

DEBATE ON THE MOTION THAT PORNOGRAPHY IS DECADENCE EXPLOITED

CAMBRIDGE UNION DEBATING SOCIETY - 18TH OCT. '76

Mr. President, sir, I want to begin with - oh, by the way, I do hope that no-one will leave before the end of this debate because they will not only forfeit their vote but will ~~lose~~^{miss} the opportunity of examining the free samples I shall be passing round at that point. I want to begin with a quote from the Report of the United States Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography of 1970, to which, incidentally, I shall be referring quite often since it is one of the most important, in-depth, objective probes into this subject so far undertaken, and because it overwhelmingly rejected the opinion that pornography and obscenity were harmful, moreover found that in many cases they could, in fact, be helpful and recommended the repeal of all legislation which made its sale illegal to adults.

The quote is from the report of the "Effects Panel" of the Commission, i.e. the effects of exposure to pornography. It reads as follows:-

"Substantial difficulties exist with regard to the terms "obscenity" and "pornography". There is no adequate definition of either in legal parlance or in ordinary language."

Well, as we all know, from many much-publicised prosecutions under our own Obscene Publications Acts, and as my esteemed colleague Mr. Calder knows from first-hand experience, this is certainly so. What is "obscene" or "pornographic" to one person is nothing of the sort to another. There is tremendous subjectivity associated with such terms. I, for example, find boxing "obscene". To others it is a sport, the noble art of self-defence, even! An American Judge's erudite exposition of pornography (Justice Stewart) was simply "I know it when I see it"! Anyway, in the absence of any well-defined and generally acceptable definition of both obscenity and pornography, these terms were both eliminated from the Panel's research vocabulary and the words "erotic" and "sexual" were substituted. Erotic and sexual. I think that we would do well to emulate their example for the purposes of this debate

because pornography has become so emotive a word for many, its meaning has become almost totally obscured. When I was first asked to participate in this debate, quite naturally, and as many others do before such an occasion, I consulted a dictionary - not that well-known one from another place (incidentally a place far more suited to debating matters of decadence than the present venue, I should have thought, however - no ~~not~~ that one but another dictionary which was to hand. It reads:- "Pornography - licentious painting or writing; literature which is deliberately "obscene". Well, I ask you? Back to square one. It was published 30 years ago but still, not exactly a lot of help. However, I feel sure that none of us here are really in any doubt about that which concerns us in this debate but, since the word has come to be associated in many people's minds with "filth", which it is not, I, personally, am very leath to use it at all. I much prefer simply to refer to "sexually explicit material", for that is all that pornography is - whether it be the written word, the spoken word, drawing, painting or sculpture, or photography. In fact anything that can be seen, heard or spoken which is sexually explicit.

We hear, and have heard (this evening?) a very great deal nowadays about "permissiveness" and "outspokenness" but the fact remains that most people are still enormously inhibited about sexual matters in one way or another and I think that we would do well to consider possible reasons for this. Why is it that so many people are so "hung up" about sex, which is, after all, a perfectly natural, instinctive driving force - like eating! No-one is embarrassed by frank talk about food or tastes in food. No-one finds cookery books "offensive". Nobody gets their knickers in a twist about eating, so why should they get their knickers in a twist about sex? - or perhaps rather why should they not get their knickers in a twist about sex! What is so evil and wicked about the pursuit of sex, the gratification of sex and, consequently, the depiction of sex? Let me quote again from the U.S. Presidential Commission Report and, this time, a man called Hyman, who said:-

"Despite the forces of censorship, sexual intercourse is not a depraved, shameful vice. It is a normal body function, habitual to the judge's parents,

George Washington and many leaders of the Girl Scouts. It will become habitual to our innocent daughters, or we should hope that it will."

A sane thought, indeed, but, alas, how inaccurate a true reflection of the thoughts of those numerous souls who, as a result of self-perpetuating taboos, founded on fear, shame, jealousy or inadequacy and handed down very often unthinkingly and yet so damagingly by generation after generation, find themselves imprisoned in the straight-jacket of puritanism, the fertile breeding ground for all their future violent, illogical detestation of all open-ness and frankness appertaining to sexual matters. Is it any wonder, therefore, that such inherited inhibition should be bound to invoke such deep hostility towards pornography - i.e. sexually explicit material?

