

RADICAL FEMINISM: AN EXPOSÉ

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1. Summary

So-called "radical feminism" purports to be concerned with equality for women. The contention of this paper is that radical feminism is not really concerned with equality for women at all; that in reality it is a campaign of puritanical sex repression which uses the issue of women's equality as a smokescreen; and that every success of the campaign is actually a step backwards from the point of view of women's interests.

The structure of the argument is as follows. Radical feminists have campaigns against a number of things on the grounds of equality for women. Each of these things could be objectionable on grounds of sexual equality *only if* there were an asymmetry in the way the sexes were treated in respect of them. However there is no such asymmetry for any of these things. What these things *do* have in common is that, in some way or another, they concern - or bring to attention - the issue of sex. The radical feminist campaign against these things, despite its ostensible concern for women's equality, is merely an attempt to suppress sex.

There are only two kinds of inequality between the sexes which libertarians would in principle want to remove. Inequality of rights (or negative freedom) is morally objectionable. Inequality of autonomy (or positive freedom, or "psychological freedom", or *rationality*) is lamentable, and remediable through non-coercive rational means. Briefly, rational autonomy means making one's choices about how to live, or what to do, on the basis of an honest assessment of oneself and a rational appraisal of the available options.¹ Any puritanical campaign of sex suppression is an assault on rational autonomy in matters of sexuality. The radical feminist campaign pretends that suppression of sex is a women's issue, and thus specifically assaults the autonomy of *women* in matters of sexuality. This promotes inequality between the sexes in a way which runs directly counter to women's interests.²

2. Introduction

In what follows I will consider claims made by radical feminists concerning a range of manifestations of sex. I cannot consider the

radical feminists' arguments for these claims, since they give none. Argument, logic and evidence are quite alien to the radical feminist, as indeed they are to repressive zealots in general. It will, however, be easy to show that the claims are false. The claims are made by the puritans merely as a means to give some spurious respectability to their objective of suppressing sex wherever it is wont to appear.³

However, before I consider the claims, I want to distinguish two kinds of objection to something on the grounds of sexual equality. The weaker kind of objection maintains that inequality is involved in the thing *in the way in which it exists*. The stronger kind of objection maintains that inequality is involved in the thing *intrinsically*. The first kind of objection is weaker because, if it is admitted, all that is required to remove the objection is to change the way in which the thing exists, while the thing itself can stay. The second kind of objection is stronger because, if it is admitted, then the objection can be removed only if the thing is abolished.

In each of the cases to be considered, the radical feminists are urging the *stronger* kind of objection, because they couple their claim with a call for prohibition or abolition. In other words, for each of the things to be considered, the radical feminists are claiming that the thing *intrinsically* involves sexual inequality.

3. Prostitution

Radical feminists denounce prostitution as an institution of male oppression of women.⁴ This could be true only if all prostitutes were female and all clients of prostitutes male. However, not only are there male prostitutes with male clients; there are also male prostitutes with female clients, ranging from the "toy boys" of rich middle-aged women, to men who advertise to their female clients through contact magazines. On the Continent, of course, things are much more open: in Amsterdam women can hire men from *Jan Bik*, while in Hamburg they can go to the Crazy Boys male brothel. *Jan Bik* also, apparently, provides female prostitutes for female clients.⁵

In other words, prostitution is, in principle, indifferent between the sexes and so does not *intrinsically* raise any question of sex equality. There may of course be genuine questions of sexual equality surrounding prostitution as it exists *at present*, e.g. why are male prostitutes treated differently to female prostitutes? However, the radical feminists object to the very existence of prostitution, and not just to inequalities in the *way* in which it exists.⁶

4. Pornography

The problem with pornography, say the radical feminists, is that it is the graphic depiction of women as "sexual objects",⁷ as "vile whores";⁸ it "makes all women into cunts".⁹

Hard core heterosexual pornography shows *men and women* enjoying uninhibited sex with each other. Hard core gay pornography shows *men and men* or, on the other hand, *women and women*, enjoying uninhibited sex with each other. Soft core pornography may show naked *men and women* together, or it may just show naked *men*, or it may just show naked *women*. In other words, there is no intrinsic asymmetry between the sexes in pornography, whether hard core or soft core. Consequently, if the radical feminist claims were true (which I deny), then it would also be true that pornography is the graphic depiction of *men* as "sexual objects", as "vile (male) whores", and that it "makes all men into pricks". The radical feminist objection does not, therefore, raise a question about sex equality. They are just objecting to the graphic depiction of sex.

