinion, each position should welcome the other, but that this has not occurred. The intense and divisive debate on pornography and censorship has occurred instead. Why?

This fact, the contradiction between what is believed and what has occurred in reality, might be seen to lead to two conclusions. The first is that both of these groups have trouble putting their ideals into practice. The second conclusion is that the central point of contention between the two groups is not the fact that each group exists in itself, but, rather, the way in which each group chooses to put their 'theoretical selves' into practice. Theoretically each group should accept the other but in reality they do not, therefore, there are problems with each position's praxis and, as a result, these problems concerning strategy have become the major points of difference in the debate. Radical and socialist feminists may agree on the ideals of the feminist movement, but they most heartily disagree on the best ways in which to achieve them.

In the following segments I will discuss the problems and contradictions I have found in each position's praxis as well as the related problem of feminist ethics. In this way I hope to emphasize and bring to the foreground some of the central causes of the debate.

### *Problems with Radical Feminist Praxis*

Socialist feminists feel that radical feminists' long term goals and short term strategies are in fundamental contradiction. Radical women work toward revolutionary change and an end to the gender system and yet advocate the use of existing state structures to help women. This pursuit of short term goals, of legal remedies for the problem of pornography in particular, works against these women's desire for long term revolutionary change, socialist women contend, and, thereby, renders them prime candidates

for cooptation by the forces of the status quo.

Socialist feminists also point out that radical feminists do not, in fact, let their theory stand as a descriptive voice of women's experience. Instead, socialist women claim, this so-called 'description' of the material circumstances of women's oppression carries with it a large prescriptive element concerning the constitution of 'correct' feminist behaviour which is characterized by 'unification', 'nurturance', and 'emotionality', etc. The imposition of these supposedly 'natural' and 'reclaimed' feminine qualities adds to the potential of this group for cooptation by right-wing forces who have also revived the feminine qualities of 'nurturance', 'emotionality', and 'unification' for women.

I must agree with the socialist feminist criticisms of radical feminist praxis. This does not mean that I disagree with radical feminists' short term tactics; they have made many gains for women. Also, it does not imply that I do not believe in the validity of the qualities of unification, emotionality, and nurturance; these are very important human qualities. Simply, I find problems with the radical feminist position's logical inconsistency, its apparent lack of foresight, of long term planning, and its undervaluing of the importance of theory in the constitution of a movement toward social change.

Radical feminists state that they are not concerned with a consonance between the means used and the ends desired. Their strategies, then, are based on the immediate needs of women within the system, and their political action is oriented toward the amelioration of women's plight in any way possible. I would like to suggest that radical feminists' response to the criticism that they ignore long term goals for short term gain, which is simply that they do not care for theoretical correctness, only for the betterment of the situation of women, is not only logically inconsistent but unrealistic.

It appears as though radical feminists are not examining their practices closely enough. If they were, they would be sure to notice several instances where feminist values, embedded in radical feminist theory and writing, are replicated time and time again in their proposed strategies and actions. In the area of sexuality, for instance, Susan Cole has emphasized the necessity of eroticizing equality in theory and cultivating nurturing and equal sexual relations in practice.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the entire radical feminist critique of

sex libertarianism is based on the assumed necessity for this kind of consonance, the merging of ideals and action. Radical women strongly object to sex libertarians because they feel that sex libertarians have contradicted their feminist principles and political beliefs in order to enjoy sex. In this way, radical feminist women appear to advocate a symmetry between means and ends in the realm of sexual practice. Also, there is a definite means-ends consonance between radical women's goals and their description of the movement. It seems obvious they would like feminist practice to reflect the feminist principles of unity and integration; principles they have espoused for a feminist future.\*

Radical feminists' statement that they work for short term goals and that they do not care about means-ends consonance is plainly inconsistent with many of their actions in which a means-ends consonance is obviously advocated. I would like to point out that perhaps the radical feminist refutation of a means-ends consonance arises only when it concerns the strategy of governmental regulation of pornography. In other areas, for example the area of sexual practice, a symmetry between theories, goals, and action is desired. It could be suggested, then, that radical women's contention that they do not care about means-ends symmetry is put into effect only when it serves their interests. This point will be explored more thoroughly later.

I would also like to suggest that the desire to better the immediate situation of women does not mean it is necessary to disregard feminist history or the possible long term ramifications of certain actions. I would submit that stating that one simply 'does not care' about theoretical correctness is not a logical response to a question about the fulfillment of long term feminist goals. Nobody is asking these women for 'theoretical correctness', only for a reasonable assessment of the long term implications of their proposed short term strategies. There is no reason why this cannot occur.

According to radical women there is no 'outside' patriarchy and, therefore, there can be no alternative erotic imagery or sexual practice.<sup>7</sup> They also claim that the role of theory is simply one of description, of "the system the way that it is".<sup>8</sup> Radical women believe it is necessary to give voice to women as they are oppressed within patriarchy, to speak their experiences and their desires for the future.

Radical feminists feel that this practice is inherently revolutionary. They refute theory that is prescriptive. Socialist feminist theory, for example, which contains ideas about women as autonomous and empowered in the present, is seen to presume women's equality and to be unrelated to the experiences of real women. Radical women also see the role of theory as secondary to that of political action.

I would like to take issue with these assumptions. First, radical women's contention about building a theory based on pure description is simply unrealistic. Their writing about the patriarchal world may be informed by the experiences of women and spoken from the perspective of women, but feminist theorists go far beyond description when their analyses begin to speculate about a post-revolutionary feminist world. Radical feminist theory may describe women's experiences and desires for the future, but it appears that most radical theorists assume the nature of those desires, as unification, nurturance etc., and presume that the desires are the same for all women. I would contend that if a radical feminist theory/description was truly women-centred and interested in documenting the concerns and goals of women it would have managed to keep abreast of the changing experiences and status of women in society and would have given voice to those changing desires and experiences more freely. Perhaps if radical feminist women had done this they might have succeeded in maintaining widespread popular support instead of the marginalized status they experience today.