If a mind has been contaminated in this way and sex has become associated with "dirtiness" or "depravity", then it must follow that the depiction of sex, by whatever means, will be considered dirty or depraved - and the explicit depiction of sex (which, as we have already seen, is all that pornography is) will outrage such confused moral values and thus be branded as decadent. To the more enlightened, the more liberated, the more educated amongst us, however, decadence has nothing to do with it. I quote again from the findings of the U.S. Presidential Commission:-

"Persons who have the greater amount of experience with erotic materials tend to be male, younger, better educated, urban, to consume more mass communication media, to be more socially active, more politically active, and less active in religious affairs. Those who have less experience with erotic materials tend to be female, older, less educated, to live in small cities or rural areas, to be less exposed to general communication media, less socially active and more active in religious affairs."

I'll give you a moment to allow that little lot to sink in because, when it has, I have absolutely no doubt at all about the outcome of this debate! In the unlikely event, however, that there are still some who remain unconvinced and might still be favouring the motion, I will continue, Mr. President, if I may, for a little longer.

I have just read a quotation which referred to activity in religious affairs which

could lead me quite nicely into "Have you heard the one about the curate and the vicar's wife?" and then I could wind up with a couple of chéruses from "The Sound of Music". Instead, however, I want to examine the influence of religious groups in this sphere for there is no doubt at all that they, more than all other interested parties, form the mainstay of opposition to and hatred for pornography. Furthermore their hatred is, I regret to say, manifested in highly organised campaigns, dangerously charged with emotion, irrationality and intolerance. It is, curiously, quite the opposite kind of behaviour one would expect as the product of religious teaching, especially Christian teaching. Witness, for example (as if you could possibly have missed it!), witness the recent furore over the proposed film of the sex-life of Jesus Christ, which Mr. Jens Thorsen is contemplating and who would probably have been standing here in this very spot tonight, had not Mrs. Whitehouse "censored" his appearance, presumably because she felt her arguments would not stand up to his. Since he is not here, I feel it only fair publicly to defend him against the fanatics who have re-acted so violently a) about a film which has not yet even been made and b) even if it had been made, for attempting to stifle freedom of expression. In a letter I received from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Hume, the man who started all the fuss with his letter to "The Times", he accuses me, if you please, of over-reacting. Me! If that doesn't deserve some kind of championship trophy for muddled thinking, I'll eat my biretta. Never before have we been subjected to such a ludicrous spectacle of hysterical over-reaction from our religious institutions. Save for the sanity of the Bishop of Wakefield and Dr. Colin Morris, President of the Methodist Conference, almost all of them erupted in what Bernard Levin aptly described as "enough bilge to float the entire contents of Jane's Fighting Ships". Even the Queen joined in and took the unprecedented decision of involving herself publicly in a controversial matter of this kind by declaring that she found the proposal to make such a film "as obnoxious" as did the majority of her subjects. Now I don't recall that we had a referendum on the question, so how did she know that the majority of her subjects shared her opinion? Perhaps she was using as her yardstick the length of column inches allocated in "The Times" correspondence

section against the making of such a film? But surely she must be as aware as everyone else, that "The Times", with its strongly pre-Catholic editor, has been conducting its own ruthless campaign against pornography for a long time now, complete with vicious leaders, highly subjective reporting and letters carefully scrutinized for bias? Not a very accurate barometer of general public opinion, I should have thought. Or was she, too, under that common misconception of assuming that the majority of her subjects are Christians and would, therefore, naturally disapprove of Mr. Thorsen's film? If she was, I'm afraid I've news for her. Whether the Queen, Cardinal Hume, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the General of the Salvation Army, the Moderator of the Free Church Council, the Festival of Light, the Secretary of the National Viewers and Listeners Association et al, whether they all like it or not, the majority of the people of this country are not members of the Christian church, neither do they subscribe to the beliefs and codes of conduct decreed by the various Church hierarchies. We are, in the main, a secular society and those who strive to perpetuate the Establishment myth that we are not, may as well spare their breath to cool their porridge. The religious institutions, especially the larger ones, must rid themselves of their immense arrogance and stop assuming that their standards of morality are infallible and irrefutable and that they are, thus, speaking for us all. I firmly believe that the majority of the people of this country are sick and tired of being kept in line by what they regard as a bigoted minority. Now I happen to be an agnostic but I do genuinely respect the religious beliefs of others - except when they attempt to force their opinions and standards on me (and others like me who do not want them). Agnostic I may be, but I still cannot, for the life of me, see why pornography - sexually explicit material - should be precluded to Christians or that it is in any way incompatible with Christian living. I simply cannot accept that their God, any God, could take any possible exception to it. If we believe in such a super-natural being, we surely believe that he is a benevolent God. How could a benevolent God condemn, or even frown upon, something as pleasurable as sex, which he is in any case, like everything else, supposed to have created? What is wrong with the pursuit of pleasure and happiness? What is wrong with being sexually

aroused? Does Christianity demand of its followers a life of perpetual gloom and doom and joylessness? Surely not! As Hyman is again quoted in the Presidential Commission Report:-

"The open distribution of pornography would encourage heterosexuality and discourage impotence and frigidity. As such, it is life giving, a stimulus to joy and a source of socially harmless pleasure".