The radical feminists also claim that pornography encourages sexual violence against women, and they even claim that there is research evidence to support this.¹⁰ However, the Home Office has commissioned two official investigations into this question, and both have concluded that there is no evidence that pornography gives rise to any kind of anti-social behaviour.¹¹ Indeed, anyone at all familiar with the research evidence knows this much: either the radical feminists are *not* familiar with it, or they do not understand it, or they are arrant liars.¹² Further, it seems absurd to me that anyone should even think that pornography should lead to bad behaviour. Clearly, one would expect that it may lead to *sexual* behaviour; but only someone for whom sexual behaviour is bad would make the inference to *bad* behaviour.¹³

5. Pin-ups

The radical feminist objection to pin-ups, page three girls, calendars featuring nude or semi-nude models, etc. is essentially the same as that concerning pornography: they claim that they degrade women,

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depict them as sex objects, etc. The reply to it is the same too: there are male pin-ups, page seven fellas, calendars featuring nude or semi-nude men. If the radical feminist claim were sound, then these things would degrade men, depict them as sex objects, etc. So once again, they are not objecting to sex *inequality*, they are just objecting to *sex*.

6. Gratuitous Sex

Another thing that stirs radical feminists into a rage is gratuitous sex, whether it be sex scenes in films or the use of sex in advertising. I don't want to labour the point: it should again be obvious that there is no asymmetry between the sexes as there would have to be for this to be an issue of sex equality. For example, attractive men are used to sell things to women, just as attractive women are used to sell things to men. Only a sex puritan would object to this.

7. Forms of Expression

There are many forms of expression in common use that the radical feminists want to prohibit. One of these is the word "love" in the way in which it is often used by working-class men to call or refer to women, especially those whose name they do not know. In this use, the word is not intended to be an insult or abuse; if anything, it is a term of endearment. But the radical feminists denounce it as "sexist".

However, this term is not only used by men in reference to women: it is also used by working-class women to call or refer to men in exactly the same way. So once again there is no issue of sex equality here: the puritans just take exception to any terms of endearment between the sexes!

The case is similar with respect to many other radical feminist linguistic prohibitions: the blacklisted expressions raise no issue of sexual inequality, they merely raise the topic of sex.

8. Conclusion

We have considered a range of issues where radical feminists raise objections to things ostensibly on the ground of sexual equality. In each case, we have seen that there is no intrinsic asymmetry between the sexes and so no ground for the radical feminist claims. In each case, all that the radical feminists are objecting to is sex. "Sexist" is just their pejorative term for *sexy*. Anti-sexism is just anti-sex.

I explained in the Introduction that the radical feminist objections considered do not concern merely the way in which things exist but rather the very existence of the things concerned. In relation to pornography, however, some radical feminists seem to be sensitive to the charge of puritanism, and have introduced the notion of "erotica" which would be "sexually explicit material premised on equality".¹⁴ This would alter the nature of the objection to pornography: the complaint would be merely that *the pornography that exists* involves sexual inequality. There are two problems with this. First, it seems plain to me that the definition of "erotica" applies to current pornography, especially the hard core material, which shows men and women enjoying uninhibited sex together in every conceivable way (I will say a bit more about this below). Second, the kind of objections made by the radical feminists against pornography appear to be based on the fact that the material is sexually explicit, and so they ought to apply equally to so-called "erotica". So this attempt by the radical feminists to distinguish themselves from sex puritans, with regard to the question of pornography, seems certain to lead them into self-contradiction.

Some feminists have seen through the radical feminist smokescreen, at least with respect to pornography.¹⁵ They have pointed out that the radical feminist campaign is puritanical, sexually repressive, and is more likely to impede than to advance women's equality. Some have even championed pornography as a force for women's liberation, since it does not tie women's sexuality to reproduction or to a domesticated couple or exclusively to men.¹⁶ Indeed, "it advocates sexual adventure, sex outside of marriage, sex for no reason other than pleasure, casual sex, anonymous sex, group sex, voyeuristic sex, illegal sex, public sex".¹⁷ Pornography, "in rejecting sexual repression and hypocrisy - which have inflicted even more damage on women than on men - expresses a radical impulse ... if feminists define pornography, per se, as the enemy, the result will be to make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them. And the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt, and hypocrisy - this time served up as feminism."¹⁸

The point can be generalised to all the radical feminist anti-sex campaigns: every success of the radical feminists is a step backwards for women's sexual liberation.¹⁹