Radical women would do well to analyze more carefully their theory and the role it plays in the determination of action. Where and for what reasons do strategy and action reflect each other? How might these women open up channels of communication between themselves and younger women who feel alienated from them? What kinds of impact have the changes wrought by the movement had on women's lives? Does radical feminist writing reflect them? What is the nature of our oppression in 1987?

Feminist theorist Alison Jaggar makes the point, and I agree, that:

radical feminist analysis provides a redescription of women's reality that is not...theoretically complete or adequate because it does not provide a causal explanation of the reality that it describes. It is static, rather than dynamic.<sup>9</sup>

Jaggar is contending that much of radical feminist theory merely describes the various aspects of male

dominance and the nature of male power. It sees male power in all its forms, including pornography, as the primary agent in the oppression of women. Radical theorists do not look beyond this fact to attempt an explanation of the reasons for male dominance.

It is not necessary for women to render a completed theory of social structures, but it is necessary for them to understand that one of the roles of feminist theory must be to look behind the reality of women's oppression and beyond basic descriptions of it. Theory exists, as art does, to pose questions, challenge ways of thinking and perceiving and, perhaps most importantly, to offer interpretations on the workings of human life. Radical feminist theory most certainly poses questions and challenges. But radical feminist women, as actors in a movement toward social change, must attempt to 'get at' the causes of this male power which they are so anxious to end. As well, they must attempt to assess the effects of the kinds of challenges they are posing in their work. Do their analyses and descriptions further their goals? It is only in this way that radical feminists might move beyond their status as a marginalized oppositional group and propose strategies for social change that would incorporate the needs and interests of all women.

Radical feminists might respond to the criticisms above by claiming that they are a social movement concerned with political action first, before theory and philosophy. This is not an inadequate response. Radical feminist women have accomplished more concrete changes and implemented more support systems for women than any other faction of the movement. It is true that their direct political action such as pickets, demonstrations and boycotts have garnered much attention from the media, government and the public at large. These women's distrust of overarching political theories as blue prints for action is also entirely understandable, given the history of patriarchy.

I would contend, however, that feminist analyses and action are equally important parts of a movement toward social change. Radical feminist emphasis on the primacy of one of these areas, political action, is simply not sufficient. As has been discussed above, radical feminist theory is more than mere description. It is a prescription for social change based on analyses of women's oppression and some

women's visions of a feminist future. This prescriptive element in radical feminist theory necessarily affects the kinds of actions taken by radical feminists. It is crucial that these women recognize the roles of theory and political action as interdependent and equally important in the formulation of a social movement. By continuing to ignore this point, and focusing primarily on the immediate needs of women, on expediency, radical feminists' analyses and theories cannot serve their larger functions, to explain and inspire, and serve instead as excuses for actions that address symptoms and not root causes. I would suggest that real social transformation cannot take place unless this point is recognized.

Radical women, then, must be able to look past their short term goals and actions and attempt to assess the long term impact of these practices. As well, the role of radical feminist theory should be reexamined, revalued and redefined beyond its 'descriptive' label and its secondary status in order to resolve internal contradictions and potential misunderstandings. It is clear that most radical feminist writing is descriptive, interpretive, analytical, and prescriptive, based on feminist principles, with implicit assumptions about what a reordered feminist world might be. Radical women must realize that the assumption of women's empowerment and ideas and dreams about a feminist world in writing and theory does not detract from the reality of women's oppression in the present, or from effective social action. In fact, they are inextricably linked in ways these women should come to recognize and explore. I would contend that feminist theory is a vital and important part of feminism, and that it might help, through its envisioning of women's autonomy, to alleviate the dilemmas and contradictions of being feminist in a patriarchal world.

#### *Problems with Socialist Feminist Praxis*

Radical feminists criticize socialist feminist praxis, action based on long term goals, by claiming that it does not permit truly effective action and presents no direct challenge to the system of patriarchy. Socialist women's desire for symmetry between means and ends, and subsequent advocacy of feminist action in many diverse areas of social reform, produces strategy that is too diffuse and which distracts from the more immediate concerns of women. Radical women claim that socialist feminists' theoretical empowerment of women produces 'consonant' strategies which "address the values of the next generation.

They do not address present tense oppression".<sup>10</sup> Radical women feel that socialist women often affirm "women's values at the cost of recognizing our own oppression".<sup>11</sup>

Radical women feel that socialist feminists' chances for cooptation by the patriarchal status quo are great. Socialist women are seen to have borrowed analytical tools and rhetoric from both civil libertarians and Marxist theorists without attempting to develop a specifically women-centred theory of their own. With socialist feminist action spread so thin and with their theory so derivative it is no wonder, radical feminists assert, that they accomplish so little. Socialist women are destined for cooptation because they pursue diffuse strategies and are diverted from action by abstract theoretical concerns.

I must agree with the radical feminist critique that the socialist feminist concern for a means-ends consonance presents problems at the strategic level. But I must disagree with the criticisms of socialist women's theory. I would contend that socialist feminist's adaptation and expansion of Marxist categories to include women's experience and their use of psychoanalysis and other heuristic devices to explore the material basis of women's oppression, are bold actions - the equivalent on a theoretical level to any radical feminist action on a practical level.

In this segment, however, I will review the problems I have found with socialist feminist praxis. Simply, I would like to discuss the potential limitations of socialist feminists' concern with means-ends consonance as it applies to strategy. I would also like to explore the ways in which socialist feminist action is often misunderstood as liberal feminist work. Finally I will pose some questions about the socialist feminist strategy of producing alternative sexually explicit imagery.

Socialist women must be aware that their concern with a consonance between goals and action can interfere with the confrontation of issues that are of immediate concern to women. Just as there is no reason radical women cannot attempt to assess the long term implications of their actions, there is no reason why socialist women should disregard short term gains for the sake of theoretical purity. It is true that the state can pose a threat to women, but radical feminists' work with municipal, provincial and federal governments has brought positive gains for women in the form of rape relief centres and homes



for battered women. Perhaps socialist women should attempt to put their extensive analysis of liberal democratic capitalism into effect on a more frequent basis through more direct confrontations with the state.