Let us, therefore, reject out of hand any religious reasons for condemning the proliferation of pornography or for regarding it as decadent.

To conclude

~~Finally~~, let's consider the condemnation of pornography on the grounds that it is harmful (about which we've already heard a great deal from Mrs. Whitehouse and ?). When Denmark decided, way back in 1967, to throw out all its existing censorship laws, after the presentation of the Report from the Danish Forensic Medicine Council to the Danish Penal Code Council, very little research had been undertaken into the impact of exposure to pornography, but the Council stated that, since it was commonly known in medical science that sexual leanings are fixed at an early age, probably around 5-6 years old, and are in any case, completely established by the end of puberty, it is therefore hardly likely that the reading of "obscene" writings or the sight of films etc. will change the sexual leanings of an adult person. Their report went on later to state "The effect of pornography will consist, above all, in the stimulation of sexual inclinations in the already existing direction and it is therefore doubtful whether pornography can change the direction of sexual inclinations." In other words it does not corrupt. In fact it went further still by stating that, after a survey of researches all over the world, it could find no basis for the assumption that pornography contributes to the committing of sexual offences by normal adults or young people, that there was a possibility that pornography could even have a beneficial effect on sexually shy, neurotic people and that this statement holds good "regardless of whether the pornographic writings, pictures etc. are of normal or sexually perverted content".

In June 1968 the Arts Council of Great Britain set up its working party to

investigate the operation of the British Obscene Publications Acts and other relevant Acts, all of which, in one way or another, contributed to the suppression of Pornography. It's findings were exactly similar to those of the Danish Forensic Medicine Council. Quoted in the Arts Council Report is one Professor R.M. Jackson, Downing Professor of the Laws of England here at Cambridge, as follows:-

"The supposed depravity and corruption produced by obscene articles is a matter of conjecture. No hard evidence can be put forward, for nobody can demonstrate that anybody has ever been depraved or corrupted by a particular obscene article. A decision that an article would have such a tendency is based entirely upon opinion un-supported by verifiable facts."

The main conclusions of the working party were to recommend the complete repeal of our Obscene Publications Acts (in spite of the fact that, 8 years later, nothing has been done!). "Repression", says the Report, "is what can deprave and corrupt".

Finally, the United States Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, which came later in 1968 and lasted two years, is, as I said when I began, by far the most extensive, in-depth and objective piece of research ever undertaken in this field so far (in spite of Mrs. Whitehouse's claims otherwise and her clumsy attempts to discredit it) and its findings were exactly similar both to the Danish Report and the British Report - but far more definite:- I quote

"Extensive empirical investigation, both by the Commission and by others, provides no evidence that exposure to or use of explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in causation of social or individual harms such as crime, delinquency, sexual or non-sexual deviancy or severe emotional disturbances".

This referred both to adult and adolescent behaviour and it went on to say that, furthermore, sexually explicit materials are of positive benefit to a substantial number of Americans i.e. in helping marital relationships and acting as an "outlet" or "safety valve".

By the time the Commission's Report was published in 1970, President Nixon had

replaced President Johnson, who had initiated the Commission. The Commission recommended that Federal, State and local legislation prohibiting the sale, exhibition or distribution of sexual materials to consenting adults should be repealed. President Nixon issued a statement categorically rejecting its "morally bankrupt conclusions and major recommendations". I think it is worth recounting here how he concluded his statement.

"We all hold the responsibility for keeping America a good country", he said.

"American morality is not to be trifled with".

In the light of subsequent events, I think that further comment would be superfluous.

Three major investigatory reports, the latter promoted by the Government of the most powerful country in the world with the mistaken assumption that its findings would be quite the opposite to what happened in the event, have reached virtually exactly the same conclusion which is that pornography - sexually explicit material - of whatever kind - does not deprave and corrupt. It is not harmful and can even be beneficial. If it can do good, therefore, it cannot be immoral, and if it is not immoral, it is certainly not morally decaying, or decadent. It may well be "exploited" in the way that alcohol, incidentally a proven and medically undisputed potentially harmful, even lethal, phenomenon, is exploited. It may well be exploited because censorship renders it illegal which perhaps adds to its attraction and thus its commercial value, but it is not, as I hope I have plainly shown, decadence exploited. I strongly urge you to vote against the motion.