NOTES

1. I say a bit more about autonomy, specifically in relation to sexuality, in an earlier paper, *Sexual Liberation*, Political Notes No. 64, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1991, which includes an inchoate version of the argument of the present paper.
2. This paper focuses on a range of specific issues, but the following more general point can also be made. If you want to get yourself into a condition in which you are completely unable to understand anything about sex, it's easy: just read, uncritically, the writings of the radical feminists. Their hatred of sex is only part of the problem. The other part is their superlative exaggeration of the differences between the sexes: so many of the "women's problems" that they raise are actually human problems. There just does not exist the *stark* asymmetry between the sexes that the radical feminists assume.
3. I do not here mean to claim that all radical feminists are *consciously* practising deceit by cloaking puritanical sex repression with claims of sex equality. Some of them may be doing this knowingly; but in most cases it would probably stem from self-deception.
4. See, e.g., Jess Wells, *A Herstory of Prostitution in Western Europe*, Shameless Hussy Press, Berkeley CA, 1982, *passim*, but especially p. 79, pp. 89-91. This is probably the worst book I have ever read to the end.
5. See Tuppy Owens, *The Safer Sex Maniacs Bible*, Miss Tuppy Owens, London, 1990.
6. Some people respond to the claim that (female) prostitutes are the victims of (male) power, domination or "exploitation" by saying that it is really the men who are "exploited" by having to pay for sex. In truth, however, there is nothing in prostitution *as such* to make it an instance of power or domination or "exploitation". In the paradigmatic case, the prostitute and the client enter into a voluntary exchange of a service (some form of sex) for money: a standard business transaction which results in a satisfied customer and an honest profit for the entrepreneur. It is just false that some kind of coercion or intimidation is inherent to prostitution.
7. Catharine MacKinnon, quoted in G. Hawkins and F. E. Zimring, *Pornography in a Free Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 154.
8. Andrea Dworkin, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 160.
9. Catharine MacKinnon, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 169.
10. E.g., MacKinnon, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 164-165.
11. Bernard Williams (Chairman), *Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1979; D. Howitt and G. Cumberbatch, *Pornography: Impacts and Influences*, Home Office Research and Planning Unit, London, 1990.
12. If you ever hear a radical feminist refer to research evidence, then try this: (i) ask them to which specific research evidence they are referring (they probably won't be able to answer); (ii) if they give a reply, look up the research, and you will find that it does not support the claims that the radical feminist has made.
13. And what sort of sexual behaviour might it lead to? Some people assume it will be masturbation. (Some even argue against pornography for precisely this reason; while others, e.g. Kenneth Tynan, "Dirty Books Can Stay", in D. A. Hughes, ed., *Perspectives on Pornography*, Macmillan, New York, 1970, *defend* pornography for the same reason.) But it is also used in a variety of other ways, including: (a) as a stimulus to sex by couples watching together; (b) as a stimulus to sex by one or both members of a couple, separately, before they meet; (c) as a stimulus to sex by several people engaged in, or soon to be engaged in, group sex; (d) for the fun of sexual arousal itself, even though sex will not follow; (e) for mere enjoyment or interest when there is no question of sex or even sexual arousal, e.g. because of fatigue; (f) to provide material for sexual fantasy (such fantasies themselves being used in a variety of ways, e.g. as a private mind-game which enhances sex with a partner or by oneself, or as the plot for a sex game played out with other people, etc.). Let me also add one other point: it seems to me self-evident that anyone with hang-ups about pornography has hang-ups about sex!
14. Catharine MacKinnon, quoted in Hawkins and Zimring, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
15. See Kate Ellis, Barbara O'Dair, and Abby Talmer, eds., *Caught Looking*, Caught Looking Inc., New York, 1986.
16. Paula Webster, "Pornography and Pleasure", *ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
17. Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter, and Carole S. Vance, "False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation", *ibid.*, p. 82.
18. Ellen Willis, "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography", *ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
19. The radical feminist fuss over sexual harassment is similar but different to the cases discussed. It is similar in at least the following two ways. First, sexual harassment does not intrinsically involve sexual inequality: men can be, and sometimes are, the victims of sexual harassment by women, as well as vice versa. Second, the aim of the campaign is anti-sex: the puritans want to inhibit people from making sexual advances, by stigmatising and/or prohibiting any such advance as "sexual harassment". However, it is different in that genuine sexual harassment (of men or women), like any other bullying, is wrong (unlike all the other things discussed in this paper to which radical feminists object).