The socialist feminist desire for a means-ends consonance and their determination to address root causes does, inevitably, lead to strategies that are diffuse and general. Varda Burstyn's list of strategies for change in her essay "Beyond Despair: Positive Strategies" provides an example of the extent and diversity of the socialist feminist agenda. Burstyn has also made the point that many socialist women have had difficulty addressing the issues, strategic and otherwise, raised by the debate about pornography.<sup>12</sup> It may be hypothesized that this difficulty is the result of a lack of coherence within socialist feminist activity.

Simply stating that "economic independence for women and young people"<sup>13</sup> is the way to end the sexual exploitation of women, that social problems will disappear after the restructuring of society along socialist feminists lines, as Burstyn does, is not sufficient. This is the equivalent of stating that all difficulties will be resolved after the revolution. What are women to do in the meantime? Socialist feminists must present more concrete and realistic strategies that might help to begin this political, economic and social transformation. Most importantly, they must take action on them.

Socialist women should be aware of the ways in which their empowerment of women in theory can lead to a misinterpretation of their position in practice and, thereby, limit the efficacy of their actions. Socialist women believe that empowering women in theory increases the potential for women's liberation in practice; they base their strategies on this belief. Socialist feminists wish to expand women's interests in society and enable women to explore and take power in all areas of life, including the area of sexual expression. This wish leads socialist women to advocate the creation of 'alternative' sexual imagery and to adopt an anti-censorship stance. These strategies, however, are often misunderstood by others and seen to be defenses of freedom of expression and other liberal democratic ideals; they give the impression that socialist feminists are liberal feminists. Socialist feminist work is often subsumed under the rubric of 'reformist' and 'liberal' and their struggle toward major social transformation ignored. Socialist women

must increase their efforts to distinguish themselves from liberal feminists and analyze, more carefully, the ways in which their theoretical empowerment of women can limit their actions.

Finally, I would like to point out some difficulties I see in the socialist feminist practice of creating alternative erotic imagery and their support for the exploration of alternative forms of sexual expression. Socialist women advocate the creation of alternative "sex positive"<sup>14</sup> sexually explicit imagery, to counteract the effects of misogynist pornography. They have also defended the right of women to explore different forms of sexual expression as a way of establishing more general ideas about a woman-defined sexuality. Socialist women feel that all women must be free to seek their pleasure through practices and imagery, just as men are.

These strategies are most definitely in harmony with socialist feminists' theoretical assumptions, in which they recognize sexuality and sexual imagery to be areas where there is the potential of both danger and pleasure for women. Socialist women recognize that women are continually confronting this tension in their sexual relations. They make the point that women should attempt to work past the tension, by trying to uncover and analyze the social relations involved in the formation of the danger and the pleasure. Women can, by doing this, empower themselves. The creation of alternative sexual imagery is a part of this empowerment process. Rather than working towards the eradication of misogynist pornography, socialist women advocate the more 'positive' strategy of exploring female erotic imagery and practice.

Although I agree with the strategy of attempting to create alternative sexual imagery, I feel that socialist women have not adequately addressed some of the problems inherent in this activity. Varda Burstyn and other anti-censorship women have objected to laws regarding pornography on the grounds that the determination of what constitutes pornography is an interpretive act and that the interpretation of the images would be conducted and controlled by people with non- and anti-feminist sentiments. I contend that alternative imagery is just as subject to misinterpretation as mainstream pornography. By what and whose criteria is imagery determined to be 'alternative'? How are 'alternative' or 'positive'

sexually explicit image makers to prevent their work from being misinterpreted, coopted or misused by forces 'other' than those who are pro-feminist, gay or socialist?

Socialist women have repeatedly criticized radical feminists for setting and imposing moral standards for the movement, yet it seems clear that socialist women are espousing some kind of moral code in their determination of the criteria for 'sex-positive' and 'alternative' art and sexual practice. Not only should socialist women explore and explain these criteria more fully, but they should root out and make explicit the moral assumptions that are embedded in them. How do socialist women determine the alterity of their art work? What values are at work in this determination? What constitutes 'alternative' imagery? What is a 'positive' sexual practice? What kinds of work and practices do these categories exclude?

If socialist women are going to advocate the practice of producing sexual imagery they must, I contend, be aware of all the implications and limitations of this practice. They must assess how their alternative imagery is to become a feasible way of counteracting misogynist, mainstream pornography. How will these feminists and artists reach a broad based audience? Aside from the radical feminist belief that the content of the imagery can never reflect anything but patriarchal sexual values, how will the structure and prerogatives of capitalist production impact upon and affect the 'alternative' status of these images?

Socialist women, then, must examine ways in which their desire for a means-ends consonance and theoretical purity might interfere with possible, effective short term gains. As well, they must recognize the way in which their presumption of agency for women in theory can lead to misunderstandings about the nature of their position in practice. Socialist women must also present and take action upon more grounded and realistic strategies for social change. They must beware of relegating social struggles around specific issues, such as pornography, to the status of post-revolutionary concerns. These women should maintain their diverse interests, but should attempt to consolidate their actions and resources in such a way as to provide issues around which various social movements might coalesce. Finally, socialist

women should carefully examine all of the problems and implications of creating alternative sexually explicit imagery. They must explore and expose the moral assumptions embedded in the determinations of what constitutes 'alternative' and 'sex positive'. It is only in these ways that socialist feminist women will be able to make real their desires for collective resistance and social transformation in the present.

### *The Problem of Feminist Ethics*

The discussion of problems with radical and socialist feminist praxis presented in the segments above has brought to the foreground an issue, which, I feel, has contributed significantly to the debate: the problem of feminist ethics. Neither radical nor socialist feminists have been able to conclusively deal with the issue of a feminist ethics. Their inability to decide on the role and determination of a feminist ethics has added to the debate's animosity.

The issue of ethics as it concerns the areas of sexuality and sexual practice has come to prominence within the debate itself. Radical feminists and socialist feminists have attempted to address the issue, albeit in different ways, without much success. Should feminism subscribe to and prescribe a set moral system, an ethical 'way of being' for its members? If so, how are these ethics to be determined?

