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1-2019

## Pornography: For Consumption, Not Creation: The Radical Nature of the Commercial Sex Industry

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### Citation of this paper:

Bergen, Rikki N., "Pornography: For Consumption, Not Creation: The Radical Nature of the Commercial Sex Industry" (2019). *Women's Studies and Feminist Research Presentations*. 4.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/womenspres/4>

250855816

Sexual Subjects

Discussion B

Jan. 29, 2019

### Pornography: For Consumption, Not Creation

#### The Radical Nature of the Commercial Sex Industry

The societal rules governing sex have existed since the beginning of the human race. Expectations about who could have sex, with whom, and when and how it should be done are regulated both by laws and by self-proclaimed enforcers of morality. Narratives regarding the commercial sex industry are frequently essentialized and perspectives that deviate from the assumption that this industry is inherently harmful are silenced. The producers of pornographic materials and services and the actors within them are seen as immoral and sexual deviants, while those who consume these products and services are believed merely to have lost their moral path. With use of texts by Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin, this essay will consider the moral panic produced by conservative interpretations of the sex industry and how consumerist acts of sex are inherently radical.

Western society rates sexual practices in terms of presumed morality and “the most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models” (Rubin, 279). This “hierarchical system of value” accepts sex for reproduction within a married heterosexual couple as the most tolerable sexual act while simultaneously degrading any individuals who participate in acts seen as lewd or untraditional (279). As far as a feminist perspective goes, there are two dominating belief systems with regards to sexuality. The first considers that the sexual liberation seen within the sex industry merely serves to extend patriarchal privilege by creating women-degrading products

for male consumption. The second perspective criticizes the restrictions placed on sexually active women and strives for a sexually liberated world. Both perspectives, which will be explored with greater detail throughout the remainder of this essay, offer insight into the gender-based realities of sexual practices, radical or not.

Of her part, Adrienne Rich subscribes more closely to the former perspective. She suggests that “the function of pornography as an influence on consciousness is a major public issue of our time, when a multi-billion dollar industry has the power to disseminate increasingly sadistic, women-degrading visual images” (Rich 39). She does not see sexually explicit materials as being at all liberating due to a presumed inherent lack of emotional context, especially for the women involved. In stressing the dangers of pornographic images, Rich cautions that pornography creates “a climate in which sex and violence are interchangeable” (40). This relationship, Rich argues, has the potential to cause a negative effect on the female psyche, causing women “to perceive themselves as sexual prey” rather than as social and sexual equals to men (41). Even lesbian porn carries patriarchal standards as it is frequently created with the male gaze in mind, exploiting women’s love for each other in favour of male fetishization. Citing Kathleen Barry, Rich points out, what she suggests might be a purely Western ideology, the cultural imbalance of the belief that in relationships women primarily experience love, while men experience an uncontrollable sexual drive. She proposes that it is, at least in part, this dichotomous philosophy that makes the commercial sex industry so morally and socially dangerous, specifically for women and sexual minorities.

Meanwhile, Gayle Rubin chastises the anti-porn rhetoric for criticizing “non-routine acts of love rather than routine acts of oppression, exploitation, or violence” (301). According to Rubin, anti-porn movements utilize images out of context to exploit the shock value created by

individuals unfamiliar with sexually explicit material (298). She stresses that perhaps more dangerous than the sex industry itself is the “harassment against pornographic materials, prostitutes, and erotic deviants of all sorts” by creating a narrative of shame and punishment surrounding sexual activity, especially that of women and sexual minorities (Rubin 270). Rubin even goes so far as to blame the anti-porn movement for the inability to foster and engage in a productive discussion on sexual rights and limitations (303). While sex workers and sexual minorities do not force others to engage in non-traditional acts, anti-commercial sex propaganda strives to regulate the behaviour of others, and through the indoctrination of these standards this movement is able to gain social and legal traction. As such, “once an erotic activity has been proscribed by sex law, the full power of the state enforces conformity to the values embodied in those laws” (Rubin 288). Throughout her analysis, Rubin stresses the personal choice associated with engaging in sexual acts of any sort and argues that these decisions should lie with the individual rather than with the state.

Even if one is to agree with Rich on the dangers of erotica, anti-commercial sex laws are not the way to improve the situation. These laws, Rubin suggests, “render sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and bad working conditions” by forcing sex workers to focus more on staying out of jail than improving their work conditions (290). Rubin criticizes sexually restrictive laws as being responsible for the moral panic associated with commercial sex in saying:

The criminalization of innocuous behaviors such as homosexuality, prostitution, obscenity, or recreational drug use, is rationalized by portraying them as menaces to health and safety, women and children, national security, the family, or civilization itself.

Even when activity is acknowledged to be harmless, it may be banned because it is alleged to “lead” to something ostensibly worse. (297)

This presumed domino effect of sexual deviancy is neither logical nor productive as it prevents social and medical scholars from being able to analyze the real implications of untraditional sexual acts. This does not mean that Rubin believes that commercial sex or erotic materials are devoid of discriminatory and sexist attitudes; rather, she stresses that, as feminists and social activists, “we need to analyze and oppose the manifestations of gender inequality specific to the sex industry. But this is not the same as attempting to wipe out commercial sex” (Rubin 302). Criminalizing the commercial sex industry merely forces it to move underground, causing the potential for additional risks and harm to those participating in it.

Both scholars agree that the commercial sex industry, in all of its forms, has an inherently sexually radical nature. It is their views on what this means that differ. While one (Adrienne Rich) stresses the risks the industry presents for women, the other (Gayle Rubin) presents the opportunity for sexual liberation that commercial sex and erotic offer. While Rich argues for legal action to protect the vulnerability of those within the sex industry, Rubin advocates for social leniency to create safer channels for victims to seek information and assistance. Their methods conflict, but their goal to prevent sexual harm to women and sexual minorities is comparable. To some extent, with their specific insights, they are both correct. The dichotomous relationship between these two competing feminist perspectives leaves little room for health and productive debate. The dangers of the commercial sex industry mirror the faults and gender-issues associated with more traditional sexual practices. Due to this ideological feud, however, it is difficult for scholars to draw these comparisons without the risk of harming any progress made to their specific cause. It is conceivably less a question of whether or not the sex industry is

violent, and more a question of why this and other radical sexual movements are inherently perceived that way. It was perhaps Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson in their letter to Adrienne Rich who expressed it most eloquently: “While we fear the link between sex and violence... we wish we better understood its sources in ourselves as well as in men” (69).

Works Cited

- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 1979-1985. W.W. Norton and Company, 1986 (1980). Pp. 23-68
- Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Ed. Carole S. Vance. Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1984.