Socialist feminists wish to avoid the imposition of rigid standards of 'feminist' behaviour on members of the movement. Their concerns regarding this and their objections to the radical feminist attempt to do so are discussed in the section 'The Criticisms' in Chapter 3. Socialist women do, however, believe in the necessity for the determination of sets of feminist guidelines, developed within specific feminist communities. These guidelines must recognize and incorporate the diverse experiences, beliefs and values of women.<sup>15</sup> Referring to a feminist ethics of sexuality Mariana Valverde states:

We need a framework that allows us to understand why women do indeed feel certain desires and others do not...Understanding the social roots of desire does not necessitate a dogmatic paradigm of what is or is not politically correct, a feminist list of do's and don't's.<sup>16</sup>

For socialist women, the question of the establishment of a feminist ethics is a particularly problematic one. They fear the imposition of a set of polarized behaviours that would exclude a vast number of women and endanger feminism by establishing a form of orthodoxy and "deadening conformity"<sup>17</sup> within

the movement.

Radical feminists also believe in the need to establish a feminist ethical framework. They contend that it is impossible to have a social and political movement that is value free<sup>18</sup> and endorse the determination of an ethical system based in women's experiences within patriarchy. They see feminism as "a deeply moral movement based on the fusion of ethics and politics and fundamentally opposed to their separation."<sup>19</sup> Radical feminists claim that the movement is based upon principles "belonging particularly to women".<sup>20</sup> These principles include nurturance, creativity, integration, and recognition of others.<sup>21</sup> Feminist ethics and politics are defined, therefore, by these principles. Radical theorists Mary Daly and Carole Gilligan have produced work in which they establish feminist ethical systems based on these values.

Both radical and socialist feminists have expressed a common concern in their attempts to address the issue of feminist ethics: how is it possible to establish an ethical system that is not repressive and controlling? Socialist feminists criticize radical feminists for creating a rigid code of behaviour through their advocacy of specific 'feminist' principles and their rejection of 'alternative' sexual practices. But radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, Charlotte Bunch, and Angela Miles have called into question themselves the establishment of a feminist ethics and have discussed the problems inherent in this activity:

...just how do you have a movement that encourages the integrity of so many individuals, rather than a political movement that lays down a correct line, forces people to conform...We've always tried to build a movement that was based on the integrity of individuals.<sup>22</sup>

Socialist women, as discussed above, are also concerned with the problems inherent in the establishment of an ethical system:

Does feminism have the right to define some ethics?...At what point are they general principles of what we want, and at what point do they become a kind of moral code that makes it very difficult...for women to continue to explore the areas that are in conflict in their lives?<sup>23</sup>

Both positions recognize the need for a feminist ethics and both feel a desire to incorporate the diverse experiences of women and to allow for as much space for exploration and self-determination as

possible within it. I would contend, however, that neither position has been able to adequately come to terms with the problem of feminist ethics.

Although radical women make their assumptions about the principles that might constitute a feminist ethics more explicit than socialist women do, it may be contended that the radical feminist ethical principles of nurturance, integration, and creativity are too static and are based only on some women's experiences of the world. I believe that in order for a feminist ethical system to avoid the perils of orthodoxy and repression it must evolve. Women's experience in the world has changed over the last twenty years, largely due to the work of feminists. A feminist ethics based on women's lived experience, then, should reflect these changes as well as help to determine them.

Alternatively, I believe socialist women have allowed their fear of conformity and orthodoxy to restrict their efforts in the establishment of a feminist ethics. Most notably in the area of sexuality, these women have avoided discussion of feminist ethics and have, instead, criticized radical feminist attempts and encouraged an 'anything goes' approach to the issue.<sup>24</sup> Socialist women must realize that their 'laissez-faire' attitude toward feminist sexual practice carries with it implicit value judgements and assumptions about 'correct' feminist behaviour. I feel that these women would better serve the movement if they were to carefully examine and make explicit these judgements in the form of a feminist ethical system.

It is difficult to determine which approach to feminist ethics is more detrimental: the zealous attempts of radical women to outline a set of feminist principles, or socialist feminists' 'hands off' approach and apparent reluctance to address the issue altogether. In reality this fact is not important. What is of importance is the fact that the problem of a feminist ethics has surfaced as a crucial one within the movement and that the debate about pornography and sexuality has brought it to the fore. However, until the issue is addressed more thoroughly and conclusively by both positions, it is unlikely that a feminist ethics will do anything more for the movement than add to the animosity of the debate.

### *Some Thoughts on the Causes of the Debate*

In the preceding chapters I have reviewed the anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions on the issues of pornography and censorship. I have interpreted the arguments and contended that their underlying assumptions betray an association with other factions within feminism: radical feminism and socialist feminism. I then asserted the fundamental differences between the two positions, radical anti-pornography and socialist anti-censorship, concerned the areas of feminist praxis, definitions of ideology, patriarchy, power, sexuality and the state. In the preceding segments of this chapter I have reviewed the problems I found with both positions' praxis and their treatment of the question of feminist ethics. In this segment I would like to use these problems as a departure point for a discussion of what I feel are some of the root causes for the debate and for its continued animosity.

In the first few paragraphs of this section 'Some More Thoughts' I concluded that one of the primary reasons for the debate was the fact that each position had trouble with praxis, putting their 'theoretical selves' into practice. I also concluded that these problems with praxis made the issue of feminist strategy the focus of the debate. It seemed each position was most aware of the other's limitations in the area of strategy and tactics.

The problems that both radical and socialist feminists have with their praxis and with the question of feminist ethics may be seen to provide enough fuel, in themselves, through misunderstandings and criticisms, for the debate. But, I contend that these problems reveal a more fundamental cause of the debate: a failure on the part of each position to critically examine its own practices. Both positions seem more than able to assess the limitations of each other's arguments but appear unable and unwilling to listen to the criticisms and to engage in critical self-reflection.

This fact leads naturally to the conclusion that radical and socialist women are, in some way, intent on maintaining the divisions and unable to admit their difficulties and open up to change. It becomes clear, at certain points in both arguments, that well-thought out strategies and theories often give way to simplistic defenses against criticisms. In other words, the structures of the debate supersede or become

more important than the issues themselves; the issues of pornography and sexual violence have been overshadowed by the debate between radical and socialist feminists. This process is evident in the radical feminist claim that they 'do not care' about means-end consistency in their praxis,<sup>25</sup> and the socialist feminist contention that it is not yet time to impose a feminist ethics.<sup>26</sup> The debate becomes an end in itself and the concern is no longer with its amicable resolution but the 'victory' of one position over the other. The stake involved is no longer the future of the movement but the future legitimacy and credibility of certain prominent members of the two warring factions.

I feel it is important to mention here that this reluctance to admit difficulties and incorporate change appears to pervade feminism as a whole at this time. Debates about pornography aside, it is becoming more apparent that this inability to adapt, the attachment of some feminists to 'classic' feminist doctrines, threatens to mar the entire feminist enterprise. I feel it is crucial that feminists today not only examine the ways in which the movement might reach younger women, but carefully and critically explore the ways in which feminism, socialist and radical, has become institutionalized and marginalized in the twenty years since its second incarnation. Has feminism become a part of the status quo? As difficult as this may seem, we must look at the ways in which we might have developed an interest as feminist activists or academics, in the maintenance of the status quo. I feel that the debate about pornography and censorship can, by providing a specific example, shed some light on these issues.

We must not forget that feminism has always been characterized by a high degree of critical self-reflection. Its priority has been to give voice to the experiences of women in patriarchy; this also includes women's experiences of the feminist movement. Its project has been double-edged: to describe and explain the structures of women's oppression and to alter them.<sup>27</sup> At this time, while the radical right still holds power, feminists must not lose sight of their goals. Feminists cannot fall prey to institutionalization. We must be able to adapt and recognize the impact of the changes we have helped to bring about. A failure to do this simply means death for the movement.



Reasons for and causes of the debate about pornography and censorship may be located at various levels in the interpretation and analysis conducted here. It may be contended that the fact that each position is arguing from different definitions of sexuality, power and the nature of the state constitutes cause enough for the debate. On another level, disagreements about the way patriarchy and ideology function and the definition of feminist praxis may be seen to add to the vitriolic debate. As well, the problems and limitations inherent in each positions' praxis along with radical and socialist women's inability to deal with the issue of feminist ethics may be identified as reasons for the debate. At least, they explain the intensive criticisms and accusations which characterize the debate. I would contend, however, that, at the most fundamental level, this debate is concerned with and caused by the inability of both radical and socialist feminists to critically examine their positions, admit their limitations, assess their achievements, open themselves to change and move towards the development of a social movement that can address the situation of women and all humans in 1987.

### The Impact of the Debate

In the last two sections I have discussed what I have found to be some of the causes of the debate and some of the reasons for its continued animosity. I have made it clear that I feel that the debate has been caused by, and reflects itself, problems with the feminist project and movement.

In this section I will speculate as to the impact of the debate on both the public and private face of the feminist movement. I will discuss how the feminist literature and the feminists interviewed for this study have interpreted the debate and what they feel the debate's impact has been on the movement. Finally, I will consider what the future might hold for feminists and for the movement.

#### *What do the debaters think about the debate?*

The debate about pornography and censorship has been ongoing during the 1980s in Canada. In the past two years however, the focus of the debate seems to have shifted from pornography to the area of sexuality and sexual practice. This fact is clearly evidenced by the numerous conferences concerned with

sexuality held recently around the country. Whatever the focus has been, however, the debate has continued with startling animosity. This is why, I feel, it is now not only necessary but vital for the future of the movement to examine the ways in which the debate has impacted upon, damaged or enhanced, the public and private face of feminism.

Discussion and commentary in the feminist press about the debate—at least up until the fall of 1986—were limited, although the 'porn war', as the debate had become known, and its effects were impossible to ignore for members of the feminist community. A good deal of debate took place in the "Letters to the Editor" sections of feminist newspapers such as Kinesis and Broadside; these columns often resounded with accusation and criticism. This was especially true in the fall of 1985 and spring of 1986, after Varda Burstyn's appearance in Forum.

It is also in these sections, however, that attempts are made to analyze and assess the debate and its damage to the movement. Megan Ellis points out in Broadside that:

the pornography debate stems directly from the reluctance of Canadian...feminists to recognize a long-standing (and international) division among feminists that between radical and socialist feminists.<sup>29</sup>

Other women comment on the uselessness of importing debates from American feminism,<sup>29</sup> and the futility of engaging in a "male-defined censorship debate".<sup>30</sup> Diana Majory states that "the two groups tend to talk at cross purposes without communicating or responding to the legitimate concerns raised by the other".<sup>31</sup> Despite varying analyses about the nature of the debate, proponents of both sides have expressed concern about the vitriolic tone of the debate:

...I find it distressing and disillusioning that women calling themselves feminists hurl such epithets as hysterical, moralistic, extremist, incoherent and that old standby, silencing, at another feminist no matter how much they might disagree with her.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most eloquent opponent of the debate is a woman who has refused to take sides at any time during the debate. Pam Blackstone, a member of Women Against Pornography in Victoria, B.C., is both anti-pornography and anti-censorship. In Broadside she writes:

...let's not kid ourselves, when it sinks to this level feminist discourse is no different than patriarchal discourse...lately the struggle has become unproductive. Effective and useful

means of communication have been abandoned in favour of accusations and counter-accusations, labelling, reproach and condemnation...We are locked into rigid ways of thinking, of looking at this problem, and we need to discard them entirely and create a radical new approach.<sup>33</sup>

The need for this radical new approach, however, has yet to be recognized throughout the feminist community.

Varda Burstyn, Susan G. Cole, Sara Diamond and Jillian Ridington, prominent feminist activists interviewed for this study, have given different assessments of the reasons for the debate and the impact of the debate on the movement. It is not surprising that, when asked, these women locate opposing points of difference in the debate. In keeping with radical feminist analysis of sexuality, Susan Cole states that the "deepest division" in the debate is between those who "think that sexuality is constructed in a way that is dangerous to women and those who don't".<sup>34</sup> Conversely, socialist feminist Sara Diamond believes that most of the differences of opinion in the debate are focused on "the nature of the state...the relationship between images and activity and ideology".<sup>35</sup> Both Cole and Diamond see the major point of conflict in the debate to be the area - sex or the state respectively - which is the central focus in their specific analyses of patriarchy. These differing opinions about the central point of conflict in the debate underline the hypothesis that each group is attempting to impose their naming of reality and their frames of reference on the other.

Socialist feminists Varda Burstyn and Sara Diamond agree about the impact of the debate on the movement. Both women feel that the feminist movement has been in crisis for many years. The anti-pornography movement and the debate that has followed it are simply reflections of, and added burdens to an already weakened movement:

...feminism has been in crisis for a very long time...there's a real inability to deal with some of the changes happening within the society: the end of government funding to the women's movement, the institutionalization of the women's movement, and the inability to reach out to different social layers of women.<sup>36</sup>

Burstyn feels that both radical and socialist currents within feminism have lost a great deal of ground in their struggles toward societal transformation as a result of the debate:

...what has happened around this debate is that real radical feminism, feminism...that challenges society at its roots, that understands the need for the transformation of all its institutions, particularly the political institutions, and that is a movement capable of being in profound solidarity with other movements of oppressed peoples...is practically gone.<sup>37</sup>

According to Burstyn, liberal feminism is now the dominant current within Canadian feminism:

In the end I think that feminism has been weakened because its two most important currents, the socialist feminist current and the radical feminist current have lost a lot of ground (and) liberal feminism has gained a great deal.<sup>38</sup>

The weakening in the two radical currents leads to a weakened capacity to speak out and act politically.

Burstyn points out that:

liberal feminism will be strengthened in the sense that socialist and radical feminism has been weakened but it will not, in the long run, experience continued strength and growth...Unless people organize to change...there will be a general weakening of feminist consciousness in the entire culture.<sup>39</sup>

Burstyn and Diamond feel that the debate has profoundly affected both the public and private face of feminism. Burstyn feels this impact has been, for the most part, negative. Diamond, however, claims that the debate has raised many important issues in the public consciousness. The most vital of these issues, she feels, is female sexuality. Diamond states that the debate "has made more space for women to start to think and act around their sexuality".<sup>40</sup> According to Diamond, this has occurred within the movement as well:

The debate has made feminists rethink the way they look at men as 'the enemy'...it has made women look at their own sexuality...it has created real frustration with some of the moralism and political correctness that's been a problem within feminism...<sup>41</sup>

Diamond feels that more open discussion about female sexuality both inside and outside feminism is a positive legacy of the debate.

Liberal feminist Jillian Ridington feels that the debate has been unnecessary. She believes that any and all feminist strategies should be embraced:

We're all committed and we're all working in ways that we feel are best and...we're not each other's enemies...the real enemy is out there and that's what we should focus on.<sup>42</sup>

Ridington claims that all feminists should be sharing their skills and insights and learning from each other, instead of trading accusations and insults. She states that feminism may have been slightly

weakened politically by the debate, and believes that the debate should have been kept within the movement:

I think that it is a debate that is entirely legitimate and proper to have within a movement but...I wish we wouldn't attack each other, I wish we could disagree with each other, but do it with more respect.<sup>43</sup>

Radical feminist Susan Cole does not feel, as the others do, that the debate, as it has occurred in Canada, presents a threat to the future of the movement. She points out that the issues involved are "at the cutting edge of feminist theory",<sup>44</sup> and that many women are still discovering feminism. For these women, Cole asserts, the debate is not relevant. She feels the issues are profound ones, and that the movement can only benefit from their exploration. Cole feels very positive about the future of the movement.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Some thoughts on the debaters thoughts*

It is interesting to note that not only do radical and socialist women identify different centres of conflict in the debate, they assess the impact of the debate differently as well. Anti-censorship, socialist women Diamond and Burstyn feel that the debate has profoundly affected the feminist movement. Anti-pornography activists, radical Cole and liberal Ridington, on the other hand, feel the debate has altered feminism very little or not at all.

I would like to suggest that anti-pornography women do not see and, consequently, do not assess the debate's impact because they simply cannot afford to do so. Anti-pornography women feel that anti-censorship feminists started the conflict in the first place by introducing the censorship debate into the discussion of pornography:

...it is Burstyn and the women/feminists against censorship who have made debate on pornography all but impossible. They have misrepresented the issue as a pro- or anti-censorship debate with the result that censorship becomes the focus rather than pornography itself.<sup>46</sup>

For radical women an acknowledgement of the debate's impact means a recognition of the power and validity of the socialist feminist position. And a recognition of the validity of the socialist feminist argument implies an acceptance of the socialist feminist frame of reference and naming of a feminist

reality. Simply put, to admit that the debate has altered the face of feminism is to admit the power of the socialist position, and to admit the power of the socialist position is, for radical feminist women, to admit defeat.

To follow this argument logically, it could then be claimed that it is in socialist feminist interests to insist that the debate has had a great impact on the movement. By doing this these women could bolster their bid for authority by emphasizing the power and validity of their opposition to the anti-pornography movement. This line of reasoning does not apply here, however, because most socialist women do not feel that they instigated the debate in any way. They feel that they merely responded to dilemmas within the movement, which happened to have, at their source, the anti-pornography campaign. They do not see themselves as oppositional but feel, rather, that the tactics of the anti-pornography activists constitute dangerous opposition to the feminist enterprise.

Although much concern was expressed in the interviews and literature reviewed for this study about the tone of the debate and its impact, there never appeared to be, in any way, a lack of commitment to the movement itself. All of these women cared deeply about the future of the movement. Throughout the debate and in spite of it, these women continued to believe in the fundamental importance and integrity of the feminist struggle.

#### *Some personal thoughts on the impact*

It seems clear that, at this time, the feminist movement is at an important crossroad in its development. It is a time of increasing difficulty and change for the movement. The degree to which the debate itself has brought about difficulties and the need for change within the movement is impossible to measure. Suffice it to say that the debate about pornography has reflected, revealed, and, indeed, amplified internal inconsistencies and fundamental questions about the movement. It is hoped that this point has been explored and explained adequately in previous chapters and sections. By doing this, however, the debate has also made room for more open discussion, new resolutions, and much needed change. It is in this way that the debate has, most definitively, impacted the movement and its future course. In fact,

optimistically, it might be claimed that the debate about pornography has brought about conditions within the feminist movement that are ripe for change.

My concern lies primarily with the debate's potential contribution to the negative feminist stereotypes that abound in the public mind. Here again it is difficult to determine what the specific impact of the debate itself might be. It seems clear, however, that the two polarized positions, filtered through the mainstream media, might provide more fuel for already well-formed misconceptions. Images of the anti-pornography feminist as a man-hating, asexual, unattractive, radical fanatic will easily be supported and bolstered by the sensation-seeking media. The reactionary radical right have already done their part to encourage the impression of the anti-censorship feminist, indeed all feminists, as anti-family, anti-motherhood, sexually promiscuous, manipulative and 'overly' ambitious.

Earlier in this chapter I pointed out that problems with radical and socialist feminist praxis were to blame for feminism's inability to maintain widespread public support and appeal to a new generation of women. But it must be contended that these abundant negative stereotypes have also contributed to the difficulties now facing the women's movement. It might also be suggested that these stereotypes are the result of the intensive change brought about in the first years of the feminist movement; the result of the dissemination of new ideas across a diffuse public consciousness without the committed support of the agents of dissemination. These stereotypes embody the fears and reactions of all those threatened by the feminist project; they betray a lack of understanding. Most blatantly, these negative images provide examples of the patriarchal status quo's attempt to coopt or incorporate feminists and feminism into its symbolic order.

These stereotypes must be combatted. Debate within the movement has been concerned with the best way to combat sexist images of women as embodied in pornography. But, it has been shown earlier that this debate has reflected, itself, patriarchal discourse in its structure and tone. I suggest that what needs to be discussed now, and urgently, is the best way to combat the institutionalization and cooptation of the feminist movement itself.

## Notes

1. Rosalind Coward, Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 1.
2. See Pam Blackstone's "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 6; April 1986.
3. Coward, op. cit., p. 1.
4. Megan Ellis, private interview, March 1985.
5. See Susan G. Cole's Keynote Address for Coming Together: A Sexuality Conference, October 4, 1985, my private interview with her in June 1986, and her article "Sexuality and Its Discontents" in Broadside, volume 6, number 6, April 1985.
6. See Angela Miles' article "Feminist Radicalism in the 1980's", Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory, Volume 9, numbers 1-2, Winter/Spring 1985.
7. For an elaboration of this argument see Geraldine Finn's article "Against Sexual Imagery, Alternative and Otherwise" in Parallelogramme, Volume 12 number 1, Fall, 1986.
8. Andrea Dworkin quoted in Elizabeth Wilson's "Interview with Andrea Dworkin", Feminist Review, Summer 1982, p. 27.
9. Alison Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 289.
10. Susan Cole, "Review of *Women Against Censorship*", Canadian Journal of Women and The Law, Volume 1, 1985, p. 239.
11. Miles, "Feminist Radicalism...", op. cit., p. 33.
12. Varda Burstyn, private interview, June 1986.
13. Varda Burstyn, "Beyond Despair, Positive Strategies", Women Against Censorship, Burstyn (ed.), Toronto and Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1985, p. 167.
14. Gary Kinsman, "The Porn Debates", Fuse, Summer 1984, p. 44.
15. Mariana Valverde, Sex, Power and Pleasure, Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985, p. 203-204.
16. Ibid., p. 201.
17. Carole S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality", Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, Vance (ed.), Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 22.
18. Andrea Dworkin, "No Judgements, No Politics", Broadside, Volume 3 number 9, August 1982, p. 7.
19. Freida Forman, "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 5, March 1986, p. 3.
20. Patricia Hughes, "Pornography: Alternatives to Censorship", Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory, Volume 9 numbers 1-2, Winter/Spring 1985, p. 97.



21. Ibid., p. 97.
22. Dworkin, "No Judgements...", op. cit., p. 7.
23. Sara Diamond, private interview, May 1986.
24. This was plainly in evidence at The Heat is On: Women on Art on Sex Conference held in Vancouver, November/December 1985.
25. Ellis, private interview, March 1985.
26. Diamond, private interview, May 1986.
27. Paula Treichler, "Teaching Feminist Theory", Theory in the Classroom, Gary Nelson (ed.), Urbana: University of Illinois Press, in press, p. 18.
28. Megan Ellis, "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 7, May 1986, p. 3.
29. Pamela Walker, "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 5, March 1986, p. 3.
30. Jeri Wine, "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 5, March 1986, p. 3.
31. Diana Majory, "Comment on the Crusades", Broadside, Volume 6 number 8, June 1985, p. 3.
32. Jan Barnsley, "Letter to the Editor", Broadside, Volume 7 number 6, April 1986, p. 3.
33. Blackstone, "Letter...", op. cit., p. 3.
34. Susan Cole, private interview, June 1986.
35. Diamond, private interview, May 1986.
36. Ibid.
37. Burstyn, private interview, June 1986.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Diamond, private interview, May 1986.
41. Ibid.
42. Ridington, private interview, July 1986.
43. Ibid.
44. Cole, private interview, June 1986.
45. Ibid.
46. Jan Barnsley, op. cit., p. 3.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to explore the significance of the feminist debate about pornography in Canada. In the previous chapters I have examined the debate's history, its composite arguments and their underlying assumptions. I have also discussed the criticisms and accusations that have characterized the debate and have reviewed what I have found to be the fundamental differences between the positions in the debate. In the final chapter I speculated as to the nature of the debate, its causes, and the reasons for its continued animosity. I also discussed the impact of the debate about pornography on the Canadian feminist movement.

What, then, has this debate signified? What are the different levels of meaning within the debate and what have they revealed about the nature of the debate and trends within the feminist movement?

To begin we are presented with a debate within the feminist movement between those feminists opposed to pornography and in favour of some form of government regulation to combat it and those feminists who are opposed to any form of government legislation against sexual imagery because they feel these laws will be used against feminists, gays, and alternative artists. Immediately, upon close examination of each position's argument – arguments articulated through a few prominent spokespeople on each side of the debate – it becomes clear that the assumptions implicit in the arguments betray a deeper and longer-standing division within feminism between radical feminists and socialist feminists. It becomes obvious that the anti-pornography position is firmly situated in radical feminist definitions of the nature of sexuality, power and the role of the state, and that the anti-censorship stance has socialist feminist conceptions of sexuality, power and the role of the state at its core. The first level of meaning beneath the most obvious anti-pornography/ anti-censorship debate has emerged: both major positions are directly affiliated with two other, already polarized, positions, radical feminism and socialist feminism.

With this first level of meaning clarified, continued examination of the criticisms and accusations exchanged between the two positions reveals more information about the debate. It seems apparent that the debate, through its association with radical and socialist feminisms, has become artificially polarized.

A review of the criticisms reveals that the positions are arguing past each other, about two different phenomenon, pornography and censorship, from different definitions of sex, power, and the state. An exploration of the similarities between the two positions conveys another level of meaning within the debate; the debate reflects the fact that socialist and radical feminists are working with and arguing from different definitions of ideology, patriarchy and feminist praxis.

These different definitions bring into question an issue that lies at the core of the debate about pornography and censorship: the definition of feminism itself. After a review of each position's definition of feminism it becomes clear that, theoretically, each position should accept the other, as each position appears to appreciate and encourage diversity as a necessary facet of the feminist enterprise, but they do not. The debate is evidence of this fact. I have concluded from this fact that 1) each position has problems with their praxis and 2) feminist strategy, proposed praxis, is the central point of contention in the debate. At this level of meaning the debate signifies problems with both radical and socialist feminist praxis.

A review of the problems with radical and socialist feminist praxis and a discussion of what I have found to be a related problem of feminist ethics facilitated the identification of a more general problem within feminism and another level of significance within the debate: an inability on the part of some feminists to critically examine their positions, admit their limitations, and open themselves to change within the feminist movement. This problem brings with it the question of the potential cooptation and institutionalization of feminism by the patriarchal status quo.

Within a different framework of understanding, from the perspective of 'discourse', 'power', and 'language', I contend that the debate does, in fact, signify a cooptation of feminist interests by the status quo. This cooptation is evident in the form and the method of the debate itself. Radical and socialist feminists taking part in the debate have fallen prey to the structure of polarized political debate and methods of vitriolic accusation and counter-accusation which most often characterize patriarchal political discourse. Instead of making patriarchal structures and methods of political debate themselves the object

of analysis, feminists have internalized them. Feminists have replicated a quality of debate that belongs to the dominant patriarchy, this fact renders feminists and the feminist movement susceptible to further cooptation by the patriarchal status quo.

The debate is seen to signify a definitional struggle between radical and socialist feminists. This struggle has artificially polarized and displaced the debate among feminists about pornography. The struggle has also succeeded in excluding many feminists who do not share the radical anti-pornography position or the socialist anti-censorship stance. Most importantly, however, the struggle between radical and socialist feminists has diverted attention away from the issues that gave rise to the debate: misogynist pornography and sexual violence against women. The definitional struggle concerns, most fundamentally, the determination of what constitutes 'feminism'.

The causes of the debate and the reasons for their continued animosity are directly linked to the levels of meaning uncovered within the debate. Cause might be located in the fact that each position argues from different definitions of patriarchy, ideology, sexuality, and power and with opposing understandings of feminist praxis and the role of the state. On another level the problems with each position's praxis and their inability to resolve the issue of feminist ethics might be understood to be a likely cause of the debate. Some feminists' inability to accept criticism and reluctance to reevaluate the present and future of the feminist project has most definitely helped to continue the stalemate in the debate. The fact that the debate reflects the structures and methods of patriarchal political debate and that feminists have not been able to look beyond these structures might also be seen to contribute to the animosity of the debate about pornography. Finally, the most obvious cause of the debate about pornography as it has come to exist within Canadian feminism is the displacement of the issue of pornography and the discussion around it by radical and socialist feminists.

The Canadian feminist movement is still engaged in the debate about pornography, sexual practice and representation. Although emphasis shifts from one area to another, the issues raised by the pornography debate continue to be discussed and explored by feminists. As Sara Diamond has pointed

out, this a positive impact of the debate. Simply, it seems that the debate has brought into question the principles, priorities, and goals of feminism in a way no other discussion has done within the movement. The present and future status of the feminist movement itself is at issue.

I contend that the implications of the debate necessitate an examination of the state of feminism. At what point does the crucial diversity of opinion within the movement, a diversity both radical and socialist feminists theoretically embrace, become division, accusation, reproach, and alienation? I would suggest that this point is one at which the cooptive forces and incorporative capacities of patriarchy overwhelm or wear down the resolve of those who have fought hard and dearly to oppose it. This point is one at which the issues and the goals of the movement desperately need redefinition and are somehow forgotten in the desire to maintain control and ascendancy. This point is one at which analytic capacities within the movement cease to turn inward toward the realities of women's lives, to women's changing experiences of patriarchy and the movement, and cease the crucial, perpetual, unrelenting questioning of the ways in which the forces and structures of patriarchy shape our lives, our actions, and our debates. It is obvious, in any case, that this point has long passed.

The time has now come for a serious questioning and reevaluation of the feminist project. It must be made clear, however, that this statement is not intended to belittle or ignore the important and extensive contributions of both radical and socialist feminists to the amelioration of the status of women. The gains that all feminists have made for women in the past twenty years are innumerable and immensely valuable. But the need exists now, as evidenced by the debate about pornography, in 1987, for an assessment of the situation of feminism and feminists in the social world. We might agree that oppression and inequality still exist for women, but how are the forms of this oppression different from twenty years ago? How has women's experience of this oppression changed in the last twenty years? What role has the movement played in changing women's experience of oppression? What changes might be made in feminist strategy and tactics and in the feminist agenda to meet the changing needs of women? How do we, as feminists, combat the attempts to incorporate, coopt, and delegitimize the feminist enterprise by the patriarchal status quo?

These are questions that desperately need examination by feminists. I contend that the debate about pornography has drawn attention to these questions. It is hoped that, when and if this examination is undertaken in the future, we feminists might look back upon the debate about pornography and claim, with confidence and in sisterhood, that its legacy has been profoundly positive.

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